Time and Again

by Hitch66

Summary

It's 1935 and schoolteacher Allie Novak moves from New York to rural Virginia to start a new job and a whole new life.

Notes

I've never written any fan fiction before, so I have no idea what I'm doing. I'm not sure what you'll make of the time period change, but regardless of when and where these two were born I think they would have found each other.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Broadlea Education Committee

Broadlea

Nr. Charlottesville

Va.

22nd February 1935

Dear Miss Novak,

I am delighted to inform you that the committee has unanimously agreed your appointment to the role of schoolteacher at Broadlea Village School. We are confident that you will fulfil your duties with excellence, both in terms of academic achievement and moral guidance.

As the previous incumbent must leave the school within the next two weeks, I hope you will be able to begin work no later than 11th March. Teaching materials will be provided for the first few weeks in order to allow you time to settle in and get to know the students.

Please confirm your willingness to take the role and your intended arrival date as soon as possible. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Hubert A. Pitts

Chairman

With a huff and a hiss, the bus came to a halt and the doors jerked open. Allie ducked down the aisle and stepped off, gazing around at the city. So, this was Charlottesville, Virginia. Despite the crowded sidewalks it was nothing like Brooklyn. The buildings had a grand aspect, proud of their colonial past. The place looked prosperous and well groomed, as though the depression had hardly touched it. This early assessment did not hold true for the entire city, as she soon discovered.

Collecting her suitcase Allie set off towards her lodgings, consulting a letter from her landlady to find her way. The streets and houses grew progressively shabbier and more run down until she reached the address she was looking for.

The street was unprepossessing but the house itself was freshly painted with a neat front yard and starched curtains in the windows. The sign board stated, “No vacancies” and Allie vehemently hoped that Mrs Wentworth had held her room for her. She stepped slowly up the porch stairs, her suitcase heavy and awkward against her leg, now strangely reluctant to take the final steps that would begin her new life and erase her old one.

She adjusted the collar of her jacket, marvelling at how warm it was here after her chilly start in Brooklyn just this morning, and rang the bell. The door was opened by an imperious looking lady of late middle years.
“May I help you?” she asked, her expression indicating how unlikely a possibility it was that she would help this strange young woman who had appeared on her porch.

“I’m Allie Novak,” Allie said with a smile. “You must be Mrs Wentworth? What a pleasure to finally meet you.”

The woman’s expression softened a hint, mollified a little by her new lodger’s charm. She generally refused all boarders from New York on principle, but this young person’s references had been so exemplary that she had made an exception. She hoped she would not regret her generosity.

“Miss Novak, please come in.” She stepped back and swung the door wide grandly, as though to a royal residence or stately home. “Welcome to your new abode. I think you will find everything to your liking.”

Allie recognised the prideful look on Mrs Wentworth’s face and immediately knew that the way to get on the good side of her new landlady would be through praising the boarding house and all things connected to it. As Mrs Wentworth showed her around Allie exclaimed and admired everything that was pointed out to her. Soon Mrs Wentworth had a very self-satisfied smile on her face, and Allie knew that she had made a good first impression.

Upstairs Allie was shown to her room, a generous, light room with minimal furniture and a sickening peach coloured coverlet. Allie was just calculating how much it would cost to replace it when Mrs Wentworth broke into her thoughts.

“The bathroom is just down the hall. Dinner is at six o’clock; please be prompt. I will explain the rest of the house rules over dinner.” Abruptly she swept off down the stairs and Allie was left standing just inside the threshold of her new room. Suddenly aware of her weariness and the aching of her body, Allie was dragging her case to the bed when she heard the door to the next room open and some quiet footsteps on the landing. She sighed internally. One of the other residents no doubt, eager to find out who the new girl was. Allie pasted the smile back onto her face and turned to greet her fellow lodger.

She was faced with a tall woman in stockinged feet, a few years older than herself. As soon as Allie looked into her face she was disarmed. She had kind eyes and a gentle smile and Allie warmed to her instantly.

“Hi,” the woman said in such a quiet voice that Allie could hardly hear her. “Welcome to Thomasina Towers. I’m Maxine, the head of the escape committee.” She smiled broadly at Allie.


“Pleasure.”

They shook hands.

“I won’t bother you now Allie, as I’m sure you’d rather settle in …”

Allie surprised herself by saying, “Actually, it’s nice to see a friendly face. Won’t you come in and keep me company while I unpack?” She had a good feeling about Maxine, and God knows she could use a friend.

“Sure… “Maxine slid into the room and leant against the wall with her arms folded across her middle whilst Allie opened her case and began to put things away.

“So, why Thomasina Towers?” Allie asked with a raised eyebrow.
“Oh, it’s just something one of the other girls came up with. Mrs Wentworth’s name is Mrs T. Wentworth, but no-one has managed to find out what the “T” stands for, so she decided it stood for Thomasina because it sounds rather grand, like the lady herself. And Towers because she runs this place like a high security prison.” Maxine began ticking items off on her fingers. “No gentlemen callers after seven o’clock ...” Allie averted her eyes to a worn spot on the rug, “… And then only in the communal sitting room never in our own rooms. Mealtimes strictly adhered to. No food or drink in the rooms. No personal items left in the bathroom … I’m sure she’ll give you the full list later.”

“It sounds like you know all about this place. Have you been living here long Maxine?”

“Only a few months. I moved here to take up a job as an operator at the telephone exchange.” Maxine regarded Allie thoughtfully. She was a pretty and cheerful young woman, but Maxine thought she could detect a sadness behind the facade and wondered if she should ask any questions of her own or respect Allie’s privacy. After a moment’s thought she lightly added, “What brings you here Allie? Charlottesville must be a backwater after New York.”

“How did you know I’m from New York?”

“Your voice. Plus, you don’t get stylish clothes like that round here!”

Allie looked down at herself. She hadn’t thought this outfit would stand out. She mustn’t stand out. She would have to choose more carefully tomorrow.

“I’ve got a new job too. School teacher at Broadlea.”

“School teacher eh? Mrs Wentworth must be delighted to have such an educated woman living in her select establishment.” Maxine teased.

“That’s me!” Allie countered. “Every landlady’s dream resident.”

“Broadlea is a fair step from here though.”

“I couldn’t find any place to stay in Broadlea, so I had to choose Charlottesville. This place isn’t cheap either ...”

“I know! All the cheaper places are full. I checked and checked again.” Maxine paused. She wondered why a streetwise New York teacher would voluntarily relocate herself to a remote place like Broadlea. There must be a good reason, but it was too soon to ask what might be a very personal question. So, she just added, “You’ll be on the rural bus then, I guess?”

“Yes. It won’t be much fun. But it can’t be helped.” Allie smiled at Maxine and slipped her now empty case under the bed. “That’s me done.” Maxine admired her optimism.

“I’ll let you rest up before dinner. You can meet the rest of the girls then. See you down there.” A casual wave and she was gone, leaving Allie alone.

* * * * * * * * * * *

The next morning, early, found Allie on the rural bus out to Broadlea village. She had woken early,
apprehensive about her first day. She had dressed herself in a sober blue belted dress that she hoped said “respectable school marm”, put her hair up in a neat chignon and stepped out with confidence, determined to make a success of this new life. As the bus bumped along unpaved country roads she allowed her thoughts to stray back to dinner last evening.

Mrs Wentworth had introduced her fellow boarders to her. “Miss Novak, this is Miss Conway,” she indicated Maxine, “Miss Jenkins, and Miss Miles.”

“Hello,” Allie had said with a smile, glancing at them each in turn as she took her seat. Miss Jenkins was a mountain of a woman, with a similarly large voice. Could this account for why Maxine referred to her as Boomer? Miss Miles was slightly older than the others and seemed a little quiet and guarded. Boomer soon launched the conversation by asking Allie lots of questions and hardly waiting for her reply before telling Allie all about herself.

“Only been here six weeks me self. Got a job at the hardware store next block over. It’s goin’ great though. If I keep it up Mr Jackson – he’s the owner – says I’ll make assistant manager one day!”

“That’s wonderful Boomer! Can I call you Boomer, or …?” Allie hesitated.

“Well, me name’s Sue, but pretty much everyone calls me Boomer. So, go ahead.”

“Novak, that’s Polish isn’t it?” Miss Miles interrupted.

Allie didn’t like the sly look on her face and wondered if she wanted to make something of it. Nevertheless, she replied politely, “Yes it’s a Polish name. But please, all of you, call me Allie.”

Maxine smiled, thanking Allie silently for not taking offense and the meal progressed harmoniously enough until Boomer knocked over her glass. The water spread across the tablecloth and began to drip onto the floor. To Allie’s amazement the women scurried around in a kind of panic, mopping up the spillage in near silence, all the time casting anxious glances towards the door. By the time Mrs Wentworth reappeared the water had been soaked up and hardly showed against the white tablecloth.

As Mrs Wentworth began to clear the plates away Boomer leaped to her feet. “I’ll clear the table Mrs W. Why don’t you put your feet up for a bit.” Mrs Wentworth looked at her in surprise. “Very well. Thank you Susan,” and turned, exiting the room like a ship in full sail. Once she had gone they all helped to clear away and Boomer hung the tablecloth in the backyard to dry.

“Thanks girls!” Boomer gasped gratefully, “Thought I was a goner there!”

“Is Mrs Wentworth really so fierce?” Allie asked Maxine.

“She’s terribly protective over the furnishings and decor. I heard that one girl was made to leave after scratching an occasional table.”

“I’d better watch myself then!” After that Allie had taken herself off to bed, exhausted from a day containing so much novelty, but glad that she had begun to make friends among the other tenants.
Looking out of the bus window as it rounded a corner and began to slow, she realised that she had arrived in Broadlea. Here was the Broadlea General Store which hosted the only bus stop in the village. The store was a large wooden structure with a few outlying buildings that could be stables or storage sheds. That and a gas station and a church made up as much of the village as Allie could currently see. The school, she knew, was a few minutes’ walk away. She turned her back on the store and set off up a narrow track in the direction of the school.

Her first sight of the school was through a gap in the trees. As she came closer she could see it was small. A single wooden room to accommodate the whole school. A dusty yard for recess, with a few shade trees, a porch with a clock and a bell, and a proud signboard made up the whole place. A small man who was pacing beside a car looked up as she came into view. Allie knew that this must be Mr Pitts from the Education Committee come to welcome her. She steeled herself to be firm against any inroads he might try to make into her authority, whilst at the same time composing her face into a pleasant expression.

She need not have worried about Mr Pitts, she reflected later over a cup of coffee on the porch at Mrs Wentworth’s boarding house. He was not much interested in the curriculum, or the children, or her even, but just wanted to hand over the paperwork and the responsibility from the previous teacher and get on with his own business. That was a relief: that she could teach the children without the committee interfering at every step. If she did a good job she would probably get away with only minimal contact with the bureaucratic side of education.

Meeting her students today had reminded her of why she loved teaching. Some of them were bright, some cheeky, some funny, some determined, but all wonderful to Allie. Little packages of potential waiting to be unleashed on the world, and Allie was the one who got to help them. Already some of the children stood out. Jimmy Morris was going to be a handful. The Pitts twins, older than the others and more earnest, could be college candidates with the right guidance. Little Debbie Smith, smart and cheeky and serious by turns was sure to be the star of the class. She had already won Allie over: a spirited child of only seven years with a cascade of caramel curls and brown eyes that shone as though they reflected the light of every star ever born.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Bea Smith looks after her daughter and makes a new acquaintance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Mama, Mama!” Debbie came pounding up the porch steps, crashed through the screen door and skidded to a halt by the kitchen table, just as Bea was placing Debbie’s favourite cookies onto a plate.

“Right on time, as usual!” Bea exclaimed with a smile. She swore her daughter had a sixth sense in determining when she was taking something out of the oven. “Careful, they’re still hot.”

Debbie ignored her and took a big bite, then proceeded to spray crumbs everywhere in her excitement to relay the day’s big news.

“We’ve got a new teacher. She’s ever so nice and so pretty. Her name’s Miss Novak and she taught us all about rocks today and she read us a story this afternoon. It’s about a place called Tanglewood, and a boy called Perseus. Him and his mama get put into a chest and have to sail on the ocean …” Debbie chattered on and on between bites of cookie.

After a while Bea interjected, “Well you’ve certainly had an eventful day, but now you must clear up all these crumbs you’ve made, change your clothes and get to your chores.”

Debbie looked a little disappointed. “Yes Mama.”

“You can tell me more later,” Bea mitigated with a gentle look. No point in crushing the child’s spirit even if there was a lot to do around here. Bea smiled, jumped up and ran off upstairs to get changed. Bea smiled ruefully. Debbie had forgotten about the crumbs, but Bea hadn’t the heart to scold her.

During supper Debbie did indeed tell Bea more. How Miss Novak was kind to Sophie when she was upset; how she didn’t get really angry with Jimmy even though he dropped his pencil about fifty times which always made Miss Cartwright send him to the corner; how she had eyes so blue you wouldn’t believe it; and how she was going to allow them to write whatever they wanted for tomorrow’s composition lesson. Bea was impressed. Debbie had always said how much she loved Miss Cartwright and how much she was going to miss her when she left. Now it seemed that she could barely remember her, so fully was she eclipsed by the wonderful Miss Novak.

To stop the flow Bea quickly jumped into the conversation. “Look at the time! Don’t you want to listen to Tarzan?”

“Sure Mama. I’ll warm up the set.” Debbie ran over to switch on the radio whilst Bea quickly cleared the table. The dishes could wait until Debbie was in bed. Bea settled in her easy chair next to the radio and Debbie sat in her usual place - Bea’s lap. “I wonder if Miss Novak likes Tarzan,” Debbie murmured. Bea rolled her eyes.
Debbie was yawning before the end of the episode, worn out from another full day. As soon as she
show finished Bea sent her upstairs to get ready for bed. Bea was pretty much ready for bed herself
having spent almost every moment of the day busy with chores: weeding the vegetable garden,
cleaning the house and making sure that there would be enough food in the larder to last them. She
was just about to go and make sure that Debbie had cleaned her teeth when she heard the creak of
the porch steps. There was a shadow at the door.

By Friday afternoon Allie was starting to worry about Debbie Smith. Her sunny disposition had
clouded over as the week went on and by this morning had become positively stormy. A wrong
answer on a math quiz had prompted her eyes to fill with tears. When Sophie asked her if she was
alright and tried to pass her a hanky it was as though the shutters had come down on her usually
unguarded face. By the time Allie had asked her to switch seats with Jimmy, who was causing a
ruckus, her stony expression was actually mutinous.

Suspecting trouble at home Allie called Debbie over to her at the end of the school day. “Debbie,
the composition you wrote this week was very good. I would like to speak to your mother and
father about how pleased I am with your work.” Debbie didn’t reply but looked down at the floor,
arms crossed against her skinny body.

“It wasn’t that good,” she replied finally. “I think I could have done it better.”

“I disagree,” Allie said, peering at Debbie’s face, trying to get her to look at her. Debbie resolutely
looked at the floor. “I think they would be very proud.” Debbie just shook her head vigorously.

“Perhaps I could call by and show it to them?”

“No!” Debbie finally raised her head to look at Allie. There was something in her eyes that Allie
couldn’t quite translate. Was it fear, or maybe defiance? Debbie's glare softened, perhaps detecting
the shock on her teacher’s face. “They’re really busy,” she hedged. “I’ll tell them what you said
though,” she offered.

“Alright Debbie, You can go now.” Debbie ran for the door and was gone before Allie could draw
another breath. That was definitely not a normal reaction and now Allie was seriously worried. She
decided to call on the Smiths on her way home.

It was only a short walk from the school to the Smith house. As Allie came out of the trees onto the
dirt road she could see the house and its’ grounds situated pleasantly against the woodland
backdrop. Drawing closer she could hear the unmistakable sound of a shovel against earth. A
figure was working in a well-tended vegetable garden between the rows of immature plants.
Drawing closer she could see the person was wearing a pair of oversized denim overalls cinched in
at the waist with a belt and rolled up at the ankle. This practical garment was set off with a white
singlet and a heavy pair of boots. The gardener was toiling in the afternoon heat and had pulled her
hair away from her face with a turquoise headscarf, but Allie could still see a glorious mass of red
curls which she swore were the exact colour of Virginia creeper in the fall.

Allie called out a greeting so as not to surprise her, sure that her approach had not yet been noticed.
The woman looked up from her work and, as blue eyes met brown, Allie’s heart performed an
almost painful somersault in her chest that stopped her breath and turned her tongue into a stone.
She ought to say something, to say who she was and explain why she was there, but all she could
do was look. The seconds streamed past while Allie examined the woman's face. It was a lesson in
perfect geometry. The sharp angle of the jaw led to the almost concave plane of the face which was
topped by the sensual curve of the cheek and over all was the acute arch of the eyebrow. The result
was so arresting that an enormous effort was required for Allie to stop looking and lift her tongue
to speak.

"Hello! I'm Allie Novak, Debbie's teacher. Would you be Mrs Smith?"

"That's me." Her voice was a purring contralto that seemed to resonate inside Allie's bones. Mrs
Smith stepped forward and thrust one slim tanned arm towards her, offering her hand. "Is Debbie in
trouble? Is that why you're here?" Allie smiled and shook her head. Preparing to answer, she
managed to lift her arm to shake the other woman's hand. Mrs Smith appeared only then to notice
that she was sweaty and filthy with dirt. "Oh, sorry. You'd better not." She looked down at herself
seemingly in horror at her appearance and wiped her hand on the leg of her pants. "I'm not fit to be
seen!" she murmured ruefully.

Allie vehemently disagreed, but responded only by saying, "I'm sorry to just show up like this, but
I'm so impressed with Debbie that I wanted to come by and let you know." Allie was beginning to
compose herself now, and as long as she didn't think about what her powerful reaction to this
woman meant, she thought she could probably get through the conversation without making an
utter fool of herself. She scrabbled through her bag and eventually found the composition Debbie
had written. She smiled at Mrs Smith and waved it triumphantly, feeling that it gave her a
legitimate reason to be here talking to her. "You must see this essay she wrote about your cat. It's
so wonderful … the way she describes …"Allie trailed off. Mrs Smith was frowning. "Is
something wrong?"

"No," she replied, smiling now. "Except that we don't have a cat. Let me see that …" Allie passed
her the sheets of paper.

"A black cat, called Merriweather?" Allie clarified. "With a very shiny coat? And a talent for
falling …"

Mrs Smith interrupted. "Other children might have imaginary friends. Debbie has imaginary pets."

Allie felt like a fool and it must have shown on her face. "Don't feel bad," said the other woman,
smiling sympathetically. "You're not the first one to be taken in." At the sight of that smile Allie
instantly felt better.

"Well, now I'm even more impressed by her writing. She has imagined it all very vividly!"

"Sounds like Debbie. I'm glad she's doing well at school and it's very kind of you to come over to
tell me." This last was spoken a little haltingly as though she was not quite sure why she had come.
Allie decided that this was the perfect moment to address the main reason she had come.

"Mrs Smith …"

"Please, call me Bea," Mrs Smith interjected, ducking her head. The name ricocheted around inside
Allie's skull: Bea, Bea, Bea … Allie tried to silence it, to be professional. She took a breath.

"Bea. I couldn't help but notice, "Allie began cautiously, "that Debbie has seemed a little out of
sorts the last few days. Is there anything wrong that you're aware of? Anything that would explain
why she's tearful and frustrated … and angry …"

The reaction from the redhead was shockingly sudden. A veil of hostility drew down over her
previously friendly face. Her fists bunched by her sides. She leaned towards Allie, shoulders tense
and spoke in an artificially steady voice. "You think I don't know how to look after my daughter?"
The light in her eyes had changed from bemused to ferocious.

Allie stepped back in horror at the reaction she had elicited. "I'm not suggesting anything of the
kind!" she protested. Damn! Now she had alienated her, and she would never listen to her concerns,
maybe never speak to her again. Sorrow coursed through her and tears promised to follow. She
shook her head. "I didn't mean to upset you. Please just think about it. Something is bothering her,
I'm sure. Perhaps you can figure out what and help her. That's all I want."

Bea turned her head away slowly, seemingly keeping her temper with a great effort. Allie felt as
though Bea could no longer bear to look at her.

"You'd better go," she growled finally. Allie nodded.

"I have to catch the bus anyway." She glanced at her watch without taking in what it showed.

Bea unclenched enough to point out a trail that ran around the side of the house. "That's the
quickest way." Allie nodded her thanks and hastened away.

"Goodbye," she said quietly as she passed Bea, not daring to look up and see the expression on her
face. Tears were very close now, and she couldn't bear to humiliate herself any further.

* * * * * * * * * *

When Bea first became aware of the woman standing in her garden she could not, for a moment,
reconcile the appearance of this glamorous stranger with the backdrop of bean and tomato plants
amongst which she stood. The woman seemed similarly shocked by her appearance judging by the
way she was staring. Bea stared back. What was this woman doing here? To say she looked out of
place was an understatement: the chic dress, stockings and neat shoes belonged in a fashion plate
not here in Broadlea. If a giraffe had wandered into her garden, she could not have been more
surprised.

She was not surprised when the woman introduced herself as Debbie’s new teacher. Bea had lived
in the area her whole life and would ordinarily recognise anyone who was likely to drop by the
house. Besides, Debbie could not stop saying how pretty Miss Novak was and this woman fitted,
no, surpassed, that description. She looked at her face for a while since Miss Novak seemed in no
hurry to explain her visit. She really ought to be on the silver screen rather than at the chalkboard.
She had the most amazing rounded cheeks that called out to be cupped in a palm, and her eyes -
what colour could you call that? Undeniably blue, but not like any other blue eyes she had ever
seen. Not baby blue, or powder blue. Maybe ice blue, but warm not cold … Bea roused herself
from her reverie and held out her hand for a handshake.

"Is Debbie in trouble? Is that why you're here?" Bea suddenly realised how she must look: sweaty
and filthy and wearing the outlandish get-up she customarily wore for gardening. Christ! What
must she think of me? Horrified at the impression she must be making she tuned out from what the
other woman was saying.

When she tuned back in the teacher was smiling at her and waving something Debbie had written
about a cat. Bea soon understood what Debbie had done here. It was just like that time she told Liz
that she had a pony: not so much lying as wishful thinking. Once Bea pointed out to Miss Novak
that they didn’t have a cat she could see that she was embarrassed at her gullibility.

"Don't feel bad. You're not the first one to be taken in," Bea told her. She smiled at her to try and
lessen her embarrassment. The answering smile was dazzling, and Bea felt herself grinning harder
in response, her whole self feeling lighter and happier. What was this? Why should a stranger be able to lift her like this? What was she even doing here? Surely she hadn’t made this visit just to compliment Debbie’s essay.

“I'm glad she's doing well at school and it's very kind of you to come over to tell me,” Bea said, fishing for some kind of real reason. And she got it. Something was wrong with Debbie, she was saying, as though she knew her daughter’s moods better than her own mother. As though Bea didn’t worry enough about her, didn’t do everything she could to comfort and protect her. As though Bea was just letting Debbie be harmed. Her image of herself suddenly shifted, assaulted by this strangers’ view of her. *I am that person*, she realised. *I ought to be able to protect Debbie, but I can’t.* And then she was angry, so angry. She spoke angrily to the woman. She wanted to hurt someone or something.

When she had calmed down she could be grateful that Debbie hadn’t been around to witness her behaviour. She was off somewhere with Sophie climbing trees, catching frogs or whatever it was they were amusing themselves with at the moment. Then she was sorry that the teacher was gone. She had liked her, liked talking to her, liked looking at her … her mind veered away from that thought. She had felt connected for a few minutes. Maybe they could have been friends. But she had ruined that with her temper. She could feel that she had overreacted, that Miss Novak (Allie, she reminded herself) was probably not accusing her of anything but was just concerned for Debbie. The only one accusing her was herself.

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“You were very quiet over dinner,” Maxine ventured, sitting down next to Allie. She had retreated to the front porch at Thomasina Towers, as had become her habit in the evenings, to give herself time to think things over. Today she had more than usual to consider. She knew what her reaction to Bea Smith meant. She had been there, or somewhere nearby, before, and it had ended in disaster. She had promised herself no more romantic attractions. That Bea was married and unavailable only made it more stupid and dangerous. And then there had been Bea’s hostility. It was painful to remember how she had looked and sounded in those few moments, and now Maxine’s sympathy was threatening to unravel her composure.

“Just … a lot happened today,” she replied, attempting to mask her emotions with an easy tone of voice.

“Oh yeah? Your students giving you a hard time?” Maxine asked with a gentle smile.

“No,” Allie exhaled loudly, “one of the mothers didn’t like something I said.” Her heart started pounding at her audacity in mentioning Bea to another person. Allie knew she shouldn’t be saying anything, but Maxine was just so easy to talk to. She was expecting Maxine to ask for more details, but she was silent, watching Allie expectantly to see if she wanted to say anything else. She really appreciated this about Maxine, that she was interested in people but not nosy.

“Bea Smith …” Allie found herself saying, looking up at the night sky, not seeing the knowing look on Maxine's face.

Chapter End Notes
They met! Please let me know what you thought. Did I get it about right?
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Allie has a chance encounter ...

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all your comments and kudos. I found them more motivating than I expected!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning Bea and Debbie entered the Broadlea General Store hand in hand. It was their usual habit to visit the store on Saturday mornings to see their friends Liz and Sophie and to pick up any supplies they were short of. Elizabeth Birdsworth owned and ran the store which stocked all the items that the people of Broadlea were likely to need as well as many that they were unlikely to ever want. Sophie, her daughter, was three years older than Debbie but they were well suited as friends and they liked nothing more than to spend time together.

"Morning Liz!" Bea called out as they came through the door.

"Morning love!" Liz swept out from behind the counter to give Bea a hug. As Bea hugged her back, her expression gentled and a smile curled her lips. "Morning Debbie," Liz continued, stroking the girls’ hair. “Sophie's in the back. Go on through." Debbie skipped off happily.

"It's quiet in here this morning," Bea observed. She was the only customer at the moment and Saturday was usually Liz's busiest day.

"I reckon you missed the rush. You're a little later than normal."

"Yeah. Debbie took ages to get ready. Woke up on the wrong side of the bed today …” Bea looked away. Liz just nodded in understanding. “I had to promise Debbie I would take her into Charlottesville today to play with her cousins, though I could do without spending the bus fare.”

“Not got the truck then?” Liz asked, although the look on her face suggested that she knew she hadn’t, and she knew the reason why.

“No. Harry took off in it yesterday morning. Can’t say when he’ll bring it back.”

“Hmm,” Liz replied with a meaningful look. Bea knew she was thinking that the loss of the truck would be a small price to pay if Harry could be gone permanently. Bea didn’t reply. She understood Liz’s opinion of Harry and she couldn’t disagree.

Seeing Bea's discomfort Liz changed the subject. "Sophie's been telling me all about the new teacher. I've seen her waiting for the bus, but I haven’t met her yet. Sophie's quite taken with her. How about you?"
"Yeah," Bea replied. She meant to say that she had met her, but it now she thought it might sound like she was taken with her. She blushed deeply and looked at her feet. "I … I met her … briefly yesterday …" she clarified. She risked a glance at Liz's face. Liz looked amused but managed not to tease Bea about it.

"She looked every inch the city girl," Liz continued, "but Sophie assures me that she's very kind and clever too."

"Debbie can't stop talking about her," Bea added, trying to calm her thumping heart.

"What did you make of her, love?" Liz asked, intrigued by Bea's flusteredness.

"She, uh, she seems very dedicated … and, um, perceptive. As long as the children respect her I think she'll be fine." Bea managed to croak out.

Liz nodded, looking at Bea out of the corner of her eye. "That's good," she said faintly, her mind working.

* * * * * * * * * * *

Saturday morning at Mrs Wentworth's found Allie in the sitting room with Boomer and Maxine. Boomer was writing a reply to a letter she had received from her cousin. Her sighing and groaning were letting Allie and Maxine know that it wasn't going well.

"I can't send this!" She was in a state of despair. "She won't even be able to read it!" She threw the paper and pencil down on the table in a temper.

Allie looked up from the book she was reading. "I have pretty decent handwriting," she chimed in. "Why don't you dictate it to me and I'll write it down."

"You'd help me?"

"Of course."

"That's good of ya Allie." Boomer punched her lightly on the shoulder.

"What are friends for?" Allie replied. "How shall I start?"

"Um … 'Dear Franky'," she began.

"Oh, this is the Franky I've heard you mention?" Allie asked, beginning to write.

"Francesca. Yeah, she used to stay here too. She got me a place here but now she's gone off to study at a catering college." Boomer looked so downcast as she said this that Allie could tell that the big woman missed her cousin badly.

"She had your room in fact, Allie," Maxine interrupted. She lowered her voice. "It was Franky that came up with the ‘Thomasina Towers’ thing. She thought Mrs Wentworth was a ‘puffed up windbag’, but Franky ran rings round her, alright."

Boomer began guffawing. "D'ya remember that time with the peach cobbler?"

"Shhh!" Maxine hissed. "She’ll hear you …" but she was laughing too. At that moment Mrs Wentworth put her head around the door.

"Everything alright ladies?" she asked, looking suspicious at all the merriment. Allie managed to
maintain a straight face.

“Just catching up with our correspondence,” she replied earnestly, holding up the paper and pencil as proof of their industriousness. Mrs Wentworth didn’t look entirely convinced but nodded and withdrew. Muffled laughter followed her all the way back to the kitchen.

* * * * * * * * * * * *

Allie turned her face up to the sun, appreciating the warmth. The city streets were busy, and the sidewalks crowded, but she enjoyed a leisurely stroll, looking in the shop windows and making a mental note of the street names, building up her map of the area, wondering if she would be able to find the library. Catching a glimpse of red hair her heart started pounding. “Bea” was the word that rang out inside her at the sight of that particular shade. She smothered the thought. “Don’t be an idiot. Can’t you think of anything else?” But she had thought of little else since yesterday.

The red head bobbed its way towards her. The person underneath that hair had an energetic and impatient gait, weaving their way through the pedestrian traffic. Allie narrowed her eyes. It was Bea, looking becoming in a deep green dress. Without a thought, she moved to intercept her. Only when Allie stepped into Bea's eye line and was recognised did she wonder if it was the wisest thing. Bea stopped abruptly, as though detained by an invisible barrier.

"Bea." She paused, attempting to determine if Bea would even speak to her. Was she still angry after their conversation yesterday?

"Allie … Miss Novak …" Bea looked away and sighed. Allie smiled involuntarily on hearing her name in Bea's mouth. Bea's mouth. Allie stared at her mouth and eventually turned her attention to her eyes. She saw doubt there and indecision. Bea seemed to be staring right through Allie, somewhere in the region of her midriff. Allie wondered if she should say something or wait for Bea to continue. After a few false starts and some furious blushing Bea continued. “I should apologise for yesterday. I overreacted and …”

“There’s really no need.” Allie smiled reassuringly into her face and managed to catch her eye momentarily. Something gleamed there for a second. “I shouldn’t have ambushed you with so sensitive a subject.”

When Bea replied, her voice was gruffer than ever. “Well you needn’t be so nice about it. Just take the apology, won’t you?”

“Apology accepted,” Allie replied pertly with a grin. “On one condition…”

“What would that be?” Bea asked with an eye roll and a hint of a smile.

Allie beamed. “That you accompany me into this tearoom, right here, and let me buy you a drink and a slice of cake.”

“Shouldn’t I be the one buying? Seeing as I’m supposed to be apologising?”

“But you’d be doing me a favour really,” Allie insisted, giving Bea her best sad face. “I know hardly anyone in Charlottesville, and this is my first weekend in town. I don’t want to spend the whole day alone.”

Bea appeared to hesitate, looking up and down the street anxiously. “Well, when you put it like that I can hardly refuse, can I?”

* * * * * * * * * * * *
When Bea noticed Allie converging on her, her first thought was an impatient one. If she was going to go over it all again, about Debbie, she was not going to stand there and listen to it. Next moment she reproached herself for her knee-jerk reaction. When she allowed herself to think about yesterday she knew she ought to apologise: the poor woman was only doing her job after all. Bea took her in. She was smiling at her, so presumably would accept a friendly apology. Bea’s eyes travelled down Allie’s body to her tidy waist. Suddenly her mind was assailed by an image of her own hands placing themselves one on either side of Allie’s waist and drawing her towards her. She tossed the image away, but it wouldn’t stay away. Again it was there in her mind’s eye. Her arms gave an involuntary twitch. She dismissed the image again, but it returned as though it was caught in a crevice of her brain and destined to replay incessantly.

Belatedly realising that she had been staring for some time, Bea attempted to speak her apology. Her embarrassment at her own thoughts was making her incoherent, she knew. On top of that she was blushing again. Eventually she managed to get out an inadequate apology only for Allie to dismiss it. Her smile and her compassionate look were enough to make Bea’s throat close up and tears begin to form in her eyes. Bea couldn’t remember the last time she had felt someone’s kindness so keenly. Perhaps it had been when her mother was still alive, or her grandfather. So it was, thinking of those long ago loving faces, that Bea began to respond to Allie from her true self.

Following Allie in through the door to the tearoom, Bea had a moment of panic. She never went into places like this, her funds always being so low. If she had to actually pay for anything it would cause her to be short of cash until Harry turned up again. Allie must have sensed her anxiety because she turned round and gave her one of those smiles.

A waitress showed them to a table away from the window. As they sat down Allie passed Bea the menu. Bea tried to concentrate on the options but was distracted by Allie’s hands. They rested on the table in front of her and Bea couldn’t help but notice the long, slim fingers and the perfect shiny nails. She was painfully conscious of how her own hands contrasted: reddened skin dry and rough, nails torn and irregular. She flattened her hands under her thighs so that she wouldn’t have to look at them.

When the waitress came to take their order Bea chose almost randomly. “Tea and a slice of chocolate cake, please.” Bea never drank tea and didn’t know why she had ordered it. Allie didn’t even look at the menu, her eyes resting on Bea instead.

“I’ll have the same.” Allie waited until the waitress had gone before making some small talk. “Debbie not with you this morning?”

“I brought her over to my sister-in-law’s place to play with her cousins. Mary, my sister-in-law, is not that fond of me, but she loves Debbie. I said I had some errands to run downtown so I wouldn’t have her criticising me for two hours.”

“Is that your brother’s wife?”

“No, I’m an only child, like Debbie. Mary is Harry’s, my husbands’, sister.” She folded her lips together. She really didn’t want to talk about Harry. She felt so out of place in this smart tearoom and hardly knew how to explain to herself why she had agreed to come. Then the tea arrived. Allie poured for them both, adding milk from the tiny jug, passing the sugar, all elegantly and easily, while Bea could only stare at her cup and her slice of cake and wonder how she was ever going to get anything into her mouth without making a fool of herself.

“Tell me something,” Bea demanded, “… about yourself.”
Finally Allie removed her gaze from Bea and picked up her cup. After taking a sip she continued to stare at the liquid and began talking.

“My parents emigrated from Poland before the war. They settled in Greenpoint, which is in Brooklyn, and opened a grocery store. Both my brother, Lukas, and I were born here in America.”

As Allie talked Bea was able to relax enough to pick up her cup and drink, to pick up her fork and try the cake. When she looked up she watched Allie’s lips moving, noting how pink they were and how full. There was a beauty spot just above her lip on the left side. Bea watched it move as Allie spoke. How was it that she hadn’t noticed it before? Now she couldn’t take her eyes off it. Some might have considered such a mark as a flaw, but Bea could see that it only made Allie’s face more beautiful, more perfect.

Allie told her how determined her parents had been for her to have a college education.

“They must be very proud, now you’re a teacher.” Bea commented.

Allie just shrugged. “I think they were.” Past tense. Bea let it go, detecting something uncomfortable behind the words.

As Allie continued Bea became absorbed in what she was hearing and relaxed, forgetting where she was, focussed only on what Allie was telling her. When she next looked at Allie her eyes were back on her again, but this time Bea was able to meet them.

When Allie stopped talking for a while to eat her cake Bea surprised herself by offering up some information about her own life.

“The reason Debbie has been out of sorts … It’s probably because her father is not with us all the time. He comes and goes, and all the change is what makes Debbie unsettled.” A half-truth at best.

Allie nodded thoughtfully. Bea’s eyes skittered away. She knows …

“This last week … was he back, or gone?” Allie asked gently.

“Back …” Bea breathed. She cleared her throat. “He showed up Monday night after being away for weeks. Left again yesterday morning. If … if he stays gone for a while … you’ll see … Debbie will be her old self again.”

Allie nodded again, more firmly this time. Bea couldn’t believe she had told her so much. They barely knew each other and yet this was more than she had ever told anyone about hers’ and Debbie’s situation. She could be imagining it, but she thought she was breathing a tiny bit easier.

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Allie could hardly believe it when Bea agreed to her spontaneous idea. She headed into the tearoom quickly before Bea could change her mind. Bea ordered tea and cake and Allie, who didn’t have her reading glasses with her, went along with it although she disliked tea herself. As she sat there she schooled herself: “Don’t upset her again. And don’t scare her off.” When her first nervous question was about Debbie she could have kicked herself, but Bea answered neutrally and didn’t seem to take it the wrong way this time. But once the subject of Harry came up Allie could see that Bea was becoming agitated. So, when Bea suggested she talk about herself she was happy to do so.

Deliberately not looking at Bea, in case her compulsive staring made her tense, she told her a little
about herself and her family. She could feel Bea relax now that the attention was off her. Allie kept on staring into her cup and talking, but was able to shift her gaze enough to take in Bea’s hands as they lifted her cup and plied her fork. Her eyes were drawn to the gold band on the third finger of her left hand. If she stared at it hard enough, could she make it disappear? And Harry with it?

When Bea began to tell her, hesitantly, about her home life Allie listened carefully, sitting very still as if she was being approached by a shy wild animal who might startle away at any moment. Debbie was upset because her father was home. That told her a lot. Her heart clenched painfully at the thought of what might be going on in that house and of how long it might have been going on for. Allie reached out without thinking and grabbed Bea’s hand in hers, gave it a sympathetic squeeze and met her eyes. Bea allowed her hand to rest there, quivering gently like a terrified bird.

“You’re not alone in this Bea,” Allie said with emphasis.

Bea’s eyes clouded over again. “No. Debbie’s in it too,” she replied angrily, withdrawing her hand.

“That’s not what I meant …”

“I know what you meant, but you can’t help me Allie.” The rage was back. Bea glared at the tablecloth. “I’d better get back now. Mary will be wondering where I got to.”

“Please … don’t go away angry again,” Allie pleaded. Tears were in her eyes and in her voice.

Bea relented slightly. Enough to say, “This isn’t your fight Allie. Thanks for your concern. I appreciate it, I really do, but … Thanks for the tea.” She stood up and walked away without looking back.

Allie watched her go, thinking that Bea couldn’t just decide that. It was her fight too. She chose to make it her fight.

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Bea and Debbie walked slowly from the bus stop towards home. Debbie was swinging Bea’s hand and telling her all the things she had done with Benji and Caleb, her big boy cousins. Bea’s thoughts were still in a tearoom in Charlottesville. She recalled Allie taking her hand and the way every one of her hairs had stood on end at the contact, every inch of her skin and scalp prickling, electrified. She smiled and shook her head to herself. She didn’t know what that feeling meant but she had liked it and wanted to feel it again. Then that image in her mind: her hands on Allie’s waist pulling her near. Another image: Allie’s lips moving silently, her beauty mark flashing. Debbie stumbled and tugged on her arm bringing her back to herself.

“Did you get something to eat baby?” Bea asked. It was well past lunch. She hadn’t meant to be so gone so long.

“Yep. Aunty Mary fixed me a sandwich … but I’m still hungry!”

“Sure you are … Nearly home …” They rounded the corner of the house, and both sets of feet stopped dead. The truck was back.

Chapter End Notes
I hope you liked this chapter.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Bea and Allie get to know each other a little better.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Allie made it to Thursday without giving in to her desire to see Bea again. There had been no improvement in Debbie’s mood, and she was worried about what that might mean for Bea. After school had finished for the day she sat at her desk and debated with herself whether to call in at the Smith house on her way to the bus stop. Would Bea welcome such a visit? Or would she think that Allie was interfering? After the way they had left things on Saturday she couldn’t be sure. Finally, she reasoned that she could use the trail past their house and if she saw Bea, she could explain that she was just passing by on her way home. It was a weak excuse, Allie knew, but days of thinking and worrying about Bea had worn down her self-control.

Approaching the house Allie could see Debbie heading towards the chicken pen with a small bucket. It looked like feeding the hens was one of her chores. She smiled to see the little girl ducking inside the enclosure and clucking to the birds in a conversational way. She didn’t immediately spot Bea until some sheets that were drying on the line billowed out and revealed her standing behind one of them. After so many days of not seeing her, Allie’s breath was taken away anew. Her red hair was tied back at the nape of her neck showing off her throat and jawline. Allie swallowed heavily, a familiar feeling gripping her belly. She’d felt like this before, but never this powerfully. The image of a face rose into her mind: a face formerly beloved but now gone. She dismissed the thought and headed over to Bea.

“Hi!” she called out, waving an arm in greeting. Bea looked over at her and gave a rueful half smile. Debbie cannonballed out of the chicken pen on an intercept course.

“Miss Novak!” she called excitedly. “What are you doing here?”

“Debbie. I was just heading for the bus, but thought I’d say hello as I was passing.”

“Miss Novak, this is my mama. Mama, this is Miss Novak, my teacher. Remember, I told you…”

“I could hardly forget could I Debbie?” Then to Allie, “A certain someone likes to fill me in on everything you say and do each day.” Allie could feel herself blushing at the thought of Bea listening to Debbie talk about her. “But as it happens Debbie, Miss Novak and I have already met.” Debbie looked disappointed. “But that introduction was very nicely done,” she added, stroking her daughter’s hair. Debbie and Bea smiled at each other. Allie was enjoying this, her first opportunity to see the Smith girls together. Their mutual love and dependency were clear, and Allie was heartened to see what a balm it must be for each of them to have the other.

Bea sent Debbie off to finish with the chickens. “I wasn’t sure if you would want to see me, after Saturday,” Allie confessed.

“Well, since you’re here you can help me bring in these sheets,” Bea responded gruffly. Allie
wondered if that sly glance meant that she was secretly pleased to see her.

“Sure …”

Bea reached up to unpeg the nearest sheet but let out an involuntary gasp of pain. She couldn’t seem to reach up high enough and clasped her other hand to her ribs, her face pale.


“It’s nothing. I just fell down the stairs the other day and bruised my ribs.” The look on her face showed that even Bea didn’t believe that Allie would believe that tale.

Allie gave her a flat look and Bea lowered her eyes like she’d been caught out. “Let me look,” Allie said stepping closer. Bea’s expression was mutinous. “Something might be broken …” Allie pleaded.

“Nothing’s broken. It’s just a bad bruise,” Bea replied sharply.

“Just let me see, will you?!” The note of impatience in Allie’s voice seemed to make Bea’s resistance subside. She allowed Allie to tug her blouse free and lift it an inch or two. Just looking at the enormous mottled bruise made Allie’s own side twinge empathetically. “Oh Bea!” She met Bea’s eyes and all she saw there was shame. Was it shame that this had been done to her? Or shame that Allie was seeing it? Perhaps asking to look had only made things worse. Allie turned hot and cold alternately with anger and fear. She brushed her fingertips lightly over Bea’s ribs, watching the muscles twitch under her touch. “When exactly did this happen?” she asked.

“Um, Saturday,” Bea replied, looking off into the distance. Saturday. That was the day Allie had met Bea in town and encouraged her to stay for a drink. My God, she thought. Was this my fault? Did he do this because I kept her away from home longer than he liked? Her mouth dried up. She wanted to ask Bea if it was her fault, but Bea was looking at her as though she knew exactly what she was thinking. Bea shook her head slowly, side to side.

“These things just happen,” she said, as though she was talking about someone falling down stairs. Allie nodded dumbly. “Better get these sheets in…” Allie stretched up and unpegged a sheet. Bea grabbed one end and they proceeded to fold it between them. Every new fold brought their hands into contact and their heads close together. They folded each sheet in silence. It felt to Allie as though they were enclosed in a bubble, just the two of them. She inhaled whenever Bea was close enough, to take in a scent that was equal parts clean sheet and Bea’s own spicy, earthy smell. By the time they were on the last sheet Allie’s head was swimming. Drawing close on the final fold Bea grabbed hold of Allie’s hands. “It’s good of you to drop by,” she whispered in an intense tone. “If you drop by again another day, check for the truck. If it’s here, keep walking.” Allie nodded. “Promise.” Bea met her eyes without flinching.

“I promise.” She didn’t pause to consider if she would be able to keep that promise.

That night, as Allie got into bed, the scent of her own clean sheets lulled her to sleep with a smile on her face.

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On Friday afternoon Bea welcomed Debbie home from school as usual, and then spent the next
twenty minutes unnecessarily sweeping the porch. Every so often she would look up in the
direction that Allie would arrive from, if she were to pass by. She questioned herself about her
eagerness to lay eyes upon the schoolteacher again, then mercilessly quashed the thought. She had
no answers. She enjoyed seeing her and Harry had not been around since Saturday, so what was the
harm?

When Allie did appear out of the trees Bea was still somehow surprised to see her, even though she
had been looking out for her. Her heart leaped up, but she carried on sweeping as though nothing
had happened. Bea didn’t call out to her or show any awareness of her until she reached the bottom
porch step. Allie kept silent too and just looked at Bea and smiled as she so often did. Bea stopped
sweeping and returned the smile. She didn’t know what to say. After a long half minute of staring
and smiling Bea finally ventured a lame, “Hi.”


“Inside, drawing me a picture of the gorgon Medusa. You wouldn’t have anything to do with that
would you?” Bea asked with a shy grin, knowing about the book Allie was reading to the class.

“She surely loves that story. You should see her face when I’m reading it. It’s like she’s right there
in the adventure!”

“I feel like I’m right there at story time. She gives me the whole plot when she gets home.”

“I’m glad she’s enjoying it … I wanted to bring you this. I needed to call in at the pharmacy on my
way home last night,” Allie looked down for a moment and Bea intuited that that was not entirely
true. “And I noticed they had some of this … So, I picked up a tube … I thought it might help …
with your bruises …” She gestured to Bea’s side and passed over a tube of ointment, looking
worried, like she might be taking a liberty.

“Thanks,” Bea breathed, touched at the thought. It wasn’t often someone did something thoughtful
for her. She took the tube and looked at it more closely. “Arnica …”

“Apply it twice a day, the pharmacist said. Shall I help you put some on now?”

“No!” Bea replied emphatically, remembering how her body had responded last time Allie had
touched her there. “I’ll put it on later.” Allie just nodded, unperturbed and a little bit knowing. Bea
surprised herself by being more amused than annoyed by Allie’s easy assumption that she could
read Bea’s mind. Perhaps she could. And perhaps it was comforting to feel that someone cared
enough to read between the lines on pages that had so far been left uncut.

Debbie came barrelling out of the door, handed a sheet of paper to Bea, and called, “C’mon Hector.
C’mon boy!” patting her thigh in encouragement. She jumped off the steps and disappeared into
the woods. Allie raised an eyebrow.

“The latest fictional pet,” Bea explained. “A hound named Hector. I wish she could have an actual
pet but I don’t think I can feed any more mouths.”

Allie said, “Well, at least she has the chickens.”

Bea scoffed. “Those chickens are not pets Allie!”

“No, I suppose not,” she replied quietly, looking shamefaced.

“You’re such a city girl!” Bea told her fondly. Allie smiled blindingly, as though that was a
wonderful compliment.
Later that evening Bea surreptitiously applied the ointment to her bruises, thinking about Allie, wondering what if would have been like to allow her to touch her again, more thoroughly this time. Her heart rate picked up and a flush started up her neck. Stop it, she told herself. She was behaving like a moonstruck schoolgirl rather than an adult woman. And there was no chance of seeing Allie again now until at least Monday. Irritably, she tossed the tube of ointment into the drawer of her nightstand. She noticed a jar and drew it out. It was some hand lotion that Liz had given her for Christmas. She had forgotten all about it, but now seemed like the ideal time to make use of it. As she was smoothing it over her hands Debbie stuck her head round the door.

“What’s that Mama?” she asked, perching next to Bea on the bed.

“Just some hand lotion,” Bea replied, glad that she had managed to finish up with the arnica before Debbie had appeared.

“What’s it for?”

“It’s to make my hands softer. The washing and the gardening and all dries the skin out.”

“Smells nice. Can I have some?”

“Sure.” Bea rubbed a little onto her daughter’s hands, though of course her skin was already perfectly soft. Debbie sniffed her hands appreciatively. “What’s that one?” she asked, pointing to the tub on top of the nightstand.

“That’s cold cream. For my face … I guess you want to try that too?” Debbie nodded with a grin. Bea opened the jar and got a blob of cream on her finger, and then dabbed it right onto the tip of Debbie’s nose. Debbie gave a little squeal at the sensation. “You look so pretty Deb!” Bea teased. Before she knew it, Debbie had stuck her hand into the jar and smeared some on Bea’s nose, laughing. “Right, that does it!” Bea tipped her over onto the bed and tickled her thoroughly, growling whilst Debbie laughed and squealed with mock fear.

When they had worn themselves out with tickling and wrestling, they lay back on the pillows and watched the dusk begin to darken the room. Bea looked at her daughter’s profile, admiring the shape of her nose and the curve of her lips. What a gift this child was! She wanted it all for Debbie: success, love, happiness and, more than anything, an end to fear. For the first time Bea felt as though it might be within her own power to steer their lives into a better course. She hugged Debbie to her tightly. “C’mon baby, time for bed.”

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Over the coming weeks it became a habit for Allie to stop by every day on her way home from work. Harry’s truck remained absent and Allie noticed that Bea was nearly always busy at the front of the house as she arrived. Was this a coincidence, Allie wondered, or was Bea looking out for her? She had noticed some other small clues that maybe Bea liked her: the blushing, the difficulty in making eye contact, the teasing that Bea was starting to direct at her. And when Allie touched her, by accident or deliberately, it was difficult to imagine that the electricity that seemed to jump between them was all on one side.

But Allie still balked at making plain her true feelings for Bea out of fear of her reaction. Living here in a small village where life was dominated by the Baptist chapel Bea was likely to share the
views of her God-fearing neighbours when it came to judging someone like her. Fear, scorn and
disgust were to be anticipated. Pity was the best she could hope for. In New York Allie had been
able to be “in the life” to a degree, but here it would be impossible. If she revealed herself to Bea
and she was repulsed, Allie didn’t think she could stand it. She would have to leave Broadlea and
would never see Bea again. Best to be cautious for now.

On one particular day Bea was hoeing between the rows of vegetables when Allie arrived. Once
again, she was dressed in overalls and singlet like the first time Allie saw her. She stood and
watched her for a minute, admiring her bare arms as she worked. At that moment Debbie crashed
through the porch door and ran down the steps. She was wearing a red and white baseball uniform
and carrying a bat under her arm.

“Hi Miss Novak. Wanna watch me bat?”

“Sure Debbie. I didn’t know you played baseball.’”

“I’m just learning. Can you pitch to me?”

“Yes, okay,” Allie agreed walking over to her. “Where did you get the uniform?”

“It’s my cousin Caleb’s, but he grew out of it.”

Debbie picked herself a spot, shuffled her feet and swung the bat experimentally a time or two.
Allie could see Bea watching them with amusement whilst pretending to carry on with the hoeing.
She thought this was funny, did she? Well, watch this! Allie took a few steps back, palmed the ball
into the mitt once or twice, then wound up, raised her left leg comically high, and gave Debbie an
easy ball. Debbie swung hard and with a crack the ball sailed up and out into the long grass.

“Woo! Great hit Debbie!” Debbie looked shocked to have hit the ball so far, gave an enormous
grim and ran off to fetch it. Allie turned to look at Bea who was doubled up with laughter between
the beans, leaning on her hoe for support. “What’s so funny?” Allie asked innocently, knowing she
must have made a curious sight pitching in such a heightened way and wearing her work clothes
besides.

“Nothin’!” Bea gasped. “Great pitch Allie!” Allie just nodded with a serious expression on her face
and spent the next ten minutes exaggerating her pitch more and more just to see Bea’s amusement.

“We could use a fielder over here,” Allie finally suggested. Bea dropped her hoe and came and
joined the game. From the way she was running and jumping Allie could see that her injury must
be pretty much healed. Allie’s heart felt light: there was no better way to spend her time than
having fun with her two favourite people.

After a spectacular catch Bea called out: “Who’d like some lemonade?” Debbie readily abandoned
the game at the promise of a cool drink. They sat on the porch and sipped their drinks. After a
couple of minutes Debbie ran off to play on the swing that was strung from the branch of a tree not
far from the house.

“Thanks for playing with her,” Bea said. “Where’d you learn to pitch like that?”

“I learned all my incredible baseball skills practising with my brother when we were kids.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything quite like it,” Bea chortled, tears of laughter welling up
again.

“I’m glad you’re amused,” Allie replied in mock outrage. She was glad. She went on to tell her
about Thomasina Towers and Mrs Wentworth’s terrible rissoles, just to make her laugh more. Making Bea laugh until she cried was her new favourite thing.

“I’d better go,” Allie finally said regretfully. “If I miss this next bus I won’t be back at the Towers for six.”

“Don’t want to miss out on the rissoles,” Bea quipped, her expression unreadable. Allie smiled sadly and headed off.

Allie made it back in time for dinner. Not rissoles, but chops that were more bone than anything, and some limp vegetables. Allie ate hungrily whilst the others stared and picked at their own food with little appetite.

“Pretty hungry there, Novak?” Linda Miles commented. Allie felt like she was trying to pick a fight, but nothing could rile her today, after her perfect afternoon with Bea and Debbie.

“Umm, yes. Pretty hungry,” she agreed amiably. Linda scowled but let her be. Maxine smiled at Allie, looking smug.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry not much plot but I hope you enjoyed the chapter anyway.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

It rains. Bea and Allie get closer ...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Spring turned into summer and Harry stayed away. The vegetable garden flourished, as did Debbie. Allie visited every weekday and so Bea flourished too. Bea and Debbie took Allie to pick wild strawberries, they showed her their own special spot by the pond, Allie helped Debbie improve her batting and pitching. Bea’s fists unclenched for the first time in a long time. She could sometimes feel a smile darting across her face, and her heart unfurled a tiny bit. She wondered if this was what people meant when they said they were happy.

The only shadow over this new reality was the money problem. With Harry gone so long there was no cash in the house. Bea had managed to sell some of her early produce, but that might cause difficulty later in the year when they would miss the preserves she usually put up. Liz had gladly extended her credit at the store although it nearly broke Bea to ask her. Bea prayed that Harry was still paying the mortgage. What would they do if he wasn’t? She resolutely turned her mind away from that desperate thought. For now they had a roof over their heads and food in their bellies. It would have to suffice.

Thursday was a sweltering day. By afternoon dark clouds were gathering presaging a summer storm. Bea stood on the porch looking at the sky. Some rain would be good for the garden but if it was a very heavy downpour it might crush the more tender plants. But there was nothing she could do about that. She turned back inside. She would make some of Debbie’s favourite cookies for when she got home. Perhaps Allie would like one ...

The sky got darker still as Bea baked. Eventually she could see Debbie’s small form dashing along the trail just as the first few heavy drops splattered onto the dry ground.

“Hi Mama! I beat the rain!”

Bea could smell the tang of the coming deluge on the air. The wind was gusting hard now. Thunder sounded and then the rain abruptly intensified into a deafening cascade. They stepped out onto the porch to watch the storm play out. Debbie was hanging onto the porch rail and jumping up and down with excitement. Bea found it exhilarating too. The hairs on her arms all lifted up and an involuntary smile spread across her face. She almost forgot to worry about the garden. But Allie … surely, she wouldn’t come over in this weather? She would either wait for the rain to stop or go directly to the bus stop. Despite her certainty she still found her eyes straying to the tree line, just in case.

The rain continued to fall steadily. It had lost its initial intensity but would be enough to keep any sensible person inside until it had stopped. After a few minutes Bea had to accept that there would be no Allie today. She turned to Debbie. “Want a cookie Deb?” Debbie ran inside without even answering: that question only ever had one answer after all. Bea was about to follow her when her eye caught some movement on the path. A figure was hurrying towards the house, hair plastered to
her head, mangled umbrella in one hand, sliding in the mud. Allie! She must be mad … Bea grabbed her coat and set out to meet her, the coat held over her head for protection. Despite the coat her legs and feet were almost instantly soaked. Her wet slacks clung coldly to her legs and her shoes filled with water. Bea ignored the sensation and concentrated on reaching Allie without slipping over.

Grabbing Allie’s arm to steady her she lifted the coat so it would cover them both. As they progressed back towards the house Bea slipped her arm around Allie’s back and grasped her waist so that she could more easily keep them both under cover. The cotton of Allie’s dress was soaked through and freezing cold, but Bea could feel Allie’s body heat against her palm in a most distracting way. Allie was sliding all around in her city shoes so that Bea had a tough time keeping her on her feet. And then, above the sound of the pounding rain, Bea could hear Allie start to laugh. Bea stared at her in consternation. What was wrong with her?

Reaching the steps Bea propelled her inside as quickly as she could. It seemed very quiet inside the house after the noise of the rain. Allie stood there dripping and laughing, grasping her elbows with her hands, shaking with the cold. A violent shiver ran through her. She must be freezing, Bea realised.

“Debbie! Grab me a towel. And get the blanket off the bottom of my bed!”

Debbie paused in surprise, a cookie poised near her lips, at the spectacle of her teacher standing in her house soaked through. “Yes ma’am!” She raced off up the stairs.

Seeing Allie shivering with cold and apparently hysterical, Bea acted without thinking. Placing one hand on either side of her waist she drew Allie to her, pressed herself against her, and then put her arms around her. Allie stopped laughing, shivered for a few more seconds, and then relaxed against Bea, absorbing her body heat. Allie smelled of rain on parched earth after a long dry spell. Bea soaked her in, tightening her hold. “Christ Allie. What were you thinking?” she murmured.

Allie put her lips close to Bea’s ear. “Of you,” she whispered. Her words and her hot breath on her ear set Bea to shivering in her turn. Her knees were feeling a bit loose and her heart beat kind of irregular. Breathing seemed more difficult than usual. She was holding Allie just as she had imagined doing not long after they first met. The reality of it surpassed anything she could have expected. Wherever their bodies met Bea’s skin thrilled and gooseflesh erupted. Hearing Debbie pounding back down the stairs Bea drew away, glassy-eyed and disconcerted. Debbie was exclaiming about how wet Allie was and, oh no what had happened to her umbrella … Bea tuned her out and wrapped the towel around Allie. Wordlessly she led her over to the kitchen and sat her down on a chair next to the stove. She rubbed gently at her hair while Allie just eyed her dumbly.

“We’d better get you out of these wet things.” Bea finally broke the silence. “Take off your stockings and I’ll put them to dry.” Allie’s eyes gleamed and an impish smile took over her face. Looking Bea in the eye she reached up under the hem of her dress to unfasten her stockings. Bea was treated to a view of one long, creamy-skinned leg at a time as Allie removed her stockings. Bea flushed and broke out into a sweat. She swallowed with difficulty then stood up abruptly and turned on her heel. “Get out of your dress too,” she said hoarsely over her shoulder. “Debbie and I will find you something to put on. C’mon Deb …” She stalked off up the stairs, leaving Allie to it, trailing whatever scraps of dignity she had left behind her.

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Once Debbie had dumped a dress of Bea’s in her lap, that same dark green dress Bea had worn the time that they had taken tea in Charlottesville, and run back upstairs, Allie reflected that maybe she had gone a bit too far. Getting caught in the chilly rain after the heat of the day seemed to have
scrambled her brain. That and feeling Bea’s arms around her. And now Bea had run away and was apparently hiding upstairs. She sighed and peeled off her damp dress. Her under things were wet too. She took them off and dried herself with the towel, marvelling at the fact that she was standing naked in Bea’s kitchen.

She pulled the dress on and managed to fasten most of the eyelets. Putting her wet clothes to dry over the backs of a couple of chairs she sank back down feeling suddenly drained and weak. She could hear tentative footsteps on the stairs and then Bea poked her head around the corner. “Don’t worry, I’m not naked!” Allie sang out. Allie could see Bea’s blush from where she sat.

“How are you feeling now?” Bea asked her.

“Fine. I’m warming up nicely.” Bea came over and looked into her face. She looked concerned.

“Come sit on the couch and I’ll make you a cup of coffee. That’ll help chase the chill away.” With one hand she grasped Allie’s upper arm and led her over to the couch. She did feel a bit peculiar still and was glad to sink down into the soft fabric. Bea astonished her by crouching down, grabbing her feet and swinging her legs up onto the couch. She then proceeded to cover her with a soft red blanket and tucked it round her. “Just rest there. I’ll be back in a moment.” Allie watched her head back to the kitchen. When had someone last looked after her like this? She couldn’t remember. It was usually her consoling crying children and mopping bloody knees. To be coddled like this felt unfamiliar.

The whole downstairs of Bea’s house was open plan so Allie was free to watch Bea as she moved about the kitchen, added more fuel to the stove and prepared the coffee. Bea was wearing a pair of charcoal grey slacks that Allie had not seen before. They were wide legged but the way they fitted Bea around the hips and behind made Allie stare, look away, and stare some more. The sweater she wore looked handknitted. It was round necked and a little too small. The waistband finished at her hips and the sleeves left inches of her slim wrists uncovered. It was also kind of tight across the chest, Allie couldn’t help but notice. It was dark teal, or maybe petrol blue, a colour that made a dramatic contrast with Bea’s red curls.

This was the first time Allie had actually been inside Bea’s house. The warm weather had meant that all their other meetings had taken place either outside or on the porch. It was cosily furnished and well lived in. The rugs and soft furnishings were faded, and the paintwork needed refreshing, but Allie loved the Bea-ness of it. Pots of seedlings covered the kitchen windowsill, a clutter of dirty bowls and baking equipment covered half of the kitchen table whilst the other half was taken up with sheets of paper and a scattering of Debbie’s crayons, some of which had rolled onto the floor.

“How is there a shovel in your kitchen?” Allie asked with a grin.

“Huh?” Bea swivelled round. She looked at the shovel leaning up against the wall near the stove. “Oh. It has a loose handle. I keep meaning to fix it.” Bea headed over to her with a cup in her hand. “Here,” she offered it to Allie. “Hope it’s not too strong.”

“Looks perfect,” Allie said, taking it from her and cupping her hands around it for the warmth.

“You should have a cookie,” Debbie said entering the room. “They always make me feel better.” Debbie sat herself down on the rug and began setting up a tea party for a teddy bear and a knitted creature that might have been a rabbit, or maybe a kangaroo.

“She’s right,” Bea said, heading back to the kitchen. “The sugar will help with the shock, or whatever that was …” Bea brought her over a homemade cookie on a plate and settled it on Allie’s
Allie took a bite. It was chewy but with crunchy sweet nuggets studded throughout it. “Oh my God! That’s wonderful. What is it?”

Bea smiled, looking pleased. “Family recipe. We call them honeycomb cookies.”

“I think this might be the best thing I ever tasted.” The combination of the hot bitter coffee and the sugary cookie were working together nicely to revive Allie.

“Wait till you try her applesauce cake!” Debbie chimed in.

“Oh yeah?” Allie asked, cocking an eyebrow at Bea.

“That cake is for special occasions only … but maybe I’ll make it for you sometime,” she said, her expression promising something that Allie couldn’t interpret.

Bea was looking at Allie much more directly than usual, her eyes darting away less often. She huffed a breath out of her nostrils and seemed to come to a decision. She walked over to the couch, lifted Allie’s feet and sat down, replacing them in her lap. She covered them over with the blanket to keep them warm. But then, to Allie’s amazement, she cupped first one foot and then the other between her palms, warming them. She stroked and rubbed until Allie’s feet felt pink and warm. Allie didn’t know where to look and was acutely aware of her lack of underwear. Debbie was right there only feet away and Allie was in danger of swooning from Bea’s ministrations. Her face was hot, and her pulse was thundering away in her throat, loud enough, she was sure, for the whole room to hear.

Bea looked over at Allie. “That’s better. You seem to have some colour back in your face now,” she smirked. Allie’s mouth gaped in surprise. She was doing this on purpose! This was payback for her stunt with the stockings! The knowledge that Bea was aware of the effect she was having on her only stirred her up more. Allie had assumed Bea disliked emotional and physical closeness because she so often placed herself at a careful remove, but here she was demonstrating that she wasn’t so withdrawn after all. Well, they said still waters ran deep, didn’t they?

Bea seemed to take pity on her and brought her hands out from under the blanket. Allie relaxed a little, though she missed the contact, settling back into the cushions and closing her eyes. This might just be her happiest moment ever, she reflected. Cosy on a couch, wrapped in this soft Bea-smelling blanket, the coffee, the cookie, Debbie babbling to her toys in the background, her feet in Bea’s lap. And Bea had touched her. Really touched her! Deliberately. Sensually. It was almost too good to be true.

Allie opened her eyes to check it was all real and saw Bea as though for the first time, again. Her beauty, her solidity, her cleverness. How would she ever be able to explain to her what she saw when she looked at her? Words were great. Allie loved words, but they couldn’t get close to what she wanted to say. So instead she told Bea, inanely, “I like that sweater.” Bea smiled sadly.

“My mama made it for me, when I was still a girl.” She ran her hands pensively over the sleeves. “I wear it when I want to feel close to her.”

“What happened?” Allie asked gently. Bea had never mentioned her mother before.

There was a long pause. “She died. Influenza. Years ago.” Bea gazed at Debbie. “I wish Debbie could have known her. Those cookies,” she gestured to the kitchen, “are the same ones she used to make for me. And I loved them just like Debbie does.” She smiled bravely but tears had bubbled
up and her mouth and voice trembled.

“Oh Bea,” Allie sat up and scooted down the couch so she could take her in her arms. Bea accepted the embrace and even leant into Allie apparently accepting the comfort she offered.

“My daddy died when I was so little, I don’t think I even remember him,” she continued. “Quarry accident. So, it was just me and Mama and Grandpa and Grandma. That’s who raised me.” A tiny smile. “My grandpa was wonderful. A real mountain man. He knew the names of all the plants and birds and roamed all over the Blue Ridge as a young man. He taught me so much.” Bea’s eyes were unfocused now, seemingly lost in the memories.

“What about your grandma? What was she like?” Allie asked.

“She was as tough as they come. Not an easy woman, but hardworking and God-fearing. She loved me though. Just had a hard time showing it.” Allie nodded thinking about how some of those traits might have come down the generations. “God, we were poor. By the time mama got ill the house was just about falling down. Grandpa had died the year before and Grandma was getting frail. So, after mama died, I hung in there long enough to finish school, like I promised her, and then took the lifeline that Harry was offering.” She glanced at Debbie and lowered her voice. “He had a good job at the quarry. We got married. Got a mortgage on this place. Me and Grandma, we moved in.” She gestured helplessly. “How can I regret it, when I had no other choice?” She looked at Allie as though begging for forgiveness.

“You did what you had to do,” Allie told her softly, gripping her hand. She was appalled by the situation Bea had found herself trapped in. A young woman alone with an elderly grandparent to care for and no means of financial support, compelled to marry just to prevent destitution. Probably it had happened to thousands of girls and women over the years, but it was worse than ever now. The depression meant that whatever few jobs were available would never be given to a woman when there were so many men unemployed. The only reason Allie had her job was thanks to her college degree. She hated to think what she would be doing now if it weren’t for that.

Bea took in a breath, visibly preparing herself to continue. “I thought it would be alright. Harry wasn’t a bad husband at first, whilst Grandma was alive, and Debbie was a baby.” She glanced at Debbie again, checking she was absorbed in her game. “I never loved him,” she whispered. “And I don’t think he ever loved me either. He just wanted to acquire me. Wanted to be able to look at me and know that I was his.” Bea’s expression was bleak. Allie thought she knew how much courage and effort it took Bea to open up like this. She also knew there was more to be said and tears that ought to be falling, but Bea would not yet allow herself to appear weak in front of Allie, and certainly not in front of Debbie.

“I need some fresh air,” Allie announced to the room. She stood and draped the blanket around her shoulders. “Debbie, your mama’s just coming with me onto the porch - to look after me.” Bea looked surprised but Debbie just nodded and poured some more imaginary tea. Allie linked her arm through Bea’s and led her outside. The rain had slackened to an ordinary shower and the sky looked brighter. Allie guided Bea to the porch swing, settled herself next to her and grabbed her hand. “Tell me the rest,” she pleaded. Bea shook her head and sucked in her bottom lip, looking just like Debbie when she didn’t want to cooperate. “You can tell me anything. You won’t scare me off, I promise.” Bea looked away. “You’re doing so well. I feel really privileged that you’ve told me so much, but I’m ready to hear the rest … if you’re ready to tell me.” Allie couldn’t think what more to say, so she shut up and waited.

Bea looked at her lap and said nothing for a long time. Then she closed her eyes and ground it out. “The first time he hit me I was so surprised I didn’t do anything.” Allie held her breath. “I’d never
been hit before. Punishments at home had always been extra chores or learning Bible verses. I was shocked. I just took it and afterwards he apologised and said it would never happen again.” She made a disparaging sound. “I believed him. Anyone can lose their temper, right?” She looked at Allie. Allie nodded, gazing directly into Bea’s anguished brown eyes, trying to buoy her up with just a look. “When it happened again, he told me it was my fault. That I made him so angry he couldn’t help it. I believed that too, for a while.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Allie couldn’t help but interject, stroking her hand.

“I know. I figured that out after a few months. And then I started fighting back. But that only made it worse because he was bigger and stronger than me. And it seemed to give him permission to beat me harder.”

“Oh Bea! I’m so sorry.” Allie took the blanket from around herself and arranged it over Bea who had gone very pale.

“He never did it in front of Debbie. He would always send her upstairs or out to play, but I’d have to be a fool to think she didn’t know what was going on. After that I would go as limp as possible and just let him do it and get it over with as quickly and quietly as possible, hoping that Debbie wouldn’t know.” This last revelation seemed to be the hardest. She was trembling and her voice was thick. She managed to strangle out one more sentence. “That’s the worst thing: that I couldn’t protect my baby …” And then the tears would not be held back any longer. She sobbed and Allie took her in her arms and rocked her, tears silently running down her face.

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Bea sat at the kitchen table nursing a cup of coffee, exhausted. Debbie was in bed and now she could reflect on everything that had happened today. She thought about Allie, no doubt back at the boarding house by now, maybe taking off her borrowed dress and getting into bed. Bea had given her that dress so that she could have something dry to wear, and then had dampened it with her tears. Not that Allie had minded. She had let her cry herself dry and, although she felt wrung out, Bea had to admit she was relieved to have told someone. Allie didn't seem surprised by any of it, seemed to have guessed most of it. Maybe she wasn’t as good at hiding her feelings as she had thought.

Not that she wanted to hide anything from Allie anymore. That was the other big revelation of the day: Bea had allowed herself to understand what her feelings for Allie meant, and she had shown Allie that she understood them and welcomed them. Deciding that she was going to act had been terrifying, but touching Allie like that had been easy, natural. Watching Allie’s reactions to her hands on her bare feet had been like watching a silent movie: first the surprise - Bea was not usually so bold; then the arousal - the flush, the darkening eyes, the quickening breath; then the shock as she realised that Bea was purposeful in her actions - pleasure, amusement and maybe a little bit of pride. Curious to Bea was that watching Allie’s pleasure gave her so much pleasure.

Not long after Bea had cried herself out Allie had had to rush off to get back before dinner. Bea had wanted her to stay but didn’t know how to articulate it, so in the end said nothing. Allie looked like she wanted to say something too but just gave her a brief hug and left. The rain had stopped, and the sun had come out again making everything steam. Bea watched Allie disappear down the track, pieces of clothing trailing from her bag.

Then Bea had chores to do. Washing up the baking things, checking on the state of the garden, making supper. Debbie had watched her closely. When Bea asked her what she was staring at Debbie told her, “You seem so happy mama!” and Bea had realised she had been singing and smiling and maybe even dancing a little.
“Come and dance with me!” Bea called to her. She switched on the radio, found a station with music and she and Debbie polkaed and shimmied around the kitchen, singing and laughing and preparing supper all at the same time. Bea’s silly dance steps had made Debbie laugh so hard she got the hiccups, which wouldn’t go away for a full twenty minutes. Then suppertime, story time and bedtime. And now Bea should stop smiling into her cup and go to bed herself.

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Allie had arrived back at Thomasina Towers with only a few minutes to spare. Maxine was on the front porch apparently watching out for her. “There you are! I thought you weren’t going to make it. You seem to be getting later every night …” Maxine looked at her closer. “What happened?”

“What do you mean?” Allie asked, wondering if Maxine could tell what had happened between her and Bea just by looking at her.

“You look all bedraggled. No offence …”

Allie laughed. “I got caught in that rainstorm. Soaked through …” she gestured apologetically at herself.

“Where’d you get that dress? That’s not one of yours.” Maxine’s interest seemed to have been piqued.

“A friend leant it to me. Mine was wet through …”

Maxine looked closer still, seemingly taking in the fact that she was not wearing any stockings or foundation garments. “This friend … it wouldn’t be the Bea you mentioned to me before would it?” Maxine asked quietly. Allie was shocked that Maxine had made this leap of intuition. She knew her friend was perceptive, but if Maxine could work it out then other people might be able to too. Her horror must have shown on her face, because Maxine quickly said, “Don’t answer. I shouldn’t pry, and I won’t tell anyone … but … I’m happy you’ve found someone who makes you glow like that.” Allie blushed but didn’t say anything. She couldn’t think of what to say without giving more away than she already had, so she settled for sending Maxine a grateful smile. “Here,” Maxine said, pulling a hip flask from her pocket. “Have a nip of this - to celebrate. Or to numb your taste buds before dinner!”

Allie took it and gave a cautious sniff. “Moonshine? Where’d you get this?” She took a sip. Revolting, but warming.

“A certain someone … who might be showing an interest,” Maxine replied archly.


“Well, if you won’t tell, why should I … ?” But she was smiling, and her eyes were sparkling. “You’re not the only one with a secret.”

Chapter End Notes

There’s still some of this I’m not quite happy with, but here it is warts and all ...
Apparently the terrible rain we had here last week inspired me.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

No summary. WARNING SPOILER BELOW ...
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* If you are averse to depictions of violence you might want to skip the last few paragraphs.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Friday was inching by for Bea. All she could think about was Allie. She couldn’t get anything much done and looking at the clock every few minutes wasn’t helping. She would start in on a job and then the next thing she knew she had slowed to a standstill, caught in a reverie. She could remember the exact look on Allie’s face as she sat on that chair next to the stove … and then her mind was away, imagining what might have happened. What if she had knelt down in front of her and put her hands in her damp hair and pulled her in for a kiss? Her nerves were thrilling just at the idea of touching her lips to Allie’s. What would it be actually like to kiss her? The thought of it was overwhelming for the moment.

She flung the dishtowel aside. She was so distracted and restless. Perhaps some fresh air would help. She had a sudden inspiration and ran upstairs to get her pencils and notebook. She would hike up to the glade. It was peaceful there. She could sit on her favourite rock and look out at the view, and if the spirit took her, she would draw. She hadn’t drawn anything for months but suddenly her fingers twitched with the desire to put marks down on paper. It would calm her mind too, she decided … if she could still draw worth a damn. Pulling on her sturdiest boots, she set off almost at a run.

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“Jimmy Morris. Come here please,” Allie said firmly, giving him her best stern look. He came up to her desk meekly enough, just like the other two times. “I have had to write your name on the blackboard twice today Jimmy. What happens if I have to write it for a third time?” He looked at her boldly.

“Dunno Miss.” Allie gave an internal sigh. He did know. They all knew the school rules from day one.

“If I have to write your name three times in one day, you will have to stay in at recess and do extra work.” He didn’t look concerned. “Is that what you want?”

“No Miss.” No hint of remorse.
“Well, if you flick one more thing across the classroom, that’s exactly what will happen. Now, return to your seat.”

Allie rarely lost her temper in class, not even with Jimmy who would be a trial to any teacher, but today her impatience was making it more than usually difficult. All she could think about was the end of the day, when she would at last be able to see Bea again. It had been so hard to leave her yesterday. Bea had seemed tired after she had told her about Harry, but the tears had dried up, and she was able to smile again before too long. Allie had wanted to kiss her so badly when she said goodbye, but had restrained herself, feeling that Bea had probably had enough new experiences for one day. But today? All bets were off.

And then all the way home she had thought about her, clutching that borrowed dress to her, enjoying the knowledge that it had been against Bea’s skin and was now against hers. Back in Charlottesville, she had stopped by a store and picked up a bag of good coffee to take with her the next day. She was sure Bea must be struggling for money and a little coffee went a long way in making life easier. She had that coffee in her bag now. If only she could get through the next few hours.

“Now it’s time for the spelling test,” Allie announced. A collective groan went up from the class. Allie felt like joining in.

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As usual, the peace and beauty of the natural world had worked its spell on Bea, and she was feeling buoyant and lucky to live among the mountains and woods of the Blue Ridge. Her hike up to the glade had helped her feel less restless and she had managed some detailed drawings of a clump of violets with which she was more than half-happy. Heading home, Bea thought she would call in at the store to see Liz. Hank, the hired man, was at the gas pump filling up for a customer. Bea stopped to say hello and then went inside.

It was pleasantly cool and dim inside the store. Liz was arranging tins of peas into a pyramid on the end of the long counter. “Bea! What do you think? Is this display going to entice folks to buy more peas?”

“Oh definitely!” she nodded vigorously, laughing. Liz looked hurt, momentarily. “Just spoofing, Liz. They’ll be flying off the shelves.”

“Hmm … What’s got you in such a good mood?”

“Oh, I’ve just been up to the glade. It’s such a lovely day. The birds were all singing fit to bust and everything smells so fresh after all that rain yesterday.” Bea knew she was probably coming across as some kind of lunatic she was so full of smiles and enthusiasm. But she hardly cared. It was a beautiful day and Allie would be here soon, making it the only kind of day she cared for.

“Yeah? It’s not like you to give yourself a day off.” Liz said thoughtfully. “It’s good. You should do it more often if it makes you happy.”

“Well maybe I will Liz. Can’t hang around the house all the time.” Although that was her usual orbit. If she spent too much time away from the house and Harry noticed, there were repercussions. But Harry hadn’t been back for weeks and Bea was getting used to him being gone. Allie provided such an excellent distraction she hardly considered him these days, except as a past misery to be put aside. She looked up to find Liz watching her appraisingly.

“What’s going on with you, Bea? You seem different lately.”
Bea’s heart began pounding at the irrational thought that her feelings for Allie could somehow be divined. She shrugged, feigning coolness. “Harry’s not been around these past few weeks. Maybe he’s finally moved on.”

“Yeah? Wouldn’t that be something!”

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Allie headed along the trail as quickly as she could without tripping or stumbling into a rabbit hole. She had lingered at her desk just long enough to let all the children disperse. She checked the windows, tidied the classroom, locked the doors, and she was away on winged feet. Heart pumping fast from the walk, or maybe the anticipation, she came out of the trees and saw the house. It took another half a dozen steps for her brain to catch up with what her eyes had already registered. Her heart faltered for a moment, and then raced away again, twice as fast as before. A dusty truck was parked outside the house.

She stopped abruptly, throat dry, eyes wild. Cursing herself for a fool, she flung her hand over her mouth to stifle a cry. Despite yesterday’s conversation with Bea, she had almost forgotten that Harry was a threat that could rematerialize at any time. He had been gone so many weeks that she had naively thought that maybe that was it, he wouldn’t be back anymore. Yet here he was. Allie didn’t know what to do and turned herself around on the path several times, indecision debilitating her. She had promised Bea that if she saw the truck she would just walk by. But how could she? How could she leave Bea and Debbie to face him alone?

She went closer to the house. She would walk by, she decided, and see if she could hear or see anything. She tried to look natural, as though she was just someone walking by, in case Harry was looking out of the window. When she got near enough, she slowed a little and squinted through the screen door. Was that …? Yes, there was Bea, moving about in the kitchen. She couldn’t see Harry or Debbie, but the ordinariness of Bea’s activity convinced her that all was well for the moment. She rounded the corner of the house, feeling relieved. But almost as soon as Bea was out of sight, her anxiety returned.

She stopped again and looked around. She wondered if there was somewhere she could watch the house without being visible. Maybe those bushes over by the tree where Debbie had her swing. She worked her way over there slowly, keeping to the cover of foliage or shadow whenever she could. Pushing between the branches of the shrubs she crouched down, manoeuvring herself until she had a view of the door. Then she watched and waited.

Every so often, she would see Bea’s figure cross her eye line. Once, she paused and seemed to be looking out, and then disappeared again. Then Debbie came out and fed the chickens. She seemed fine but did not linger today. The drapes in one of the upstairs windows were closed and Allie suspected Harry was in there sleeping. Allie's legs were stiff, and she longed to stretch, but she forced herself to be still. She glanced at her watch. It was getting on, but there was no way she was leaving. She pondered what she should do. Making a decision, she backed out of the shrub and skirted round the house keeping out of sight in the trees. She re-joined the track and headed on to Broadlea.

Walking rapidly, she approached the general store. She had not yet been inside, fearing that it might remind her too much of her parent’s store back home. She need not have worried. The Broadlea store was much more rustic. It sold all the usual food and household materials that she expected. Additionally, one wall bristled with farm tools, coils of fencing wire and other hardware. Then there was a post office window, a telephone and, strangely, a pool table.
“Good afternoon,” the shop assistant said. “Miss Novak, isn’t it? How can I help you?” The woman was short and a little dumpy with blonde hair and a kind expression.

“Hello …” Allie replied, wondering how the woman knew her name.

“Sorry love. I’m Elizabeth Birdsworth, Sophie’s mother.”

Now Allie remembered Bea saying that Sophie’s mother was the store’s owner. “Of course, Mrs Birdsworth. How nice to meet you,” Allie replied smoothly, doing her best to seem professional despite her agitation and the fact that she probably looked like she had been dragged through a bush, which was so nearly the case. Hoping to cut off any long conversation Allie quickly added, “Could I use your telephone?”

“Of course, love. Help yourself.” Mrs Birdsworth gestured to the telephone. Allie picked up the earpiece and cranked the handle. The operator came on the line. “Charlottesville 2545 please,” Allie said, and was put through to Mrs Wentworth’s boarding house.

“Mrs Wentworth speaking,” came her landlady’s precise voice.

“Hello Mrs Wentworth. This is Allie Novak. I’m very sorry about the late notice, but I’m afraid I won’t be back for dinner tonight.” Allie spoke coolly, masking her agitation.

“Oh dear. Is anything the matter?” Allie had an excuse prepared.

“One of my students is sick, and I’m going to wait here for the doctor. The mother is really very worried and shouldn’t be left alone just now …”

“You know I won’t be able to give you any rebate on your rent for missed meals, don’t you?” Mrs Wentworth pointed out.

“Of course. I wouldn’t expect …”

“What time will you be back? Because I lock the front door at ten o’clock precisely.”

“That’s fine Mrs Wentworth. If I’m not back by then you may assume I’ve made other arrangements.” Allie replied with some asperity. “Goodbye.” She hung up. “What do I owe you?” she asked Mrs Birdsworth, fishing for her purse, hands shaking in her haste.

“That’s just a dime,” she replied.

“I’ll take some crackers and a bottle of soda, too,” Allie said. “Do you have a washroom I could use?”

Mrs Birdsworth hesitated. “Not as such, but you can use ours. It’s just through here …”

“Oh no. I wouldn’t want to put you out.”

“It’s alright. Come on through.” Mrs Birdsworth showed her through a tastefully decorated living room to a bathroom beyond. Allie was more than grateful. Her plan was to watch over Bea and Debbie for as long as was necessary, so a bathroom break now might mean less difficulty later.

When Allie was washing her hands, she glanced at her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was partly undone and there were a couple of leaves caught in there. Wonderful! Just the sort of first impression she liked to make on parents. Luckily, Elizabeth Birdsworth didn’t seem like the judgemental type. She tidied herself up as best she could and headed back into the store. Mrs
Birdsworth rang up her purchases on the register, opened her soda bottle for her, and Allie left as quickly as politeness would allow, eager to regain her vantage point and be reassured that the situation at the Smith house remained peaceful.

She ate some of the crackers as she hurried along and drank the soda, knowing that this was all the dinner she was likely to get today. At least now Mrs Wentworth wouldn’t be telephoning the Sheriff when she didn’t arrive home this evening. She had thought about calling the Sheriff herself, but what could she tell him? My friend’s husband has come home and he’s having a nap in his own bed? She would just be thought a crazy woman. She’d have to deal with this herself. Arriving back at the house she once more squirmed into her hiding place and resumed her vigil.

Dusk fell, the lights went on in the house, and all remained quiet. Allie was starting to believe that nothing would happen. That Harry would spend the night and be off again in the morning. The night deepened. It was dark like no dark Allie had known before. No streetlights, no sounds of traffic or neighbours, only the occasional rustle of some unseen creature that she prayed was something harmless like a deer, not a bear. Allie still heard and saw nothing from the house. Perhaps she should get closer. Now it was dark no one would see her. She backed out of the bush. It was becoming chilly. She had a thin cardigan in her bag, which she put on, though it didn’t help much. Her whole body was stiff as she ghosted towards the house. The downstairs lights were still on, though it must be late by now. If she could get onto the porch, she could peek through the window and hope to see Bea. She eased her foot onto the first of the porch steps, keeping to the side, where the wood was less likely to creak. Holding her breath, she transferred her weight gingerly. No sound. She stepped again. A tiny creak. She paused but there was no reaction from inside. Gaining the top step, she moved onto her hands and knees and crawled soundlessly until she was under the window. She placed her hands on the sill and slowly lifted herself until her eyes were above the level of the frame.

At first, all she could see was the living room and the kitchen behind that. Everything looked much the same as yesterday. Maybe a bit tidier. Then she moved her head to take in another angle and she could see the couch with a figure stretched out on it, covered with a blanket. Was it Bea? Yes, she could see her hair spread out in a fan around her head. She looked fine and seemed to be sleeping peacefully. She must be staying downstairs to keep out of Harry’s way. Allie sank down onto the wooden planks of the porch feeling tearful and weak with relief. She curled up on the unforgiving boards. This would be her bed for the night: she could creep away early in the morning before anyone saw her. The porch floor was cold and hard but knowing that Bea was safe and only a few feet away meant that it was as good as a comfortable bed. She slept.

A sound awakened her, fear making her surge to her feet instantly. Voices, raised voices. She looked in through the window, no longer caring if she was seen. Bea was retreating around the kitchen table pursued by a man. He was leaning forward aggressively, shaking a notebook in her face. Abruptly he dropped it and delivered a powerful backhander to her face that propelled her into the wall. Allie gave an involuntary cry and raced to the door. It was unlocked and she had rushed into the living room before she knew it, powered by adrenaline. Both Harry and Bea stared at her in astonishment.

“Who the hell are you?” Harry ground out, at the same time that Bea said, “Allie?” Bea looked astonished, then ashamed, then regretful, all in the time it took Allie to take in her pallor and the blood that coursed from her nose, dripping unheeded on the floor. Harry headed over to Allie and grabbed her by the arm, dragging her towards the door. “Get out of my house!” Allie used all her weight to resist him, but she was still being moved against her will.

“Get off me!” she protested. “I’m Miss Novak, Debbie’s teacher, and I’m here to make you leave your wife alone,” she asserted, trying not to be cowed by the hard, unfeeling expression in his eyes.
He really was very ordinary looking, Allie told herself, as a way of fortifying herself against the rage she could see in him. You wouldn’t pick him out in the street as someone who liked to beat his wife.

“My wife, my house, none of your business,” he explained through tightened teeth. “Now get out …” and she was moving towards the door again, unable to stop herself.

“What do you think your friends and neighbours will think of you when I tell them what I’ve seen tonight?” she taunted him. “Harry Smith is such a coward he likes to beat on women!” A glimmer of doubt passed across his face and he paused in his efforts to remove her. “What do you care what I do?” he asked.

“Debbie is my student,” Allie replied. She clamped her lips together to prevent herself from saying anything more.

“Oh yes, Debbie’s mentioned you. Seems like she’s got a bit of a crush on you …,” he said nastily. Allie’s eyes betrayed her. She looked at Bea. She didn’t mean to, but she did. Bea looked at the ceiling in despair, blinking. Harry’s face hardened. He understood what he’d seen in Allie’s face. Pretty perceptive for such a jerk. He looked at Bea. “Debbie’s not the only one with a crush, huh?”

“It’s not what you think Harry,” Bea said desperately, coming towards him.

“Looks to me that’s exactly what it is.” He grabbed Allie tighter and pulled her to him, leering at her. “Fucking tom, sniffing round my wife when I’m not here!” Bea paled further. She grabbed at him, pulling at his arm.

“C’mon Harry. Let her go. We can sort this out … just the two of us,” Bea pleaded. For a moment, it seemed as though Harry would listen to her, but then his face contorted in disgust. He pushed Allie to the ground and held her there, a knee in her back and his hand on the back of her neck pushing her face into the floor.

“How far’s it gone? Huh?” Allie concentrated on trying to breathe. Bea didn’t say anything. Allie could see her clenching and unclenching her hands, rocking from foot to foot as though preparing to do something. Allie couldn’t move her head to shake it and tried to send her a “no” message with her eyes. But Bea was looking at Harry now. “When I think of you around my wife it disgusts me!” He was working himself into a rage, working himself up to hurt her more. He squeezed the back of her neck harder. “Even your eyes on her are an affront to God …,” he continued. Grasping her neck, he pulled it back and thumped her forehead into the floor. Allie cried out, her vision dimming for a moment, her ears ringing. Then his fist glanced off her ear. Then a blow to her shoulder.

Afterwards, Allie would remember the sight of Bea’s face looming over Harry’s shoulder. It was contorted with rage, teeth bared, eyes blazing, curls bristling. Her arms swung, a metal object came into view, there was a terrible sound and then Harry’s grip was gone from her neck as he slumped over, half on top of her, half on the floor.

Chapter End Notes

So, that was difficult to write. Hope you can visualise what happens okay. As ever, let me know what you think.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

"Does it have to unravel this quickly?"

Chapter Notes

People sometimes say that the internet is full of crazy horrible people. Well, all I can say is that this corner of it, our sweet little Ballieverse, is full of lovelies. Thank you all for your kind and interesting comments, and above all for reading this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The dawn light began to filter into Bea's bedroom as she lay on her bed staring dry eyed at the ceiling. She heard the front door open and close quietly and got up to watch from the window as Allie made her way round the side of the house and headed for Broadlea and the bus. She looked up once, her eyes examining the house, searching for her. Bea drew back. She couldn't bear for Allie to even look at her right now. Allie's face was pale, save for the bruise on her forehead, her eyes red rimmed with dark shadows of fatigue beneath them. Even her brilliant blue irises looked a little dimmer than usual. Bea's stomach churned with guilt. She reproached herself for bringing Allie to this point, for entangling her in this mess, for almost getting her killed.

If only Allie had done as she had promised. If only she had kept walking none of this would have happened. Bea would have taken the usual abuse; Harry would have been satisfied and left them alone again. Instead, Allie had undertaken this ridiculous scheme of watching the house … And now look at what had happened … And Allie had seen her at her worst. She had lost control completely. Done and said things that couldn’t be undone or unsaid. Her temper had always been hot. Allie had seen flashes of it before, but Bea knew there was no coming back from this. She knew she had hurt her. But Allie had hurt her too. She shook her head sadly, tears starting. It wasn’t fair: this happiness had been too short lived. She threw herself on her bed and muffled her sobs with her pillow. Eventually she fell into a light sleep.

* * * * * * * * * *

The early bus back to Charlottesville was empty and Allie was grateful for the privacy. Her mind was playing over the scenes of the previous night. The things she had said … Allie groaned to herself. It had been necessary, but she had seen the expression on Bea’s face. Unforgivable. And Bea was furious at her intervention. She had wanted to hold Allie to her promise. Allie had promised, that was what she kept on repeating. Allie had promised. Bea had been livid and had whisper-shouted at her on the porch interminably about that promise. Yes, she had promised, but why couldn’t Bea see that she had broken that promise for her sake?

Debbie had slept through all the chaos of the night. Bea had cracked Harry over the head with that shovel and, moving tigerishly fast, run up the stairs two at a time to check on the little girl, leaving
Allie to crawl out from under him as best she could. Apparently, Debbie was fast asleep and spread-eagled on her bed as if she had fallen from the sky. All the rest of the talk that night had been conducted in low voices despite the anger and upset they felt. All their footsteps as quiet as they could make them, as they tidied up, cleared away, wiped up the blood, made the house look like nothing had happened. But something *had* happened and now they just had to live with it.

* * * * * * * * * * *

Bea was wandering around the house, unable to think about anything other than the events of the previous night. Debbie had divined her mood and had been alternately tiptoeing around her and trying to cheer her up. This wasn't good enough, Bea decided. She had wanted to protect Debbie from upsets not create new ones. She must do something to shake it off and she really couldn't face their usual Saturday morning visit with Liz and Sophie.

"How about we go down to the pond Debbie? We could take our bathing suits."

"Yes please Mama!" Debbie rejoiced. Bea gathered together the things they would need and packed a picnic. Swimming always made Debbie extra hungry.

The water of the pond was mild and green, with just enough sunlight permeating the leaves of the elms to make the basin seem private and magical. Debbie splashed around and jumped in countless times, trying to make the biggest splash she could. Bea watched on, pleased that she was enjoying herself, happy that she had not asked where Harry was this morning.

The cool water did its work on Bea. Her hot blood was tempered and her mind began to dissipate the frantic ferment that had occupied it since last night. The notion gradually came to her that she might have been too hard on Allie. Allie’s interference may have been ill considered, but everything she had done had been from an authentic desire to help and protect her and Debbie. Allie must have been hurt and frightened by Harry’s attack, but she kept her head and said and did what had to be said and done to end the nightmare. And instead of comforting her and thanking her, Bea had behaved as though she was the cause of the trouble. Bea gripped her forehead in frustration and sighed. Her head had got all mixed up again and she had blamed the wrong person. Poor brave Allie! She deserved better, though it hardly mattered now. That bridge had not only been burned, it had turned to ash and been blown away by the wind.

* * * * * * * * * * *

Slumped on the porch seat at Thomasina Towers, Allie was wondering if it had all come to an end. She prayed that it had not. Harry was gone. Bea and Debbie could get on with their lives, but would she now not be a part of it? If she weren’t so tired, she would cry. The pulse in her head was hammering and her shoulders and back ached like nothing she had known before. She just needed someone to unlock the door so she could go to bed, but this early on a Saturday no one was around yet.

She tried to consider things from Bea’s position. It would be a big adjustment for her to accept that Harry wouldn’t be coming around anymore, terrorising her, hurting her and upsetting Debbie. She had lived all of her adult life with that fear hanging over her. Once something like that was gone, did it mean that sunlight immediately flooded in to replace it? Allie thought not, as much as she wished it to be so. Allie wanted so badly to be Bea’s sunlight … On the other hand, when she had come here to start anew she had promised herself a life free of romantic drama. Look at how that had turned out! If the situation hadn’t been so dire, it would be funny. Perhaps if Bea could no longer stand the sight of her she would get her wish. Now she really did feel like crying.

Hearing the rattle of the door handle, she looked up. The door opened and Maxine peered out.
Seeing Allie, her face fell. She must look even worse than she realised.

“Rough night?” Maxine asked sympathetically. It was more than Allie could bear. Her face crumpled and tears immediately followed. Maxine swiftly quit the house and, sitting down next to her, folded her in her arms. “Oh, hon …” Allie sobbed whilst Maxine rocked her and made comforting sounds. “It’s not so bad … Everything will be alright …” Once Allie had recovered herself a little Maxine gave her an examining look. “What happened to your head?” she asked, gingerly touching the purpling lump.

“Oh, insect bite,” Allie replied tearfully.

“… Some insect …” Maxine replied with a sceptical look. “Come on. Come inside. You can tell me all about it later. For now, what do you need most? Breakfast? A hot bath?”

“Just sleep,” Allie sighed. Maxine nodded and led her inside.

She awoke several hours later feeling less tired but no less sad. The house was quiet. At this time on a Saturday, everybody was probably out making the most of the weekend: it would be a good time for a soak in the bath. She headed down the hall only for Maxine’s door to fly open. “You’re up! Feeling better?” Allie nodded and gave a faint smile. Maxine looked at her towel and wash things. “I’ll draw a bath for you,” she said, emerging from her room.

“It’s okay,” Allie replied. “I can do it …”

“You’re moving like an old woman,” Maxine noted. “Let me help you …”

“I’m just a bit achy,” Allie said.

“More than a bit I reckon.” She preceded Allie into the bathroom and set about running the faucets and organising everything. Allie decided it was futile to object. “I’ll leave you to relax for a bit now. When you’re done come to my room and I’ll see what I can do to make that bruise - sorry, insect bite - less noticeable.” She smiled kindly and left. Allie sank gratefully into the hot water and closed her eyes.

Forty minutes later, she hauled herself out. Her muscles had definitely eased up some and she was able to dress more easily than she had undressed. Heading back down the hall she tapped softly at Maxine’s door. “You look much better now. Come in …” she grabbed Allie’s forearm and drew her into the room. “By my calculations you must have missed out on at least three meals. When was the last time you ate anything?” She steered Allie to the bed and made her sit down.

“I had a few crackers yesterday evening but nothing since,” Allie confessed.

“Here, eat this. It’ll tide you over until dinner,” Maxine said, producing a candy bar. Allie nibbled at a corner and then ate the whole thing, surprised that she had such an appetite. Maxine looked on approvingly. “Now, I have some make-up that I think will disguise this nicely,” she said, lifting Allie’s hair to get a better look at her forehead. “And then I think we can arrange your hair over it for added camouflage.” She rummaged in a draw, finding the things she needed. “And whilst I do that, why don’t you tell me what happened.” Allie’s eyes immediately filled with tears again. She sighed and began.

After Allie had explained everything and shed a few more tears Maxine said, "So, she's angry with you?" Allie nodded, welling up again. "Allie, honey, don't you think you're overreacting?"

Allie looked at her with astonishment. "What do you mean?"
"It was a big night for her. For you too, but she's been living with this for a long time. You've only been here for a few weeks. You took the situation out of her hands and forced her to act. That’s gotta be hard to take. She probably feels like she should have taken the initiative … years ago. Plus, from what you've told me, she has feelings for you and to see you at the mercy of that bastard must have scared her and probably made her feel guilty."

"I don't see why she should feel guilty," Allie grumbled.

"Because if it wasn't for her you wouldn't have been at such risk." Maxine smiled. "I think deep down you already know all this but I can understand why you're upset. A first argument with a new lover is always going to be difficult." Allie blushed.

"It's not like that. We … we haven't even kissed," she mumbled, looking at her hands.

"Yet … right?" Maxine said gently, catching Allie's eye.

"We never will now," Allie protested.

"Allie … you just need to give her time to think about everything that's happened. Time to calm down. Sounds like she has a bit of a temper…?"

"Um. I suppose she is the fiery redhead type," Allie replied with a rueful grin.

"You should have known better than to fall for a redhead," Maxine teased.

"I didn't mean to fall for her. I couldn’t have helped it if I’d tried." Allie sighed and met Maxine's eyes. "You really think she'll forgive me?"

"Of course. Given your feelings, what you did was only natural. And once it hits her how much better off she is now she'll be thanking you." Allie smiled for the first time in a while. “There, look in the mirror. You can hardly see it now. But if anyone asks, don’t try to convince them it’s an insect bite.”

* * * * * * * * * * *

A bleak but calm mood had settled over Bea by the next morning. After a difficult night, during which she had gone over everything that had happened and mercilessly examined her own feelings, and berated herself for several hours, she had finally conceded that descending into a spiral of self-recrimination was not helpful. She had little hope that Allie would forgive her but she knew she had to try. If her nights’ musings had taught her anything, it was that this hollowed out feeling could not be borne for even another day. It was time to fix this, if she could.

First, however, there were some things she had to do for Debbie. Breakfast and then church. They didn’t attend church very often; just often enough to satisfy the neighbours, but this Sunday was a special one. Sophie had been invited to sing a solo and Debbie wanted to be there to watch her friend’s triumph. But once that was done, she would do her best to make this right.

When they reached the church there was a gathering of people waiting to go inside. Bea diffidently approached her neighbours, greeting each one and trying to make cheerful small talk. They wound their way over to Liz and Sophie.

“Morning love,” Liz greeted her with a smile and a hug. She held her at arm’s length and examined her. “You look like hell,” she added mildly.

“Thanks Liz! Don’t hold back will you,” Bea replied, slightly affronted. “I just didn’t sleep well
last night.”

Liz nodded. “Looks like you haven’t slept for a week,” she said without malice. “Where were you yesterday? We thought you might drop by …”

“Oh, just busy …” Bea said, at the same time that Debbie piped up: “We went swimming in the pond!” Bea looked at her feet.

“Oh right,” Liz said, apparently amused by Bea’s discomfiture.

“So, Sophie,” Bea quickly put in, “are you looking forward to singing this morning?” Sophie nodded, but looked a little pale. Debbie took her hand.

“Let’s go inside Sophie. We should sit right at the front,” Debbie said leading her away. Bea and Liz watched them go in silence.

“So … I met your Miss Novak on Friday night,” Liz began. Bea’s heart seized up for a moment. Miss Novak? Why would she say that? Bea’s heart then set up an irregular hammering as she thought about Friday night. “She dropped into the store to use the telephone.” Bea couldn’t speak but managed what she hoped was a neutral nod. “She seemed really nice, I have to say. Very polite, but a bit on edge …” Was it Bea’s imagination or was Liz looking at her with a question in her eyes.

“On edge?” Bea managed to croak out.

“Yeah …” Liz mused. Bea didn’t know what to say. Allie had gone to the store after seeing Harry’s truck, so no wonder she was on edge. Bea kept silent until Liz said, “Perhaps she’s just the nervous type.”

“We’d better go in,” Bea said, seeing that most of the congregation had already gone inside the church. As they walked Bea steeled herself to ask, “After church would it be alright if I came and used the telephone? I know it’s Sunday and you’re officially closed …”

“Of course. Use it whenever you like,” Liz replied with a smile. If she wondered whom Bea might want to call, she didn’t ask.

After the service was over, they congratulated Sophie, who was visibly relieved that her ordeal was behind her, and the girls ran off to play in Sophie’s bedroom. Liz unlocked the door to the store so that Bea could use the telephone and retreated to the kitchen to make some coffee. Bea stared at the telephone for a few moments, trying to calm herself and think what she wanted to say to Allie.

* * * * * * * * * * *

That same Sunday morning Mrs Wentworth had taken herself off to church to be followed by lunch at her sister’s. Maxine insisted that a still distressed Allie should come for a walk with her to clear her head. That left Linda and Boomer with the house to themselves. They played cards in the sitting room for a while, an occupation that Mrs Wentworth would surely have disapproved of had she been there. Linda eventually threw down her cards.

“Gee, Boomer, I’m bored. What can we do?” she asked petulantly.

“Don’t you wanna play cards no more?” Boomer’s forehead creased in puzzlement.

“There must be something more exciting to do around here …” Linda mused.
Boomer thought for a moment. “I know where Maxi keeps her moonshine?” she offered.

“Great!” and Linda was on her feet and trotting up the stairs.

“Maybe we didn’t oughta,” Boomer hedged, following her.

"Of course we should! Now, show me where it is.”

* * * * * * * * * * *

Bea listened to the telephone ringing out at the other end. It was taking a very long time for anyone to answer it. Eventually the ringing stopped and a voice came on the line. “Thomasina Towers?” followed by the sound of giggling. Bea frowned. Surely, no one actually called the boarding house that?

“Um, hello? Could I speak to Allie Novak please?” Bea’s voice shook a little. She tried to calm her breath knowing that in a moment she would be speaking to Allie.

“Who? Who do you want?” More giggling. Bea was getting a bit annoyed now.

“Allie Novak please,” she said firmly.

“There’s no one here of that name …” a gale of laughter. Bea sighed. Had the lunatics taken over the asylum?

“That is Mrs Wentworth’s boarding house isn’t it?” she asked tartly. There was a guffaw and then the line went dead. Bea went through the operator and had her try again in case she had connected her to the wrong number. The telephone rang and rang. This time no one picked up. Bea replaced the earpiece with dismay. She leaned her forehead against the wall, tears of frustration threatening. She slammed her palm into the wooden panelling of the wall with exasperation, fuming that people could be joking around when she needed to get through to Allie.

Liz appeared with a cup of coffee in her hand. “What’s up love?” Her face was creased with concern.

“They hung up! And I need to talk to her … “ Bea was tugging at her hair, clearly about to succumb to one of her occasional rages. Liz put the cup down and placed a calming hand on her arm.

“This is about Miss Novak, isn’t it?” she said smoothly. Bea’s face dropped.

“Why do you say that?” Bea asked, sharply, adrenaline surging.

“Don’t be mad, but Debbie has mentioned to me that she’s been spending a fair amount of time with you. So I … put two and two together after seeing you going around like you’re walking on air.” Liz looked at her so tenderly that Bea knew she understood and accepted her feelings for Allie. If she couldn’t drop her guard with Liz, then whom could she be honest with? “I think it’s really wonderful,” Liz went on, “that you’ve got someone who makes you happy at last. I know lots of people would think it’s wrong. But I’m not one of them.” She drew Bea into a hug.

“Thanks Liz,” Bea sniffled, accepting the embrace.

“So, what’s going on? Why do you need to speak to her so badly?”

Bea drew back and sighed. “I said some really horrible things. I need to apologise … I can’t bear to
think of her dwelling on what I said, being upset and blaming herself. I need to sort this out.”

“And it can’t wait until tomorrow?”

Bea shook her head firmly. “I need to get to Charlottesville. I don’t have the truck and there are no buses today … Could I borrow your delivery truck?” She asked suddenly.

Liz shook her head. “Sorry, but Hank has it. He’s helping his brother move some lumber.” Bea’s face fell. Liz pondered for a few moments. “There’s one other option, but I doubt you’ll like it.”

“What is it? I’ll try anything,” Bea asserted without hesitation.

Chapter End Notes

Is that just one long tease?

[The quotation I used for this chapter summary is what Vivian says to Cay in the film "Desert Hearts" (but you knew that already, I expect).]
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone for reading the previous installments and for all your lovely comments. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Liz led Bea out to the shed next to the store and swung open the heavy door. Sunlight shone through the cracks in the walls, illuminating the dust motes hanging in the air. Every part of the interior was packed with tools, equipment and surplus stock. Liz entered and drew back a stained tarpaulin that was draped over something towards one side of the shed, to reveal a battered looking motorcycle with sidecar attached. Liz looked at Bea with her eyebrows raised.

“That old thing?” Bea asked incredulously. “Does it still go?”

Liz shrugged. “You’d have to try it. Hank used it a few months back and it went then.” Bea walked over to it and gave it a sceptical look. The tyres needed some air, it would probably need some oil, and who knows what else. She squatted down next to it.

“Better see what I can do, then …”

“Hank left some of his work clothes here,” she indicated some dirty garments hanging from a nail. “You’d better change, otherwise you’ll ruin your Sunday best.” Bea grimaced at the grimy jeans and plaid shirt but grabbed them and headed back inside to change.

After an hour of tinkering and much cursing, Bea managed to start the engine. She put air in the tyres and wheeled it over to the gas pump to fill up the tank. Liz had found a pair of goggles and a brown leather motorcyclist’s helmet that fitted snugly over Bea’s hair once she had tied it into a knot at the back of her head. A pair of Hank’s boots were secured around her ankles with string to complete the outfit. Bea looked down at herself in consternation.

“If she sees me like this, she’ll probably run a mile,” she said, pathetically.

Liz smiled. “Perhaps she’ll be impressed with all the effort you’ve gone to.”

Bea scoffed. “You’re sure you okay to look after Debbie?”

“Of course! Her and Sophie will have a lovely time. Don’t worry … and ride that thing carefully. It’s been a while.” Bea nodded and positioned the goggles over her eyes. “Oh and why don’t you take these?” She handed Bea a large brown paper bag and a rolled-up blanket. “It’s just some sandwiches and so on. Perhaps you can persuade Miss Novak to have a picnic with you …” The word romantic was not uttered, but the twinkle in Liz’s eyes brought it instantly to Bea’s mind.

“What have I done to deserve a friend like you?” Bea asked earnestly, wrapping her arms around Liz and squeezing. She placed the bag and blanket in the foot well of the sidecar. “And for God’s sake call her Allie! Miss Novak just reminds me that she’s my daughter’s teacher.”

With that, she climbed onto the cycle, started the engine and rode cautiously away. Liz watched her go. “Allie,” she murmured to herself, and nodded with satisfaction.
Returning to Thomasina Towers after their walk Allie and Maxine found the house in an uproar. Linda and Boomer were bouncing on the chairs in the sitting room and singing at the tops of their voices. “She’s a Latin from Manhattan . . .,” crooned Linda, whilst Boomer tunelessly added, “She can take her tambourine and whack it . . .”

“What’s going on?” Maxine shouted. “If Mrs Wentworth catches you on her furniture you’ll be out of here before you know what hit you!”

“Hey Maxi! Come and join us!” Boomer called, bouncing up and down.

“Though she does a rumba for us, And she calls herself Dolores ,” Linda sang on. Maxine grabbed Boomer’s hand and tried to get her to come down, but she shook her off and continued bouncing round in a circle.

“What’s wrong with them?” Maxine appealed to Allie. Allie belatedly noticed the empty bottle lying on the rug. She picked it up and showed it to Maxine.

“They’re drunk!” she declared.

“Hey, that was mine . . . Boomer! How could you?” Boomer had the grace to look a little shamefaced. She stilled her motion for a moment.

“Sorry Maxi,” she muttered. Meanwhile Linda had stopped bouncing and hurried from the room. She looked a little green and Allie guessed she was heading for the bathroom.

“Alright, party’s over,” Maxine intoned. “Boomer help me tidy this place up. Mrs Wentworth must find it exactly as she left it.” Allie and Maxine set to whilst Boomer dejectedly picked up a cushion and held it to her chest.

“I’m really sorry Maxine. There might be a bit of a mess in the kitchen too.” She sat down abruptly, buried her head in the cushion and closed her eyes.

“Hey, don’t go to sleep Boomer! Is there anything else we should know about? Boomer . . .” The big woman picked up her head and gazed blearily at Maxine.

“Someone telephoned . . . for Allie.” Allie’s head whipped round.

“Who was it? Who called for me?” she demanded. No reply. “Boomer . . . Boomer . . .” She knelt in front of her and gave her shoulders a vigorous shake. She was asleep or maybe unconscious. Allie looked up at Maxine with a wretched expression.

“Think it was her?” Maxine asked.

Allie nodded. “I can’t think who else would be calling me. Damn . . . I’ll go see if Linda is any more sensible.” She stalked out of the room and up the stairs. She found Linda sitting on the bathroom floor looking pale. “What’s this I hear about a telephone call for me?” she asked brusquely. Linda looked at her defiantly and just shrugged.

“Not much to tell.” She closed her mouth and looked disinclined to elaborate.

“Who was it? What did you say to them?” Allie asked, starting to lose her temper.

“I just said you weren’t here. And they didn’t leave a name.” Allie couldn’t judge if this was
truthful or not.

“Was it a man or a woman?”

“A woman …” Allie’s heart immediately started pounding. “… So not your fancy man, at any rate,” she sneered.

Allie swallowed her annoyance as best she could. “Did she leave a message?” she asked, trying to mask the hope in her voice.

Linda shook her head. “No message,” she said, and turned her face to the toilet bowl again. Allie left the room as quickly as she could.

The last time Bea had ridden this motorcycle had been when Hank had been ill and Liz’s truck had been waiting on a spare part. There had been deliveries that couldn’t wait and Harry had been away on one of his periodic absences, so hadn’t been able to prevent her from helping her friend. It had been during that week that Bea had learned a modicum of motor mechanics in order to keep the damned contraption on the road. It hadn’t been too difficult to learn to ride, as the sidecar gave it a lot of stability. Now the knack of riding it was coming back to her and she sped up, breaking free of restraint. The wind of her motion beat the loose sleeves of Hank’s shirt against her arms and dust from the country roads stuck to her damp face. She smiled grimly. It felt good to be on the move and heading towards Allie.

Soon she was entering the outskirts of Charlottesville. She had a pretty good idea of where the boarding house was, but there were a couple of residential streets that could be the correct one. She would need to check them out. She slowed her momentum and cruised past the houses, looking for the one Allie had described. Nothing on this street. She would have to try the next one over.

Ultimately, it was the “No vacancies” sign that caught her eye. She slowed further and the immaculate state of the building let her know that this was the right place. It was just as Allie had described it. She pulled the motorcycle over and turned off the engine. And then she just sat there, as though fixed to the seat, unable to dismount. Apprehension had calcified her joints. I’m here to apologise, she told herself. To win her back. But what words might achieve that end she was unable to say. She consulted her internal dictionary, but fear seemed to have erased every word. She would just have to go up there, knock on the door and hope that something helpful came out when she opened her mouth.

Maxine had managed to wake Boomer and between them Allie and Maxine handled her up the stairs and into bed. Linda had disappeared, presumably to her room. The remaining two residents swept through the whole house tidying and restoring everything that had been set awry by their drunken counterparts. When the mess had been conquered and there was still no sign of Mrs Wentworth, they withdrew to Allie’s room to talk things over.

“I can’t believe Boomer did that. Went into my room and took something …,” Maxine complained.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if Linda put her up to it.” Allie had never really warmed to Linda Miles and didn’t trust her, whereas Boomer had a kind heart but was easily influenced.


“If it was Bea on the telephone,” Allie pondered, her thoughts dominated by the missed call, “she
would most likely have called from Broadlea General Store. Perhaps I could call back and see if she’s still there.”

“You know Mrs Wentworth doesn’t allow outgoing calls.”

“I could go find a payphone …”

“Come and look at this,” Maxine said. She had wandered over to Allie’s window and was staring out. Allie came and stood beside her. There was a motorcyclist sitting on his bike outside the house. “Do you think he’s looking for someone at this address?” Maxine asked. Just then, the motorcyclist dismounted and removed his goggles and helmet, revealing a sculpted feminine face and a mess of red curls. Maxine gasped. "Is that her?" she asked. But Allie had gone, and all the reply Maxine got was the patter of her feet on the stairs.

Bea walked heavily up the path, still frantically scrambling through her thoughts for an opening remark. She heard the front door swing open and looked up to find Allie already standing there waiting for her. Had she always looked this good? Today she was unapproachable in a calf-length lemon dress with a snug waist, and what could only be described as a fitted bodice. Bea's feet stopped of their own accord. That shade of yellow emphasised the blonde of Allie’s hair, contrasted dazzlingly with her eyes and brought out a golden glow in her skin. And that fitted bodice drew Bea’s eyes like nothing had before. The perfect swell and curve of … that part of Allie's body … made her want something that her mind insistently slid around. She was staring, of course, she realised, and probably blushing. She almost turned around and left right then, except that she noticed that Allie was looking at her just as fixedly. Move your feet, idiot, she told herself. But it was Allie who came down the steps towards her.

“What’s wrong? Is Debbie alright?” Allie asked, her brows drawn together. Bea nodded. Allie drew a little closer to look in her face. If Allie was angry or upset with her, it didn’t show. All Bea saw in her eyes was sympathy and concern. That look was enough to crack Bea’s heart wide open. Tears welled up and an inarticulate sound issued from her throat, partially disguised with a cough. She was making a fool of herself. Allie stepped right up to her, took her hand and squeezed it, forcing a tear to drip from Bea’s downturned face onto the dirt by her foot. Looking around Allie said, “We can’t do this here.” Bea blurily followed her gaze and saw a woman standing watching from an upstairs window.

Bea gestured to the motorcycle and sidecar. “I … I know a place,” she managed to utter. “That’s if … I’ll understand if …” Allie looked unsure. Time to step up to the plate, Bea told herself. She took a deep breath and now words were forming even though it was impossible to meet Allie's eyes while she spoke. "I know I spoke to you harshly the other night … I would really like to talk to you about it properly and … apologise. I wouldn't blame you if you decided to have nothing more to do with me …" Bea's voice had become quieter and hoarser as she went on and eventually faded away completely as she reached this unpalatable conclusion.

Allie nodded. "Okay. Let's go." Bea released the breath she had been holding.

"You’d better put these on." She handed Allie the helmet and goggles.

"Really?" Allie quirked her eyebrows at Bea.

“Best to be safe,” Bea confirmed. Allie crammed the helmet over her hair and Bea helped her adjust the strap of the goggles. The final effect was so endearing that Bea’s lips curved into a smile despite her dread of the upcoming conversation.
“You’d better not be laughing at me Bea Smith,” Allie threatened, as Bea helped her into the sidecar.

Bea shook her head. “I wouldn’t dare.”

* * * * * * * * *

The ride was noisy and bone jarring. They were getting some curious looks from passers-by, so it was fortunate that they soon left the city and headed up a steep country lane. Bea negotiated the acute bends deftly, Allie gripping on to the sidecar to keep from being flung about. They emerged from the shade of a stand of tall trees into a sunlit meadow. Bea pulled the motorcycle over by an outcropping of rocks and cut the engine.

Allie listened to the ticking of the cooling engine for a moment and took a moment to surreptitiously admire the way Bea looked astride the motorcycle's saddle. “What is this place?” she asked.

“Local beauty spot,” Bea replied. “Come on, I’ll show you.” She swung herself off the bike and came around to hand Allie out of the sidecar. She grabbed a bag, stuffed a rolled blanket under her arm and led the way around the rocks. Hemmed in by stone and stunted trees was a perfect grassy dell, studded with wildflowers and bathed in dappled sunlight. Bea led her over to one particular spot and pointed. Framed by the branches of the trees a view opened up. Woodland and mountain shown to their very best advantage complete with blue skies and downy clouds.

Allie stared for a minute. “It’s beautiful,” she said, “… and private.” Bea nodded and occupied herself with laying out the blanket. Allie sat down but Bea moved to stand and stare out at the view, her back to Allie. Whatever Bea had to say would not be easy for her and Allie accepted that this might not be a face-to-face conversation. Allie left her to compose her thoughts and took the time to study her. She appeared to be wearing someone else’s clothes: everything was much too big for her. The shoulder seams of the shirt reached part way down her arms; the cuffs hid all of her hands except the tips of her fingers. The shirt was tucked into a pair of loose jeans, which were held up by a belt tied in a knot. The pants were turned up several times and Allie could see that the enormous boots were tied on with string. Bea had clearly had an unusual morning.

Bea began to speak. Allie let her get it all out without interruption. How she was sorry, how she wished she had behaved differently, how scared she had been. She apologised for her temper. Told her how it had always been her weakness. Said she had blamed Allie at the time, but now she didn’t blame her at all and knew that if she put herself in Allie’s position, she would have done the same thing, if she could have found the courage. All this was told stoically with her face averted, restlessly shifting her weight from side to side, hands clenching and unclenching. “I was so afraid,” she said finally, “seeing him holding you down and hurting you. For the first time I faced a fear greater than my fear of him, and that allowed me to break his control over me. That was the only reason I was able to pick up that shovel … God, I’ve been so pathetic, and weak …” The resilience seemed to go out of her then and she crumpled into a crouch and hid her face in her hands, shoulders shaking with suppressed sobs.

Allie walked round to face her. Kneeling down she placed her hands on her hair and stroked it soothingly. “Bea. It’s alright.” The sobs intensified. Allie tried to peel her hands away from her face, but Bea resisted. So Allie settled down next to her, shoulder to shoulder, and talked. “You know, the worst thing about all that you’ve told me is that you wouldn’t defy Harry for your own sake but only for mine. Do you really think so little of yourself?” Allie paused, not really expecting Bea to answer but allowing a gap in case she could. “I wish you could have got free of him some other way. But things happened the way they happened, and it’s done. We should forgive ourselves
and each other.” Bea still didn’t reply or remove her hands, but the sobs were quieter now, and Allie thought she was listening. “I should do some apologising too. I broke my promise and I said things I know hurt you. I have as many flaws as you or anyone else …” Bea made an incredulous sound through her tears. “It’s true. I’m weak and I’m sometimes dishonest. And I care too much about what other people think of me.”

Bea removed her hands and turned her reddened eyes to Allie’s. “After Friday,” she said in a sodden voice, “you’ll never convince me that you’re weak.” She swiped at her wet face with her cuff.

“Let me,” Allie said gently, pushing Bea’s hand away. She cupped Bea’s face in her two hands and used her thumbs to wipe the tears away, all the while looking at Bea so tenderly that she threatened to undo all her good work right there. “You look tired,” she noted.

Bea nodded. “I couldn’t sleep ‘cause I thought you might never speak to me again.”

“Come and lie down on the blanket for a minute.” Bea allowed Allie to lead her over and she lay down on her side watching Allie arrange herself next to her. Bea cushioned her head on her folded arm and sighed out a shaky breath. Allie watched her relax little by little.

“I like that dress,” Bea commented, out of the blue, fighting sleep.

“Yeah?” Allie smiled.

“... Colour suits you. Sunny yellow. It … it fits you just right …” For a moment Allie was puzzled until she noticed the direction of Bea’s gaze. She laughed softly and felt herself blush.

“Thank you,” she said, quietly, because Bea’s eyes were closing.

When she was sure that Bea was sleeping, she loosened the string and removed the overly large boots. Bea’s bare feet were narrow and elegant but looked sore in places from where the boots had chafed. Allie took her time inventorying every part of her, from her messy curls to the dust and tears on her face; past the black oil on her fingertips right down to those vulnerable looking toes.

* * * * * * * * *

When Bea opened her eyes, Allie was right there, looking at her.

"Hey," she husked.

"Hey." A smile.

"How long have I been asleep?"


A stretch. "It feels like a whole different day. Did you sleep?" Allie shook her head. Bea stared at her forehead. She reached out, without hesitation for once, and ran a finger lightly over the lump there. "I'm so sorry this happened …"

"Don't Bea. No more of that. Only one person caused this lump, and it wasn't you."

Bea nodded. "And it wasn't you either." She sat up. "Hungry?"

"Sure …" Bea reached for the bag and unloaded sandwiches, apples, sodas and two hard-boiled eggs. "You made us a picnic?" Allie asked incredulously.
"Actually, Liz did. And we have her to thank for the transport as well." They ate hungrily whilst Bea filled Allie in on everything that had happened. They chatted about Debbie and Sophie, church, Bea’s mechanical skills. Inconsequential matters, but a relief from all the Harry related horror. Allie told Bea why she’d had such a strange telephone conversation with Linda Miles. Bea laughed, but then grew serious. “Liz could see what a state I was in when I couldn’t get through to you. She said she’d figured out that it was you making me giddy these last few weeks.”

"And she's okay with it?"

“I think this picnic is her giving us her blessing,” Bea chuckled.

“Did you tell her what happened with Harry?”

Bea shook her head. "I was pretty impatient to get over here and see you.” She smiled, but Allie looked troubled. "What's wrong?"

"I told Maxine everything," she admitted. "Don't be mad. She guessed about us, but I was so upset on Saturday that the whole story came out."

Bea felt her stomach drop. "What must she think of us? Do you trust her to keep it to herself?" Allie nodded. "Then I guess I trust her too. And I'm glad you had someone to turn to." Bea passed her an apple and took the opportunity to stroke a reassuring finger over the back of her hand.

"Your ring! You took it off?" Allie stared at the pale line on Bea's finger.

"Yeah. I figure I'm going to sell it. It should cover a month of the mortgage and I can pay Liz what I owe her if there's any left."

"And then what?"

"I need to get a job." They both knew that was not going to be easy.

Allie wished they could stay forever on this blanket in their own private world, but it was Sunday afternoon and she had some preparation to do for the week’s lessons.

“What time do you think it is?” she asked Bea.

Bea looked at the sky. “About four, I guess.” She threw down the blade of grass she had been rolling between her fingers. “I suppose you're going to tell me you have to get back.” Allie nodded regretfully. Bea groaned.

“Going to miss me?” Allie asked playfully.

“Actually, I was just thinking that I have to put those god-awful boots back on,” Bea quipped, but her expression gave her away. Allie gave her shoulder a shove and met her eyes with a very frank look. Bea jumped to her feet as if she’d been stung and started gathering things together. Allie helped her fold the blanket. It seemed like the bold Bea of a few days ago had taken a step back. It was to be expected, Allie supposed. All Allie wanted to do at this moment was to back Bea up against a tree and kiss her thoroughly. But she would be patient.

“Allie …” Bea had caught her staring at her. “I know,” Bea said, abashed. “I look like a scarecrow.” She was looking down at her clothes.
“That’s not what I was thinking,” Allie told her, stepping over to her. “I kind of like it, actually. But there’s one adjustment I would make …” she asked permission with her eyes. Bea looked nervous but nodded. Allie reached out and took Bea’s hand in both of hers. She unbuttoned her shirt cuff and turned it over and over until it reached above Bea’s elbow. Then she repeated the process with the other sleeve. “That’s better,” she said silkily, meeting her eyes. “Now I can see your sexy arms,” and she ran the backs of her fingers gently up the insides of Bea’s forearms. Bea trembled at the touch and let out a gasp. Heat swept through Allie at this response, but she was being patient, so she just smiled at Bea, picked up the blanket and headed back towards the motorcycle.

Bea set her down on the corner of the street. Allie thought it likely that Mrs Wentworth would be back by now, and she would be horrified to see one of her girls being dropped off by a motorcyclist. Allie handed back the goggles and helmet. “Bea,” she started doubtfully. “Do you think we can trust him?”

Bea shook her head. “But maybe we can trust his self-interest.” Allie nodded and firmed her lips. She laid her hand briefly on Bea’s shoulder and then walked away.

Chapter End Notes

Postscript. The song Boomer and Linda sing is: "She's a Latin from Manhattan", written by Al Dubin and Harry Warren. This popular 1935 release was performed by Victor Young & His Orchestra.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

What's this? A flashback?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Allie burst through the door, Bea could not at first comprehend what she was seeing. Allie and Harry in the same time and place: it was not possible for these two people to co-exist. Harry was part of her old world and Allie belonged to a new, better universe that she had been rocketing towards ever since they first met. But she was here and Bea knew that she must have seen the latest blow that Harry had bestowed upon her. She hadn’t wanted Allie to see her this way, as a punching bag, a battered wife, a victim. But shame would have to wait, because Harry was looking at Allie and there was nothing good that could come of that.

_Do something._ Harry had hold of Allie now. He was dragging her away. _Move._ They were shouting at each other. Bea was horrified by what she was seeing but still somehow unable to act. _Stop him._ Then Allie was looking at Bea and Bea was looking at Allie. It was all there, written plainly on Allie’s face for anyone with the wit to read it. _Longing._ Bea glanced at Harry and saw the understanding wash across his face followed closely by a wave of humiliation. _Danger._ Bea knew from experience that humiliation brought out the worst, blackest violence. Finally she could move. She grabbed his arm, she pleaded with him, but he was beyond reaching now and he had Allie pinned to the floor.

Casting around for something to help her, her eyes alighted on that old loose handled shovel leaning against the kitchen wall. Her hands were curled around the wooden shaft almost before she knew it. Dread sank through her as she lifted it above her head, but the resultant downward swing seemed almost like an inevitability. The sound the blade made against Harry’s skull reverberated for a moment, he slumped over, and all was silent.

Time stopped. Bea’s eyes were locked on the two figures on the floor. What had she done? Why were they so still? Then Allie moved weakly and the spell was broken. _Debbie._ That terrible sound must have disturbed her, surely, even if all the shouting hadn’t. Bea cast aside the shovel and took the stairs two at a time. Reaching Debbie’s room, she tried to quiet her hoarse breath and eased the door open. In the dim light, she could see her baby girl sprawled on the bed as usual, like a cloud had shed an angel. Her limbs were still, her chest rising and falling slowly and evenly. She closed the door again. _Gently, gently._ Thinking about what awaited her downstairs; tears crowded her eyes. _Face it._

Allie had got herself out from under Harry and was standing with her back pressed against the wall, arms folded across her middle. She was staring. At Harry or through Harry, Bea couldn't tell.

"Allie." No response. Bea reached out and took hold of her elbow until her eyes refocused on her. "You alright?"

She nodded. "Debbie?"
"Sleeping. Spread-eagled like she fell from the sky …"

"Is he ...?" Allie glanced at Harry with dread. Bea looked over at him. There was no sign of movement and she felt a queasy reluctance to get closer to him, to find out if she had made a murderer of herself. She was steeling herself to move when Allie took a pace forward and knelt down next to him. She peered at him intently for a minute.

"He's breathing," she reported. Bea let out a sigh. At first, she felt relief that she hadn't killed him; but the next moment she was frustrated by his continued existence. "There's quite a bit of blood," Allie said. Bea went over to look. His scalp was cut and had bled profusely and a lump was forming, but Bea had a horrible feeling that he would be all right. He might only be unconscious for a few minutes. If there was ever a time to be decisive it was now.

"Help me drag him out onto the porch," Bea commanded. Allie looked at her questioningly. "When he comes round I don't want him in the house." They each took hold of one ankle and dragged him to the door and out onto the porch. Bea fetched the shovel and took that outside too. Then she got a rag and wet it with cold water. She held it against the lump on Harry's head for a minute. Allie watched a pinkish puddle form on the floor. "Hold this against his head" When she didn't move she whisper shouted, "Allie!" She startled. "Do it! It'll help with the swelling. I'm not going to jail for killing this bastard unless I have to." Allie didn't want to touch him, but forced herself to take the rag and hold it against his head. Bea rummaged around in the kitchen and found the front door key. Holding it up she said to Allie, "In or out?" When Allie just looked bewildered, she explained. "Once I lock that door it's staying locked for Debbie's safety. So, in or out?" Allie gave it no thought.

"Out." Bea nodded and locked the door. She tucked the key inside her shoe and hefted the shovel, pointing it in Harry’s direction.

"Now we wait," she told Allie. “When he comes round, he’ll be as mad as hell but he’s not getting back inside that house. Not tonight or any night.” Allie could only nod. Bea had made the decision and now it was her job to back her up and make sure it could be carried through.

They waited in a tense silence. A few minutes later, he began to stir and moan. Allie drew away from him nervously. When he managed to open his eyes, Bea made sure he could see the shovel. “See this Harry? This means you are never bothering Debbie or me again. I want you to take the truck and go …” Harry blinked groggily. Even through his pain and bewilderment, he managed a sneer. Then he was gasping and struggling to his feet.

“I’m happy to go Bea. For now. But you’re my wife. And Debbie is my daughter, so I’ll be back. You can’t keep that shovel to hand all the time.” Hatred blazed in his eyes as he tentatively explored the wound on his head, wincing. “And next time I’m gonna make you pay for what you did tonight.” Allie watched Bea weighing the shovel in her hands. She knew she had to step in before Bea felt compelled to resort to violence again.

“You’d better promise never ... never to come here again,” Allie began falteringly.

“Oh yeah? And why’s that, little girl ?”

“Because if you don’t, I’ll tell everyone what you are: a cowardly wife beater.” Allie spat, heart galloping wildly.

Harry looked not at all daunted. “And I’ll tell everyone what you are: a dirty little sexual invert
lusting after my wife.”

Allie was only momentarily taken aback. “That would be just as damning for you as for me. What kind of a man are you that his wife looks to another woman for satisfaction? You’d be a laughing stock.” Now it was Allie’s turn to sneer. Harry's face purpled with fury.

“But if people find out that you, the oh so prim school teacher, are a pervert you’ll lose your job and have to move away and leave your precious love behind,” Harry pronounced this with satisfaction. His ace in the hole.

It took Allie every ounce of resolution she could muster to deliver her reply. This had better work, she thought. “You don’t think I love her, do you? This is just what I do. Have my fun while I can, and when the husband finds out … Well, I just move on to a new town. You’d be surprised how many wives there are with unsatisfactory husbands …” She conveyed this as airily as she could, not daring to look at Bea for fear of revealing the truth. And for fear of witnessing her pain. But she saw Harry’s eyes go to Bea and she saw his eyes light up at her reaction. It was paradoxical, but she had hoped Bea would react with hurt. It was essential that he see it and believe it. It was what he wanted, after all: for her to hurt. Would he be satisfied and leave?

He looked undecided. He was glancing between the two of them, trying to work out what to believe. Allie took a breath and turned to Bea, determined to look at her but not see her, for to see her would unravel her resolve. Despite that, the change in her face was impossible to ignore. It was as though Allie’s words had eclipsed the lustre that had animated it. Allie fought to keep her face neutral, to not crumble at the sight. She thought there was probably no coming back from this for her and Bea, but at least Bea and Debbie would be safe. “Sorry Bea,” she said lightly. “I hope you didn’t think I was sticking around. It’s not my style y’see.” Bea paled and her eyes filled. Harry smiled, satisfied.

And yet.

“So, what do I get out of this?” he pondered.

“What do you mean?” Allie asked. Bea was silent and rigidly still.

“Seems to me, I leave behind my wife, my child, my house … What’s in it for me?” Allie’s thoughts were suddenly veering off on a new tack.

“Well, maybe I could add a little sweetener … for Debbie’s sake. I’ve gotten fond of her and God knows she deserves better than you.”

“Keep talking …”

“I have some savings. What would it take to make you move away and stay away?” His eyes slid to the side slyly.

“Let me see. The starting again, the loss of my family, having to find work, all the money I’ve paid off on the house … Must be several thousand dollars of inconvenience right there.”

Allie scoffed. “Don’t forget about the outstanding money you owe on the house. That’s a liability more than anything, times being what they are. Plus …” Allie had an idea she wanted to float. “ … It’s a great opportunity to start a new life with that lady friend of yours.” Allie had long ago concluded that Harry must have another woman and that she was the cause of his lengthy absences from his family. Now the look on Harry’s face told her that she had hit on something.

“Five thousand dollars.” Harry stated.
Allie laughed. “I don’t have that kind of money! Nobody does … How about five hundred.”

He shook his head. “Can’t start again and give my pretty lady what she deserves on that kind of money.” He glanced at Bea to make sure his barb had struck home. Allie didn’t dare look at her: she was bargaining for her life and it wouldn’t do to be distracted.

“A thousand then,” Allie countered. “And that’s as high as I can go.”

Harry sucked his lip as though calculating. Then he shook his head. “Nah, not worth my while.” He waited to see what she would say. When she was silent, he started to walk away. “See you in a day or two Bea …”

“Fifteen hundred then,” Allie said, desperately. Harry stopped.

“You must be awfully fond of that little girl of mine,” he grinned, looking at Bea. Seems she hadn’t fooled him after all. But now his greed was roused maybe it wouldn’t matter.

“Fifteen hundred,” Allie stated. “You sign the house over to Bea, quit your job, leave town and never see your wife or daughter again.”

Allie watched the thoughts flit across his face as he appraised this offer. He was off somewhere in his imagination for a moment with this other woman, the inconvenience of his wife and child behind him. It was what he had wanted, perhaps, for a long time. He was tempted, Allie could tell. She just hoped the sum was enough. He looked at Bea and started to nod, consideringly. “Well, alrighty! We got a deal! I reckon I got the better end of it. Fifteen hundred dollars for that!” he laughed, his voice laced with contempt. Now Allie was the one who wanted to kill him.

“Bea?” Allie said. Bea had been looking off to one side and had kept silent through the whole negotiation. Now she glanced up at Harry and nodded. Allie continued. “So, when you get settled write to Bea and let us know where to wire the money.”

“I hope I can trust you little girl. Because if the funds aren’t forthcoming I’ll be right back.”

“I know it,” Allie replied. “You’ll get your money, but not until you’re far away.”

“One last condition …” He wagged his finger at them both. “Don’t you be flauntin’ your disgusting deviance in front of the neighbours. Keep it to yourselves. I don’t want anyone thinking that’s got anything to do with me.” Allie just nodded wearily.

He seemed reluctant to go, now the talking was over. Then he came right up to Bea as though he might kiss her. She flinched and he laughed.

“Bye darlin’!” And he swaggered to the truck, threw it into reverse and drove away.

As Allie watched the headlights bounce away down the road she wondered what she had done. Harry was alive and gone, that much was true, but would Bea hate her for the things she had said?

She looked at Bea and took a step towards her. “How could you?” Bea demanded, furiously, still looking away.

“I got rid of him, didn’t I? You know I didn’t mean any of that don’t you?” Allie pleaded.

“You bought me off of him!”

“No! I just did what I had to … to get rid of him,” Allie replied desperately. Bought her? Is that
really how it seemed?

“That was an auction. All those years ago I sold myself to Harry for food and shelter for me and Grandma, and now you’ve bought me off him.” Then more quietly, “When will I ever just belong to myself?”

Allie was stunned. “There’s no obligation Bea! I just want you free of him…”

“Do you even have the money?” Bea asked. Allie nodded. “How’d you get all that? It must be a year’s earnings…”

“More than.” Allie wondered how much to tell her. “Someone left me some money in their will.”

Bea shook her head. “You should have just let me finish him,” she said with finality.

“Bea! You could have ended up in jail! And then what would have happened to Debbie?”

“Shhh. Keep your voice down. I wouldn’t have had to hit him at all if you had kept your promise and kept walking…”

“How could I just leave you on your own with him? He might have killed you!”

“It wouldn’t have gone that far.”

“You don’t know that…”

The argument span on endlessly. Allie was exhausted and finally sat down, letting Bea berate her until she ran out of words. At last, Bea took the key out of her shoe and went inside. She began tidying up and Allie followed her in and helped. When everything was back to normal, Allie gestured to the shovel. Bea picked it up. “I guess I’ll put this in the shed for now.” She was gone for a few minutes. Allie was so tired and sad she lay down on the couch and wrapped herself in Bea’s blanket. It was soft and it surrounded her with Bea’s comforting spicy scent. When Bea came back in she said, “Why don’t you use Grandma’s old room? At least there’s a proper bed in there.” She gestured to a door next to the kitchen.

Allie shook her head. “I’ll be alright here.” Bea nodded, looking like she didn’t know what to say. “Don’t worry,” Allie added. “I’ll leave first thing in the morning.” Bea looked at her feet and compressed her lips.

“Probably best,” she muttered, and disappeared upstairs, leaving Allie to sob on the couch for what remained of the night, until dawn’s light released her.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed this chapter.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Hope you weren't too annoyed by what was revealed in the previous chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next week brought a gradual normalisation of sorts. Allie’s visits continued almost as though nothing had happened, but Bea could feel a slight restraint between them that had not been there previously. She wanted them to be like they were before. Would time smooth things over? Or would everything between them be permanently muddied by Harry and the deal they had struck with him? Patience was required, but patience was hardly a long suit of hers.

She was awaiting word from the bank to confirm that the mortgage and deeds had been transferred by Harry. She was also waiting for Harry himself to write and demand the money. She knew that these things might take more than a few days, but she could not help but be impatient for the arrangements to be behind her. In the meantime, she occupied herself by expanding the vegetable garden. Breaking new ground was hard work and left little room in her head for worrying and overthinking.

Looking up from her work, she saw Allie and Debbie coming down the trail together. This was a new development. Allie now had Debbie wait for her whilst she locked up the school and then they walked to the house together. Bea wondered if Allie was worried that Harry might still be around. Did she think he might try to take Debbie away with him? Bea considered it unlikely. Harry had never been a devoted father, being more annoyed than enamoured by his daughter’s antics. But Bea did not discourage the arrangement. She saw the two of them together, chatting and smiling, and knew the time they spent together was good for them both.

Bea noticed that Allie was lugging a bag and an armful of books. She drove her shovel into the ground, so it would stand upright, and set off to meet them. Debbie was talking away and Allie was listening and nodding. The sunlight was glancing off Allie’s hair making it brighter than ever and the skirt of her blue dress was swaying with the action of her hips as she walked. Bea couldn’t help but smile, nor could she take her eyes off her. The moment Allie noticed her, and her eyes locked onto Bea’s a jolt of energy was delivered somewhere inside Bea's body. A jolt of energy that thrilled up and down her whole body and settled in the pit of her stomach. Bea didn’t know what to call this response that she had to Allie, but she felt it every time, and had begun to welcome it.

With her heart clamouring and her chest tight, she continued up the track, looking away shyly as Allie's smile grew broader. Debbie belatedly noticed her mother and ran to her, throwing her arms affectionately around her.

"Mama! Did you bake some cookies?"

Bea placed her hands on Debbie's shoulders. "Is that all you ever think about?" she asked with a mocking frown.

"No!" she denied vehemently, squinting her eyes and scrunching up her nose. "… But did you?"

"Not today. But there's a fresh baked loaf and some of those cherry preserves you like so much …"
"Mm …" Debbie's eyes went distant in anticipation. By this time Allie had caught up to them and Bea reached out and took the heavy bag from her shoulder. Allie was looking at Bea very attentively, and with an expression that she couldn't interpret.

"What?" Bea asked.

"Nothing. I just like these little things you do for me." Bea shrugged it off but couldn't keep her lips from curling up at the corners. "What about you, Bea?"

"Hmm?"

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Allie gave her a different kind of look. A look that promised something. Bea's mind went there, just for a moment. She thought of Allie's face close to hers. She thought of Allie's full pink lips pressing against hers.

Her pulse was beating hard in her throat so that she struggled to swallow. "I … I'm fine," she choked out. Because she couldn't ask for that. Allie just nodded appraisingly and smiled in the exact way she had that day when she had said the word sexy. Bea was sure she had never heard anyone say that word before, but when Allie smiled at her in that certain way, she almost felt like she knew what it meant.

* * * * * * * *

Allie watched Bea cut a thick slice of bread for Debbie. She fetched a jug of milk from the icebox and left Debbie plastering preserves onto her bread while she made some coffee. Allie noticed the newspaper on the kitchen table, open to the situations vacant.

"Any luck?" she asked Bea, indicating the page. Bea shook her head.

"They all ask for some kind of experience, which I don't have," she said dispiritedly.

"It's early days, though," Allie interjected. "Something will turn up. I've asked Maxine and Boomer to let me know if they hear of anything."

"Thanks. I think I'll go to Charlottesville tomorrow to sell my ring. Maybe I'll ask at a few places. Just in case."

"Good idea. Maybe you should try cafés and restaurants. You're obviously a great cook."

"Worth a try I guess." Bea's expression was resigned, but she smiled bravely and poured Allie a cup of coffee.

"That reminds me …" Allie rummaged in her bag. "I meant to give you this the other day." She pulled out the package of coffee she had chosen for her. Bea opened the bag and inhaled the scent of the beans.

"Mm. Smells amazing! Thanks … but you don't have to bring me things you know."

"Well, I'm always drinking your coffee, so it's only fair."

"Yeah, but …" Bea looked embarrassed.

"What is it?" Allie asked, taking her hand and gently squeezing her fingers. Bea hesitated and looked everywhere except at Allie. Allie waited her out. Bea glanced at Debbie, but she seemed
oblivious, sticky cherries all round her mouth.

"You're already out of pocket to the tune of fifteen hundred dollars because of me," she said in a low tone. "I hate that …"

"Bea," Allie interrupted. "I know this sounds crazy, but I was never going to use that money. I never wanted it and I'm glad it will soon be gone. If I was more organised, I would have already given it to a soup kitchen or something." Bea stared at her in consternation. Allie looked over at Debbie. "I'll explain some other time," she said, as though it was something she didn't want to say in front of a child. The truth was that it was a subject she couldn't face talking about in front of anyone, not even Bea. Especially not Bea, at least not yet. Allie looked away, feeling terrible. Bea seemed to notice her unease and grabbed her hand. Allie stroked her palm, feeling soothed by the contact. She flipped Bea’s hand over. "Your poor hand!" she exclaimed, fingering the ragged edges of a burst blister on her palm just below her middle finger.

"Too much digging," Bea said lightly.

"It looks sore. Maybe I should bring you some gloves next time." Bea just looked at her, eyes shining, apparently enjoying the attention. Allie was just considering if it would be wise to act on the impulse she had to bring Bea’s injured palm up to her mouth for a kiss, when Debbie turned her sticky face towards them.

"Why have you been digging so much Mama?"

Bea reclaimed her hand shyly. “I’m going to sow some more vegetables. Some for us and some to sell or trade.”

“Can we grow pumpkins?” Debbie asked with an excited little wriggle.

“I don’t see why not …”

“Pumpkin pie every week!” Debbie exclaimed. Bea rolled her eyes and laughed.

*          * *          * * *          * * *          * * * *

The next day when Bea climbed off the bus outside the Broadlea General Store, she was more than a little glum. True, she had in her purse more money than she ever remembered seeing before. But that money was already spoken for, and after traipsing around shops and businesses failing to find any kind of work, she had no prospects of getting any more.

Liz had apparently seen her getting off the bus and was beckoning to her through the window. Bea opened the door into the cool, dim interior, listening out for the familiar jangle of the bell. Liz was just finishing serving a customer. The woman turned around.

"Good afternoon Mrs Smith," she said with a polite smile.

"Mrs Stewart," Bea responded. Vera Stewart was one of her near neighbours, but despite that Bea felt as though she hardly knew her, as the woman didn’t pay calls any more than Bea herself did. She had a pleasant, though somewhat bland, face, alleviated by large expressive eyes. Her hair was scraped back severely, and Bea had noticed that her face sometimes assumed a disapproving or sour aspect. But Bea was inclined to be friendly towards her, wondering if she might be lonely or sad rather than disagreeable.

"How are you today?" Bea asked.
"Very well thank you. I'm just buying the ingredients for a special supper for my husband." Bea nodded and smiled. She remembered Vera's husband. A handsome, somewhat younger, man with a glib way with words. Bea had not taken to him.

"Special occasion?" Bea asked out of politeness.

Vera nodded and smiled smugly. "Our second wedding anniversary."

"Well, congratulations," Bea replied as brightly as she could. She feigned interest in Liz's display of canned peas, allowing Mrs Stewart to finish her transaction and leave with a nod.

Liz waited until Vera was clear of the store before saying to Bea, “That poor woman. Going to all that trouble for that no-good husband of hers.”

“I suppose people have often said the same thing about me,” Bea observed mildly.

“Not in this store they haven’t,” Liz replied fiercely. “Anyway, it’s common knowledge that Jake Stewart is like a tom cat, roaming all around the county …”

“Did you just call me in here to tell me about the Stewarts?” Bea interrupted, disliking gossip.

“No, of course not love. You’ve got some mail.” Liz disappeared behind the post office window to find it. Bea was expecting it to be from the bank, but instead it was something addressed to Harry. She put it in her purse to look at later. "I take it everything is going alright now?" Liz asked with a slightly nervous smile. "I saw Miss Novak, I mean Allie, waiting for the bus yesterday. If that smile had been any wider it would’ve split her face in two!"

Bea blushed. It was difficult to get used to the notion that someone else knew about her intensely private circumstances. “Yeah … thanks Liz … for everything you did on Sunday. It really helped.”

“That’s all right. It’s time you felt some happiness … but what are you going to do about Harry?” Bea sighed. No one else was in the store and the girls were still at school, so it seemed like the perfect time to fill Liz in on what had happened on Friday night. With much hesitation, she related the whole story.

Liz looked shocked but satisfied. “He finally got what was coming to him when you whacked him with that shovel. I’m glad you’re rid of him. And poor Allie! Is she okay?”

“I think so. You wouldn’t know it to look at her, but she’s a force to be reckoned with,” Bea responded, not without a hint of pride. “You can’t tell anyone about what happened. And you can’t let on about Allie and me either. You know that, right?” Bea pleaded.

“Of course. I wouldn’t say a word. But people might start to wonder who’s put that smile on her face.”

"We'll just have to be careful. But I couldn't bear for her to hide that smile …" Bea said, cheeks pinking. Liz chuckled.

Bea headed back to the house feeling more exhausted and heavy legged with every step. Trailing around the streets had worn her out and left her feeling a little hopeless. Turning the corner of the trail, she saw Allie sitting on the porch. It must be later than she had realised. Bea, feeling suddenly energised, stalked nearer, taking the opportunity to admire her whilst she was unaware of being observed. Allie was sitting with the top half of her body in the shade and had pulled a chair round to rest her feet on. Her shoes lay on the floor with her stockings puddled on top of them. Her bottom half was in the sun and she had pulled her skirt up to mid-thigh to enjoy the feeling of the
sunlight on her legs. Her eyes were closed, her head thrown back, her arms hanging loosely, a cat-cream smile turning up her lips.

Bea stared. Allie’s legs really were extraordinary. She thought back to the day of the rainstorm when Allie had teased her by taking off her stockings. Ever since then she had been unable to suppress a fascination for those legs, a desire to see them again, long and bare like now. She swallowed thickly, stepped closer, stared some more. Two more steps would take her up the porch steps to a position where she could put out a hand and caress that soft pale skin. Her hand twitched. She wanted to, but she didn’t dare. Instead, she switched her gaze to Allie’s face and took in the perfection of it. The beauty spot above her lip, the arch of her brows, the way her dark lashes lay against the fair skin of her cheek. Beautiful girl.

Allie’s eyes fluttered open and her startling blue irises immediately fixed on Bea. She smiled lazily and stretched.

“Mm,” she murmured, as if in reply. *I didn’t say that aloud did I?* Bea thought in a panic. “You’re back. How’d it go?”

Bea grimaced. “No luck. Where’s Debbie?”


“Not at all. You look content. Like a cat lying in the sun.” Allie lifted her feet down so that Bea could sit.

“You look done in. Stay here and I’ll get you a cold drink.” She headed inside, brushing her fingers against Bea’s arm as she passed, and smiling at her over her shoulder in a way that accelerated Bea’s heart rate dangerously. Bea opened her purse to check on the money she had received from selling her ring and noticed the letter that Liz had given to her, addressed to Harry. *What could this be?* she wondered, tearing into the envelope.

When Allie returned with a glass of lemonade from the icebox Bea was leaning against the porch rail looking frail. Allie was immediately at her elbow.

“What’s the matter?” she demanded. Bea gave her a broken look and handed her a sheet of paper. Allie hastily read it. It was a letter from the quarry informing Harry that as his absenteeism had not improved, even after an official warning, he should now consider himself dismissed from his post.

“What’s he playing at?” Bea asked. “This is dated yesterday: days after he was supposed to have quit.”

“You think he’s still around?” Allie asked, unable to stop herself from scanning the area around the house.

Bea shrugged. “I don’t know … but if he didn’t quit his job, maybe he didn’t sign the house over either.” She sighed deeply. “I’d better go to the bank tomorrow. See what’s going on.”

“I’ll come with you,” Allie quickly put in. Suddenly she didn’t like the idea of Bea being alone.

Bea smiled. “No, you won’t. Tomorrow’s Friday so you’ll be at work.” Allie glared in frustration. “It’s fine.” Bea gently slipped her fingers in between Allie’s and smoothed her thumb over Allie’s fingertips, apparently not minding the chalk dust, gentle brown eyes on hers all the while. Allie’s
Bea usually had some difficulty in meeting her eyes and showing affection freely. That she had courageously overcome that to offer Allie reassurance meant everything to her.

"Bea …" I love you. The words were in her mouth, bubbling up from her heart, ready for speaking. But just then all she could think of was what had happened the last time she had said those words. “… Just, be careful,” she said instead.

* * * * * * *

The next morning Bea entered the bank with trepidation. Harry had always dealt with all their financial affairs, so a meeting like this was beyond her experience. She was damp handed with nerves as she approached the receptionist. When the woman found out that she didn’t have an appointment she looked down her nose at Bea and told her that she would have to wait until Mr Lapton was free to speak with her. Bea sat down in the waiting area feeling discomfited, her purse in her lap, trying to look as though she did this kind of thing all the time.

When finally she was shown into Mr. Lapton’s office she found him to be a friendly gentleman with a courteous manner. He wore old-fashioned grey side-whiskers, small gold-rimmed spectacles and a watch chain across his vest. After he had assured himself that she was comfortable and had fussed around asking if she would like a refreshment and enquiring if she was well, he eventually turned business-like.

“What can I do for you this morning Mrs Smith?”

Although Bea had practiced what she wanted to say to the bank manager, she still felt uneasy in giving him even the scant personal details that she was forced to. She explained that she and Harry had decided to separate and that he had said that he would come to the bank and make the house over in her name.

"As I have not heard from you, I thought I had better come and check that everything is proceeding as it should."

Mr Lapton sighed. "I'm sorry to say that I have not heard from your husband. In fact, I am intending to write to him in the next day or two to remind him of the consequences of missing a payment."

Bea startled. "He missed a payment?" Mr Lapton nodded. "Are you sure?" Bea asked, her mind whirling.

"I have the file right here. See for yourself," and he turned the pages round so that Bea could see the schedule of payments.

Bea was shocked but noted that the amount could be covered by what she had received for her wedding ring. "I can pay that immediately," Bea told him. "I don't want to incur any penalties for late payment."

Mr Lapton looked at her appraisingly. "You can certainly pay the instalment today, but I must advise you that the property remains in your husband's name."

"Can we transfer it to my name, or, or put it in our joint names?" Bea asked desperately. "I have our marriage certificate here." She began looking in her purse.

"Not without your husband coming into the bank and signing the relevant paperwork. If you could get him to make an appointment …"
“That might not be possible,” Bea told him. She stared at her hands for a few moments. Mr Lapton was silent, perhaps giving her time to compose herself. “If I continue to make the payments on time, all will be well?” she asked finally.

“For the time being. But you will have no security, as Mr Smith would be within his rights to sell or let the property without your permission. I really have to advise you to see an attorney and get your name on the deeds.”

Bea nodded. She understood what he was saying, though she could not see how it could be accomplished. She didn’t know where Harry was, and when he did get in touch, how could she compel him to sign the house over to her if he had changed his mind? In addition, as she still had not found any paid employment, she could see no way that she could make the next mortgage payment on time. But she simply had to hold onto the house. It was Debbie’s home, and, in any case, they had nowhere else to go.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked that. Next update will be in a little over a week. Probably.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

A little progress.

Chapter Notes

And we're back ...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"As soon as I see Mama, I’m going to tell her!” Debbie said excitedly.

“I’m sure she’ll be really proud of you,” Allie replied, her eyes scanning the vegetable garden and porch for Bea. No sign of her, so perhaps she was not back from Charlottesville yet. Allie had been anxious all day, wondering what was going on with Harry. Debbie flew down the trail ahead of her and rushed into the house. As Allie approached, she could hear her excited voice telling Bea her news.

“… best score for the whole term. So, I’ll be getting a certificate …” she was bouncing up and down as she spoke, and Bea was smiling at her.

“Hold still a moment Debbie. Tell me again, I missed the first part,” Bea said patiently, pulling her daughter onto her lap.

“I got the most spellings right the whole term, Mama! So, I’m the best speller!” Bea looked at Allie for confirmation. She looked worn out, Allie thought as she came over to mother and daughter. She couldn’t resist briefly laying a hand on Bea’s shoulder and was gratified to feel some of the tension leave her at her touch.

“We’re having a prize giving next week, as it’s the last week of school. Debbie outperformed everyone in the spelling tests so, yes, I will be presenting her with a certificate of achievement!” Allie announced.

Bea looked a little teary. She kissed Debbie’s cheek. “Well done. I saw how hard you worked to learn all those words, so you deserve that certificate.” Debbie nodded happily, accepting the compliment easily.

“Is it alright if I take Hector out to play?” Debbie asked.

“What about your chores?”

“Can I do them later Mama? Please? I’m too excited to do chores just now.”

“Alright. Go run it off,” Bea allowed. “But change your clothes first!” she called after her. Debbie ran off up the stairs. Allie sat down beside Bea at the table.
“I’m almost afraid to ask what you found out,” Allie began. “How about I make coffee first?”

“That would be wonderful,” Bea smiled. “I’ve only been back a few minutes myself.” Allie busied herself filling the pot and lighting the stove, whilst Bea sat at the table, apparently lost in thought. After a couple of minutes Debbie came back down the stairs barefoot and in her old clothes and ran out of the front door calling to Hector to come. Allie had to smile. That imaginary dog could not be more real to Debbie.

“Shall we have this on the porch?” Allie asked, once the coffee was ready. Bea nodded and when they went outside Bea sat at one end of the swing seat, so Allie took that as an invitation and sat beside her. It wasn’t a wide seat and so it meant that their thighs lay alongside each other, lightly touching. Allie was intoxicated by this arrangement, but quickly sobered as Bea told her what she had learned at the bank.

“Do you think Harry still expects to get the money, even though he’s not done what he said he would?” Allie asked.

“I don’t know,” Bea replied. “And I don’t know what else we can do, other than wait to hear from him.”

“Do you have any idea who …” she began hesitantly, before coming to a halt, not knowing if asking her question would hurt Bea.

“Who the woman is?” Bea asked. She shook her head. “I’ve known there must be someone, or several someones, for a long time. But I don’t know who.”

“I was just thinking that if you knew who she was we could check if he was at her place.” After a moment’s thought Allie asked, “What about his sister? Might she know how to find him?” Bea nodded absently, her mind clearly elsewhere.

“You know, all this about Harry being in trouble at work and behind with the mortgage. It makes more sense now; how eager he was to accept your offer. He knew he would probably lose his job and maybe he has debts he wants to leave behind.” They drank their coffee in silence for a while, Bea’s eyes following Debbie as she ran around at a little distance from the house, Allie’s eyes resting on Bea’s face. “While I was in town, I took the opportunity to ask around about work, but no dice. I’m gonna have to sell some tools, or furniture or something. The next payment is due in a week. I have much less time than I thought …” Bea mused, almost to herself.

Allie turned herself towards Bea. “I’ve been thinking about this,” she began eagerly, “and I hope you won’t think it’s a terrible idea …” Suddenly feeling shy to make the suggestion that had been in her mind for a few days Allie looked at her lap uncertainly, falling silent.

“What is it?” Bea asked, noticing Allie’s sudden reticence. “Say what you’re thinking, Allie. All ideas are good ideas at this point.”

“I was thinking …” she said, slowly at first, and then more quickly as she warmed to her theme, “that I’m spending money every week, on my board at Mrs Wentworth’s … That money, well, if I stayed here and paid you board instead of her, that would really help you … it might even cover the mortgage payments. And it would help me too because I wouldn’t have to pay all that bus fare, and spend all that time travelling, and I wouldn’t have to eat her terrible food …” And I would be with you . Allie faded out. Looking at Bea’s face, she couldn’t tell what she thought of the idea. There was a long silence.

“And this would be a purely financial arrangement, would it?” Bea grated out eventually, looking
off into the distance.

“God, no! Not on my part,” Allie said hastily. “I don’t expect anything of you, Bea. But … I would love to be with you more of the time. I want you to be happy. And I want you to know that being around you makes me happy. But I wouldn't place any expectations on you … on this … if you thought maybe ...” She sighed. “I’m not explaining this very well am I?”

Bea finally looked at her. “No, you're not,” she said dryly, and smiled. “How about this? You like me. God knows why,” she added with a shake of her head. “And I like you,” she said quickly, before Allie could interrupt. She blushed and picked up Allie’s hand. “I would love it if you moved in here. Being around you does make me happy. I don’t know what’s going to become of us. I don’t know if I have anything to offer you, but …”

“Is that a yes?” Allie asked, gripping Bea’s hand tightly, her eyes prickling.

“Don’t you even want to see your room first?” Bea smiled at her impetuosity.

“Not really.” Allie replied, looking into Bea’s smiling eyes, her own brimming with delight.

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“I’ll take it,” Allie said with a giggle. “I love it!”

Bea shook her head. “It’s filthy and full of junk. Needs a coat of paint …”

“Don’t bother. We’ll just give it a clean. Fresh sheets, air it out ...” They were standing just inside the doorway of grandma’s old bedroom. It was a small room just behind the kitchen, with a window to the back of the house. It housed an old dark wooden bedstead and matching nightstand, a looming wardrobe and various objects from around the house that seemed to have migrated here: a lamp, a pile of clothes, a wooden box full of odds and ends. Bea could smell the mustiness and see how grimy everything was, but Allie seemed enamoured of it. “Can I move in straight away? I don’t think I have to give Mrs Wentworth any notice.” Bea nodded, amused by her enthusiasm. “I have hardly any belongings. I can be unpacked in ten minutes.” Her face turned serious. “You have to check Debbie is okay with this first, though.”

“Allie, I’m not going to consult a seven-year-old!”

“Normally I would agree. But, because I’m her teacher … it could be really awkward for her. I mean, we can’t expect her to carry on calling me Miss Novak at home, can we?”

“I don’t see why not.” Allie looked dissatisfied. “Look, I’ll talk to her right now. Get some ground rules set up …” She started for the door, but Allie grabbed her arm. Bea gave her a questioning look.

“What if she doesn’t want me here? What if she thinks I’m coming between you?” Allie whispered fearfully.

“Don’t be crazy. I’m the only person round here who likes you more than Debbie.” Bea’s heart was pounding at her own boldness. Since the moment Allie had first suggested moving in here, she had known that, now the idea was in her head, nothing less would do. She reached up with both hands and stroked Allie's hair, fixing her eyes on Allie's, anxious to reassure. Tangling her fingers in Allie's hair, she gripped the sides of her head to emphasise her point. Her eyes strayed to Allie's lips. "You're good for Debbie. Since the first day she met you she couldn't stop talking about you. She loves that you join in with everything we do. You add to her happiness, you really do.” Allie still looked uncertain. Bea removed her hands reluctantly. "I'm going to call her in and ask her
about it." She headed out the door. "Wait here."

*       *       *       *       *       *       *       *

Allie leaned against the doorframe, catching her breath. For a moment she had thought that Bea was going to kiss her, and she was still reeling. She could hear Bea hollering for Debbie and the clatter of the door as she came in.

"I'll do my chores now Mama."

"In a minute. Come sit by me." Allie could picture them snuggled upside by side on the couch, Bea's arm around her daughter. "So, I have to ask you something and I want you to answer truthfully."

"Am I in trouble Mama?" Debbie asked warily. Allie smiled, imagining the expression on Debbie's face.

"No. Why, what have you done?" Bea teased. Debbie gave a small squeal, from which Allie intuited that Bea was tickling her. After a moment Bea continued. "So, how would you feel about it if Miss Novak came and stayed here with us? Remember, say what you really feel."

There was a short silence, during which Allie's heart plummeted. Then Debbie gave a gasp. "Really? Could she really?"

"Do you like the idea?" Bea asked.

"Of course, Mama! I was worrying that we wouldn't see her all summer long ..." Allie rested her forehead against the doorframe. She was worried and I had no idea, she reproached herself. I should have anticipated it, with the way Harry has come and gone through her whole childhood.

"You were worried?" Bea's words echoed Allie's thoughts. "I wish you had told me. There's no way we were going all summer without her."

"Can I go and feed the chickens now?"

"Hold on baby girl. How do you think you will get on with having Miss Novak as your teacher and living here too? Will it be strange for you?"

"Home is home and school is school. I just keep them apart in my head." Allie knew exactly why she would do such a thing.

"So do you think you could manage to call her Miss Novak at school and only call her by her first name at home?"

"Of course. I don't tell people at school about things at home. I never talked to anyone about Daddy," Allie stifled a gasp. When Bea replied, her voice was strangled by the tears she was trying to hold back.

"I'm sorry baby. That must have been hard." Allie fought the temptation to go to Bea and comfort her. "Your daddy has gone away now. I don't think he'll be coming back." There was a brief silence that Allie's mind filled with a hug and a kiss.

"Don't cry Mama. Are you sad he's gone?"

"No," Bea quavered. "I'm just sad you couldn't have had a better daddy."
"It's okay," Debbie insisted. "I have you. And now I have Miss Novak too."

After another, longer silence, Bea called out to Allie. When she emerged into the living room Allie could see that Bea was wiping tears from her face. Debbie looked concerned for her mother but was dry eyed.

"Are you really coming to live with us?" She asked eagerly. Allie nodded mutely, not trusting her voice. She squeezed in next to Debbie and managed to put her arms around them both. "We're going to have a fun summer," Debbie enthused. "We can go swimming. We can go and picnic in the glade. Ooh, and we can play lots of baseball …"

"Well hold on Debbie. Allie probably has some plans of her own."

"Actually, that all sounds wonderful," Allie said, finally finding her voice.

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"So, if you speak to Mrs Wentworth tonight, I'll telephone you tomorrow to make sure everything is okay. That gives you Sunday to pack. If you bring your things with you to work on Monday morning, Debbie and I can meet you off the bus."

"Monday it is."

"Are you sure you can manage …"

"It's just one case, Bea."

"I know. Sorry. I just …"

"Stop worrying. I'm not going to change my mind. The room is fine. You're going to be the best landlady ever."

"Right …"

"Speak to you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow. Shall we walk down to the bus with you?"

"Better not."

"I could carry your bag …"

"You know what they say about absence."

"It's a pain in the ass?"

"Ha! Speak to you tomorrow."

"Alright. Bye then."

"Bye beautiful," Allie added.

Bea felt herself blush. Allie turned back and placed the gentlest of kisses on the apex of Bea's cheek. With her blood thundering in her ears Bea sketched a goodbye wave as Allie backed away with a smirk. Then she sank weakly onto a chair, chastising herself for behaving like a lovesick girl.
Mrs Wentworth wasn't all that pleased when Allie, searching her out in the kitchen, told her that she would be leaving. Miss Novak had been a clean, quiet boarder who always paid on time and never complained about the food, unlike some people. However, she rarely had difficulty finding new boarders, so she would just have to hope that the next girl was also suitable.

Allie went to Maxine's room to let her know she would be leaving. She would truly miss Maxine. She couldn't think of a better person to have as a friend and hoped that they could keep their friendship up after Allie had moved out.

Maxine's door was partially open. "Knock knock," Allie called out before poking her head round the door.

"Hey there! Come on in."

"Hi Maxine. I … I just dropped in to let you know my news."

"Sounds serious. What's up?"

"I've just arranged with Bea that I'm going to board with her from now on. So …"

"You're moving in with her?" Maxine interrupted. "Quick work hon!" She threw her a wink.

"It's not exactly that … She can't keep up the house payments without some kind of income." Allie hesitated.

"But judging by the look on your face you're hoping to get a bit closer to her than you are with your current landlady?"

"Am I so transparent?" Allie lamented.

"Only to me hon." She drew Allie into an embrace. "So, you'll be leaving us. I'm gonna miss you!"

"Me too Maxi. But we'll still see each other. Right?"

"Right."

Come Saturday breakfast everyone knew about Allie's imminent departure. Boomer looked particularly miserable. Allie took her to one side.

"What's the matter Boomer? You're not going to miss me, are you?"

"Nah! Nothin' like that. It's just … first Frankie goes, then you. Why can't things just stay the same?"

"I don't know Boomer. I'll still come around from time to time. But you could maybe do me a favour?"

"Yeah? What's that?" Boomer asked, brightening a little.

"I need something from the hardware store. Maybe you could show me around? Help me choose something?"

"Sure Allie. What is it you need? We got pretty much everything …" the big woman enthused.
During this conversation Maxine had sidled up. "Mind if I tag along?" She asked.

Allie looked at her in surprise. "It's just the hardware store Maxi."

"Still. You won't be here much longer, so perhaps we could all go together."

"Of course! Let me just get my purse."

Jackson's Hardware was an impressive looking place, filled with every type of tool Allie had ever heard of and quite a few she couldn't name. Rows of small boxes lined the shelves against one wall. Looking closer Allie could see that they contained nails, screws and washers of all different sizes. Boomer breezed past a display of shovels, calling out to her boss. "Mr Jackson! Mr Jackson!"

A handsome dark haired man of around forty years appeared from a back room. When he saw who it was, he broke into a smile, and his wide-set eyes lit up.

"Boomer! What are you doing here on a Saturday?"

"My friend Allie wanted me to bring her over to look at the work gloves," Boomer gushed.

Mr Jackson looked at her. "You must be the young teacher that Boomer's been telling me about." He held out his hand to shake. "I'm Will Jackson. Feel free to look around. The gloves are over in the back corner." Allie started off in the direction he had indicated. "Miss Conway," she could hear him continue. "What a pleasure to see you again." Allie couldn't catch Maxine's reply, but something about the tone of her voice made Allie turn around and stare. Was that a simper? They were grinning at each other and Mr Jackson still had hold of her hand. Allie smiled to herself. So, this was Maxine's secret admirer! Maxine would get some teasing later!

She managed to find a pair of gloves that she thought would be small enough for Bea. When she took them up to the counter to pay Mr Jackson insisted on giving her a small discount. "Any friend of Boomer's is a friend of mine," he said. He was looking at Maxine as he said this. Any friend of Boomer's. Yeah, right. Allie and Boomer headed over to the door, but Maxine and Mr Jackson were engrossed in each other.

"I'll catch you up!" Maxine called out to them.

Once on the street Allie turned to Boomer. "So, Maxi and your boss, hey?"

"Whadya mean?" Boomer asked blankly.

"Did you not just see them? They can't take their eyes off each other!"

"Maxi and Mr J?" Boomer was incredulous.

Allie sighed. "Are you blind? Yes! Maxi and Mr J. How long has this been going on?"

Boomer shrugged. "Dunno. I introduced them weeks ago …"

"He's a good man, right?" Allie asked.

"Mr J's the best," Boomer confirmed without hesitation.

Liz opened her drapes on Monday morning to find two figures loitering outside her store. Bea was pacing and Debbie was bouncing up and down on the spot. What are they doing? Liz wondered.
Opening the door, she called out, "Bea, did you need something? We're not open yet, but if there's something you need …"

"Morning Liz! No there's nothing we need, thanks." Bea continued her pacing, looking down the road expectantly.

"What are you doing?" Liz asked, coming out of the store and looking down the road in the same direction as Bea.

"Waiting for the bus. Here she comes, Debbie!" The bus had just come into sight. Bea had positioned herself right at the stop, looking in the bus windows as it drew closer. Liz could pinpoint the exact moment Bea spotted Allie by the transformation of her face. All trace of anxiety was erased as a smile spread over her features. As Allie stepped off the bus, Bea was right there, taking the suitcase out of her hand, Debbie jostling her elbow.

It looked like her friend was starting off on a new phase of her life. Liz was happy for her but wondered if Allie moving in met Bea's idea of 'being careful'.

Chapter End Notes

Phew, made it on time! Enjoy.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

A feast for the senses.

Chapter Notes

Here is the latest chapter for your enjoyment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Allie had been distracted all day. Knowing that this afternoon, when she went to Bea's house, that instead of a brief visit, she had the whole evening with her was putting her mind in turmoil. Her subconscious was conjuring up image after image: Bea standing on the porch looking out for them; Bea eating supper at the kitchen table; Bea leaving the bathroom in her nightwear. What kind of nightwear? Allie wondered. She pictured her in a lacy nightgown, then pyjamas, maybe a nightshirt … Allie mentally shook herself. What was the matter with her? She was at work and her students needed her attention. It was the last week of school and they were already skittish with anticipation of the long summer vacation. On the other hand, it was the last week of school and maybe she could allow them some leeway. "Alright everyone. Please put down your pencils. For the last hour of the day we will take our books outside and read in the shade." There was a muffled cheer and a clatter of chairs as the class got their things together.

The last hour went quickly now. The younger children gathered around Allie and told her about what they were reading, whilst the older ones went off into huddles at more of a distance. Some were reading, but some seemed to be chatting. Allie allowed it for once, glancing at her watch and waiting for the moment when she could dismiss the class. Once they were gone Debbie helped her tidy up and then they were off down the track towards home.

Allie was disappointed that Bea was not on the porch or in the garden looking out for them as she nearly always was. Stepping up to the door, she was suddenly apprehensive about the change they were making. What if Bea found it difficult having someone else in the house? It was nearly the summer vacation and Allie would be around a great deal. She didn't want to get under Bea's feet: she was always so busy. Debbie had rushed through the door and Allie followed more slowly. "Mama!" Debbie called out. Bea emerged from the room that was to be Allie's. "You're back. I didn't realise the time …" Bea looked flushed and excited as she welcomed Debbie home with a hug and met Allie's eyes shyly. "Want to see?" Allie nodded and Bea led the way into the room, Debbie crowding in too. Allie was amazed by how good the room looked now. Bea had transformed it since Friday. Every surface was now thoroughly clean, and the room smelled fresh. A faded rug lay next to the bed, bright curtains at the window, a small vase of wildflowers on the nightstand. Bea had put fresh white sheets on the bed and draped it with her red blanket.

Allie broke into a surprised smile. "I can't believe it's the same room," she told Bea. "Thank you. I love it, but you should have waited, and I could have helped you."
"Don't be silly. Debbie helped …" Bea attempted to shrug it off, but Allie could see how pleased she was with her response.

"Thank you, Debbie," she told the little girl. "You could have given me a clue."

"It was a surprise," Debbie replied.

"And your blanket, Bea. You shouldn't have put that in here." But Allie loved having it. It reminded her of the day of the rainstorm, when Bea had wrapped her in it. It spoke of the intimacy they had shared that day and filled her with anticipation.

"It's too warm for either of us to need a blanket, but I thought it brightened the place up." Bea looked down and away and Allie wondered if the blanket held the same associations for her. "Anyway, we should let you unpack." Bea gestured to the suitcase standing ready by the bed.

"Won't take me long," Allie replied, unable to stop smiling, feeling welcome and wanted in her new home.

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Bea had been busy and excited all day. Preparing for Allie's arrival had taken up every moment and every thought. Now she was here, and Bea could hardly believe it. She was momentarily at a loss for what to do next now that Allie was unpacking, but Debbie was hovering near the kitchen table.

"Hungry Deb?"

Once Debbie was satisfied and ready to handle her chores Bea took the opportunity to have a wash and get changed. She wouldn't usually change before supper but today was a special day and deserved special consideration. She put on the grey slacks that she loved to wear and found a short-sleeved blouse that would do. She brushed out her hair and tied it back at the base of her neck. Scrutinising herself in the mirror she could only conclude that at least she looked less sweaty and flushed than before.

She had done all the preparation she could for supper, and as it was too early to start cooking, she thought she would put some coffee on for Allie. Coming down the stairs she found her already sitting at the kitchen table.

"Told you it wouldn't take me long to unpack."

"I guess you'll have to buy some more clothes before winter. Nothing you have can possibly be warm enough." In response Allie smiled brilliantly, as only she could.

"Now you've got me imagining winter here - all snug with you and Debbie." She sighed contentedly.

"Coffee?" Bea asked, her head full of the image of the three of them around the fire, snow on the ground outside.

"Mm. What can I do to help?" Allie asked, jumping up.

"Nothing. Just sit there."

"I hope you're not going to treat me like a guest Bea. I just want …" To be part of the family.

"This is your first day. Let me spoil you a bit. There's plenty of time to get stuck in later." Allie
held her hands up in surrender and sat back down. "How was your day?" So, Allie told her about her slow school day whilst Bea listened, made the coffee and marvelled that something so ordinary could be so wonderful.

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Allie had been sent out to sit on the porch, Bea complaining that she was distracting her from cooking.

"What am I doing?" Allie had protested.

"You're watching me." Allie merely shrugged. She couldn't deny it. Her eyes just followed Bea. It wasn't possible to stop. Especially since Bea had put on those grey pants that fitted her so nicely. "Unless you want me to burn everything you'd better vamoose." So, Allie had reluctantly withdrawn to watch Debbie turning cartwheels in the front yard.

After a few minutes, Debbie ran over. "Did you see me? Can you do a cartwheel?"

Allie looked doubtful. "I used to be able to, when I was a girl."

"Come on Miss Novak, come and try!"

"Remember, you can call me Allie at home Debbie."

Debbie giggled. "Allie," she said experimentally, "come and do cartwheels with me!" Allie looked at her expectant face and shucked off her shoes.

"Let's see if I've still got it." Allie surprised herself by turning several successful cartwheels before Bea came out onto the porch to call them in for supper and caught Allie with her skirt tucked into her underwear, hands in the air, preparing to throw herself into another turn. Bea looked so delighted and amused that Allie didn't even feel embarrassed.

Coming inside Allie was assailed by a melange of appetising smells. After hastily washing her hands, she was ushered into a seat by Bea. "Dig in. Hope you like it."

"Smells amazing. What is it?"

"We've got trout, potatoes, green beans … Debbie … Pass that to Allie …" Soon everyone's plates were loaded, and they dug in. The potatoes were tiny and sweet. Bea had griddled them so that they were crispy and salty too. Allie almost groaned as she savoured them. The fish was oily and fresh and served with some unfamiliar tart berries. The combination was explosive.

"This is delicious, Bea. I've never eaten such a good meal." Bea smiled and blushed.

"It's a favourite from my childhood. Grandpa loved to go fishing. Knowing that Grandma would be mad at him for being away all day he would pick wild gooseberries on his way home. She never could resist them. Turns out that trout and gooseberries complement each other. Just like they did."

Allie was touched that Bea would go to so much trouble to make her a meal to welcome her. And one that held so much meaning.

"Thank you for making it. You went to a lot of trouble." She told Bea, sincerely. "So, you've been fishing and picking berries today. What else?" Allie was listening, she really was, but mostly she was feasting her eyes on Bea as she ate and moved around fetching things. The blouse she wore was jade green cotton sprinkled all over with tiny white dots like constellations. It had a small,
rounded collar, and the cuffs fastened tightly around Bea's upper arms, making them look slimmer and stronger than ever. It was tucked firmly into those well-fitted pants, and the outfit was finished off with a pair of tatty Keds.

Allie was staring at the triangle of flesh revealed at the open collar, imagining laying her cheek against it. It would be soft and smooth. Bea's scent would be strong there, and if she could just undo one more button, she might get a glimpse of the paler skin ...

"Allie."

"Hm?"

"I was just asking if you wanted some dessert, but maybe you're too tired."

"I'm not tired," she smiled.

"Your eyes had glazed over."

"I was just daydreaming ..." Her expression must have given Bea a clue as to what she had been daydreaming about because Bea blushed deeply and turned away.

"I made applesauce cake, if you would like a piece."

"I thought that was just for special occasions?" Allie commented over Debbie's cheers. Bea shrugged and smiled. She brought three large slices of cake to the table along with a bowl of thick cream.

"This is a special occasion," Debbie commented artlessly. "Because you're here now." And she plied her spoon enthusiastically, unaware of how much her words had touched Allie. Allie looked at Bea. Her face held a tender expression that showed Allie that she knew exactly how she felt. To keep her composure, she took a mouthful of cake and cream. The cake was spicy and moist, the cream cold and heavy.

"Um. Delicious," she managed to murmur around her mouthful. Debbie nodded and kept spooning.

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Despite her objections, Allie was helping Bea clean up after supper. Which meant that Debbie was helping too, as she couldn't bear not to participate in the unusually festive atmosphere in the kitchen. She was clearly tired and overexcited, saying Allie's name over and over for the novelty of it, and putting things away in the wrong places just for fun. Bea's eyes met Allie's over Debbie's head. They smiled ruefully at one another.

"Right Debbie. Time for bed." Bea intoned.

"But I haven't finished yet," she protested.

"I'll finish off, Debbie." Allie told her.

"But you don't know where anything belongs!"

"I'll figure it out. Off you go." But Debbie's eyes had filled with tears. "I'll still be here in the morning," Allie added.

"Promise?"
"I promise." She stroked the little girl's hair. "Get a good night's sleep. See you in the morning."

"Night."

"Come on," Bea told her. "If you get ready quickly, I'll read to you for a while." Debbie scampered up the stairs ahead of her.

Once Debbie was snuggled into bed Bea slid in next to her and opened the book. They had read this tale many times before but Debbie never tired of it. Tonight, Bea related the exciting episode of Jack and the porcupine. "Smiling at the child's eagerness, and willing to please him, I made a somewhat awkward bundle of the porcupine, wrapping it in several folds of cloth, and added it to the donkey's load," she read. She kissed her daughter's soft cheek. "That's all for tonight." Debbie groaned but didn't dispute the decision. She turned on her side and settled down to sleep.

Bea turned out the light and was creeping towards the door when Debbie murmured sleepily, "It's more fun with three, isn't it Mama?"

Bea smiled. "Goodnight baby."

Going back down the stairs Bea found that Allie had finished clearing up from supper and was now sitting at the table, bent over a textbook. As she came into the room, words of thanks ready on her lips, Allie raised her head to look at her, and Bea lost any idea of what she had been going to say. Between Allie's delightfully tousled hair and her full lips there now perched a pair of round tortoiseshell spectacles. Never having seen them before, Bea was astonished at the effect they had. How could it be that something so ordinary and, well, ugly on most people, could actually make a beautiful woman even more beautiful? Could it be that the lenses magnified Allie's eyes? Or was it that this tiny token of the imperfection in Allie's vision amplified the perfection of her face?

Whatever it was, Bea stood, immobile, and stared, as though she had been blind her whole life until this moment. Her heart was speeding along; her eyes so wide they almost ached; her body reacting to Allie's presence like never before. She swallowed but still said nothing. Allie was starting to frown.

"Bea? Are you alright?" Bea just gasped and tore her eyes away. Allie was on her feet and coming towards her. "Whatever's the matter?" Bea looked at her again. A trembling started up in her spine and her whole body felt ready to sink down to the floor. Her breath was coming in irregular gasps, her fingers reaching out towards Allie of their own accord.

"Allie," she managed to strangle out, as she reached for her. "Please …" Even as she said that word, she didn't know what it was she was pleading for. But Allie seemed to know. Her expression softened and her arms circled Bea, steadying her and holding her close.

"You're trembling," Allie commented. Bea hesitantly raised her eyes to Allie's. She saw tenderness there, but also something else. The bright blue irises now contained a dark flame, flaring up as their eyes met. Allie reached up as if to remove her glasses.

"No … Leave them …" Bea husked. Allie smiled the private smile that was just for them, and cupped Bea's face with her hand, leaning in. Bea now knew what it was she wanted and she welcomed Allie's lips onto her own. The first touch was very gentle. So soft, Bea marvelled. The second was firmer. A delicate pull from Allie's mouth caused tendrils of sensation to unfurl along Bea's nerves, blooming in every part of her body. An inarticulate sound was drawn from her throat. She shuddered a breath into Allie's mouth as their lips met the third time, the tip of Allie's tongue brushing the underside of her top lip, creating a wave of pleasure that almost capsized her. But Allie held her steady.
Allie was sitting at the kitchen table preparing some algebra problems for her more able students, when Bea came back downstairs. She looked up from the page to find Bea frozen and staring, a stricken look on her face. Her first thought was that she had fallen ill, and Allie came to her feet quickly, thinking she might faint.

Reaching Bea's side, she took in her heaving breath, her flush, her wide eyes. Recognizing the symptoms, she felt an answering reaction from her own body and quickly wrapped her arms about Bea. She was quivering in her embrace, her lips parted slightly in anticipation. Allie would not keep her waiting. She went to remove her reading glasses, but Bea wouldn't let her. She likes the glasses, Allie rejoiced, some corner of her mind amused by this detail.

Slowly, carefully, she touched her lips to Bea's, her heart beating a joyful tattoo. At last. The sensation of homecoming was profound. She kissed her again and her whole body vibrated like a struck gong. She had known it would be like this, and yet she still reeled with the force of her sensations. Bea was trembling and shuddering in response and Allie could not have resisted kissing her again if she had wanted to. Bea melted against her. Allie held her tightly, feeling their hearts galloping in unison. Eventually Bea's joints solidified again. She rested her hands on Allie's hips and looked her in the face.

"How'd you do that?" she asked, looking sincerely puzzled.

"Do what?" Allie replied gently, staring into her eyes.

"You kissed me and I … I felt it everywhere. Fingers, toes, even the ends of my hair. I swear it."

Allie smiled. "That just means we're doing it right. You made my glasses steam up. Another good sign."

"I didn't know a kiss could be like that. When Harry kissed me, I … I just felt nothing."

"Oh darling. He was wrong for you in every way."

"I feel like I've just woken up. That there's a whole world I wasn't aware of." She looked shocked at the idea.

"And I want to be the one to explore it with you." Allie examined her face. "Feel okay?"

"Better than okay," she sighed out with a small smile. "You'd better take these off," she reached up to remove Allie's glasses. "Before I … go all strange again."

"I might wear them all the time, now I know the effect they have on you." Bea seemed to have steadied herself. "Come and sit on the couch with me," Allie suggested.

Allie sat down and drew Bea close to her, soothing the last of the trembling away with gentle hands. Bea leant into her, relaxing and breathing evenly. Allie could tell she was tired; had noticed before that after any situation where Bea's emotional walls were breached, her recovery strategy was to sleep. She really ought to let her get to bed, but for a few moments she selfishly wanted to enjoy this new feeling: Bea Smith resting calmly in her arms, her lips still tingling from their kisses.

"Allie?"

"Yes?"
"Do you think that we could maybe… you know… kiss some more?"

Allie threw her head back and laughed. "I was just about to suggest you get some sleep. You seem pretty tired."

"Just one more."

“Like I told Debbie, I’ll still be here in the morning.”

“I know. A goodnight kiss…”

"You've convinced me." Allie turned towards her and waited. Bea smiled and closed the distance between them, holding Allie’s head between her hands. As their mouths met, Allie closed her eyes and let the rush of pleasure sweep through her.

Chapter End Notes

I really enjoyed writing this chapter, so if you enjoyed reading it half as much as I did writing it I'll be very happy.

Anyone know/care to guess what book Bea is reading to Debbie?
Allie awoke and remembered where she was. She smiled, stretched, and flexed her toes with pleasure. She was in her new bedroom in Bea's house and Bea was just upstairs in her own room. Or maybe not. Judging from the sounds she could hear she was the last one still in bed. Getting up, she hastily dressed and came out of her room. Bea was slicing bread at the kitchen table and Debbie was bringing a jug of milk over from the icebox.

Bea glanced over at her with a smile that was full of last night. "Morning sleepyhead." Debbie looked up and grinned, gambolling over to give Allie a hug.

"Morning Allie. We can walk to school together today," she announced.

"I guess we can. I'll need us to leave a bit earlier than you usually do to get set up before the other students arrive."

"That's okay. I've already collected the eggs, polished my shoes and got my books ready." Allie nodded dumbly. How long had they been awake?

"I'll just …" she gestured at the stairs. Bea nodded.

"Breakfast in ten minutes," she told her. Ten minutes! Allie hastened up the stairs to the bathroom.

When she came back down Bea was standing at the stove. "How would you like your eggs?" Seeing that she was making scrambled for Debbie, she chose scrambled too.

"What can I do?" She asked.

"Everything is ready apart from the eggs. Just sit down. Help yourself to coffee."

"You should have woken me. I could have helped with all this," Allie complained, feeling humiliated by her uselessness.

"Don't be silly. This is our normal weekday routine. One extra mouth is no trouble."

"I should have set my alarm clock. I just knew I would have more time than before, so I didn't bother." Bea came over to serve up her eggs, brushing against her as she did so.
"So you'll set it tomorrow. If you want to. Now, stop fretting and eat." Bea placed her hand on her shoulder and Allie instantly felt comforted. She ate her eggs, stealing regular glances at Bea, wondering what she was thinking about what happened last night. She seemed cheerful and unembarrassed, untroubled and well rested. Allie herself had slept solidly. After, that is, a few minutes of turning and winding in her sheets, reliving those precious kisses. 

She finished up her food and was just about to help clear up the table when Bea intervened. 

"Allie, I just need to show you how to work the catch on your wardrobe."

"The catch is f …"

"It can be a little tricky. I'll show you the knack. Debbie, run up and brush your teeth." And she led the way to Allie's room. Once inside she executed a neat pirouette to face Allie and reached behind her to close the door. Her face was lit up, a smile flickering across it as she excitedly lifted herself onto her toes and back down, her glance touching Allie's and then fluttering away. Her resemblance to Debbie was so strong in that moment that Allie smiled to herself. 

"So what's up with this catch then?" Allie asked, knowingly. 

"What catch?" Bea asked breathily. In an instant she was up on her toes again, drawing Allie to her and pressing their mouths together. Allie's body reacted with a sudden inward convulsion of pleasure. She leaned into Bea, passion taking over for a moment, before she remembered that she was taking things slowly. She gently drew back, catching her breath. "I couldn't let you leave me all day without a kiss," Bea rasped. 

"Bea," Allie murmured, overcome with the tenderness she felt. She held Bea against her and lovingly kissed her lips, her cheeks, her eyelids, her nose, before returning to her mouth. Then Bea was shaking again and Allie found herself leaning against the door for support, her arms still circled around Bea's waist. "I guess there's no point in asking you how you feel about last night," Allie commented dryly. 

"I dreamed about you," Bea confessed, reaching up to tuck a lock of Allie's hair behind her ear. "I can't remember the details, but when I woke up I felt … I don't know what. But all I could think about was doing this." She touched tentative fingers to Allie's lips before pressing her mouth to them firmly and holding it there for a long moment, taking Allie's bottom lip between hers. Allie was breathing hard by the time Bea released her. 

"You're one hell of a kisser," Allie told her. Bea's face flushed to match the pinkness that was already working its way up from her chest to her throat. Allie leaned in and buried her nose in Bea's hair and neck. "You smell so good," she groaned. "Please tell me I don't have to go to work today." Bea held her tighter. 

"I don't have any reason to leave this room. We could just stay like this and kiss all day." Bea agreed. 

"Except any moment now Debbie's going to be banging on that door, asking us what we're doing …"

"Damn!" Bea straightened herself up. "How do I look?"

"Like you've just been ravished," Allie teased. Bea gave her a light thump on the shoulder. "You look beautiful. A little pink … but beautiful."

"Allie! You're not helping!" Bea complained, having turned a deeper shade of pink from the
compliment. Allie laughed.

"You'd better go. I need to get my school things together … and you need to cool off. Beautiful." Bea tried to look annoyed, but the spark in her eyes gave her away. Allie stole one last kiss from her before she slipped out of the room.

Having gathered all her books and papers for the day ahead, Allie came out of her room to find Debbie waiting for her, books and lunch bag in hand. "Ready?" Allie asked.

"Yup. Let's go! Bye Mama," Debbie called already halfway out the door. Allie trailed behind.

"Allie!" Bea called. "You forgot this." She held out a brown paper bag. Allie looked at it in wonder.

"You made me a lunch?" She asked, disbelief in her voice. Bea nodded and put it into her hand. "You didn't have to do that."

"What were you going to do come lunchtime?" Bea asked her.

"I don't know. I hadn't thought about it."

"Good job one of us did," Bea responded with an eye roll.

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Left alone in the house Bea felt adrift and purposeless in a quite unfamiliar way. She had a mental list of things that needed doing but, for once, couldn't decide which was highest priority. She roamed around the house, desultorily tidying things away before electing to clean the bathroom. Once she had made a start, she felt better. There's nothing to bring one down to earth like scrubbing a toilet.

A minute later, her mind had wandered away again. She had caught sight of Allie's toothbrush nestling in amongst Debbie's and her own. She sat on the edge of the bathtub contemplating how much her life had changed since Allie had walked into her garden a few weeks ago. She couldn't think of a time when she had ever felt so hopeful, and yet the unknowns were endless and disturbing. What did it make her, this passion she felt for Allie? An unnatural woman? Manish, perverted, sinful? Was it right for Debbie to be around someone like her? Would it ruin Debbie's chances for a happy marriage and children of her own? And the consequences if people found out about them. She groaned internally. They would be shunned. Allie would lose her job and they would have to leave their home and move away.

Home. That was what they were building here. A home, a household, a family. More than anything, that's what the sight of the three toothbrushes together in the glass represented. How could she think that that closeness could harm Debbie? How could what she felt for Allie possibly be wrong? She knew wrong. Had lived wrong. Harry was wrong. Harry had not been good for Debbie, but it was evident that Allie was. If only the rest of the world would leave them alone they could be happy and safe.

But maybe she was getting ahead of herself. Allie had not said what she wanted for the future. Maybe this was not a long time thing for her. After all, what could it be that she saw in Bea? An ordinary housewife with a bad marriage, a child and no prospects. Allie was beautiful, smart, a qualified teacher with a career. She deserved better. Bea had nothing to offer her. And maybe Allie wanted marriage and children for herself one day … Imagining that almost brought Bea to tears. If it were best for Allie, would she be able to let her go?
Bea stood up. She recognised that she was getting herself into one of those cyclical thought patterns that would inevitably bring on a rage. Time to get out for a walk. She would take her notepad and make some sketches. She could be home again by lunchtime and still get some jobs done this afternoon.

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This might be the best morning of teaching I've ever done, Allie thought. She was so euphoric over how things were going with Bea that she had felt energised and extra motivated all morning. The Pitts twins had lapped up that algebra; the younger students finally seemed to understand those time problems they had been struggling with; and even Jimmy had been engrossed with the math questions she had given him, probably because they all dealt with buying candy and marbles.

Now she was sitting at her desk to eat her lunch. Her students had gone outside to eat at the benches and run off their excess energy and Allie was left in peace to eat and think about Bea. That she had sought her out this morning and shown her that, not only did she not regret what had happened last night, but she enthusiastically wanted more, made Allie supremely glad. The step back that Bea had taken after that terrible night with Harry had now become a step forwards. They still had a way to go and many things stood in their way, but Allie felt wholly optimistic about the future.

Opening her lunch bag, Allie found a sandwich and a slice of last nights’ applesauce cake wrapped in wax paper. If possible, it tasted even better than it had the night before. Just as she was finishing up, she noticed a scrap of paper nestling at the bottom of the bag. Drawing it out she found it was a small sketch, obviously done in haste, of an out-stretched cat. Underneath, a caption had been added: “Allie-cat lying in the sun.” Allie’s eyes filled up. What a precious thing for Bea to have done for her. She stared at it, smoothing her fingers over the lines, imagining Bea making this for her. It was such a perfect little drawing, capturing the spirit of the animal in just a few lines, but with a couple of hints about the face that made it resemble Allie. She had not known that Bea could draw, but was not surprised. Just looking at her hands, she had been able to tell how capable and dextrous they would be. But that was a thought for another time.

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Bea waited behind an ancient white ash, her shoulder blades pressing into its rough bark. She wasn’t sure what the time was, but she felt happier waiting here than pacing the porch or bending over her seed drills. Her back was aching and not just from gardening. Her time of the month had come around which meant backache, stomach cramps and tiredness. Also the infernal sanitary belt.

Hearing footfalls, she stepped away from the tree trunk. Sure enough, Debbie and Allie came past the tree and she fell into step beside them. “Carry your bag, Miss?” she growled, causing Allie to jump like a startled deer. Debbie laughed.

"Mama!"

“Bea!” Allie remonstrated. “You scared me half to death.”

“Sorry,” Bea said through her smile, a little too delighted at Allie’s flushed cheeks to be truly sorry. Already the heaviness had dropped away from her limbs and stomach and the fluttery, happy feeling had started up again. She took the bag from Allie and accepted the strap of books Debbie thrust at her without complaint, too distracted by Allie to make her carry them herself. Debbie was already fifty yards ahead in any case. “How was your day?” Bea asked.

“Marvellous,” Allie told her. When Bea raised a sceptical eyebrow, she continued quietly. “You
make me so happy. Today sailed by like a dream.” She stepped in front of Bea, stopping her, and put a hand on her chest, her fingers brushing over her collarbone. She came closer until there was only a fingers width between them. Heart pounding, Bea breathed her in. *Watermelon*. That was what Allie smelled of, *watermelon*. “I wanted to thank you,” Allie whispered. “For the drawing you left in my lunch bag. It was gorgeous and it made my day.” Bea was blushing hard and smiling like a lunatic. “I didn’t know you were an artist … on top of all your other talents,” she added suggestively, breathing hotly on Bea’s cheek.


"How was your day, my love?” Allie asked as they continued to stroll towards home. Bea looked at her out of the corners of her eyes. *My love.* Did Allie have any clue how that made her heart leap up?

"It was … okay." Bea replied. Allie was looking at her closely. Bea maintained her silence, not sure she had the energy to relate all the thoughts and doubts her mind had entertained today. "I missed you."

"Perhaps you could show me how much, later," Allie breathed, smiling. "And maybe you'll feel like telling me what's really bothering you too," she added, meeting Bea's eyes fearlessly and seriously. How could she do that? Bea wondered. How could she face all the messy emotional stuff head on? Some days Bea would almost rather flay off her own skin than confront her feelings. Allie had a courage she couldn't ever hope to match.

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Allie was watching Bea move about the kitchen. When she stopped to rub her palm against her belly and breathe out a sigh, Allie recognised how she was feeling.

“Why don’t you sit down for a bit and let me do that,” she suggested, coming over to her.

“It’s fine,” Bea replied.

“You’re not fine. Want me to get you some aspirin? Or a hot water bottle?” Allie asked, looking pointedly at Bea’s stomach.

Bea laid her head to one side and gave Allie a look. “Do you think I usually take aspirin and put my feet up?” she asked her.

“No. I think you usually ignore it and carry on.” Allie replied.

Bea gave a satisfied nod. “Well there you go then.” *So stubborn.*

“But you don’t need to do that now, because I’m here and I can help you out when you don’t feel so great.” Allie looked at her patiently. Bea carried on getting pans out of the cupboard as though she hadn’t spoken. Allie waited.

“You’re looking at me again,” Bea accused her, finally.

“Always,” Allie responded. She went over to her and stilled her busy hands by holding her wrists. She stroked the skin there until Bea looked at her. “I know you’re used to being queen of your domain … but let me do something for you once in a while. Think of me. Think how much I would like to do something for you … and let me.” The fight went out of her then and Allie was able to steer her into a chair. “Sit there. Where do you keep the aspirin and what are we having for supper?”
“Bathroom,” she said shortly. “Chicken and potatoes.”

Bea was sitting on her hands. It was the only way she could watch Allie in the kitchen without intervening.

“I could peel those while I’m sitting here,” Bea said, nodding at the potatoes Allie was massacring. Allie gave her a look, apparently checking to see if she was being critical. Bea kept her face neutral. “I feel much better now I’ve taken those aspirin,” she insisted. Allie handed over the knife.

“Go on then. I’ll admit I’m a bit out of practice,” she grinned. She watched Bea’s expert peeling for a few moments. “I don’t think I’ll ever be as fast as that. Those glorious hands of yours. So capable, I bet they could do anything. Oh, that reminds me …” She disappeared into her room, leaving Bea looking at her rough, scarred hands, wondering what Allie could find to admire in them. She returned with an envelope and a small brown paper package. “I meant to give these to you last night, but I got distracted. In the nicest possible way …” Bea’s body surged with an echo of the pleasure she had felt last night and she shifted in her seat, feeling suddenly hot. Had Allie noticed? Of course she had. Would these blushes ever stop giving her away?

“What’s this?” Bea asked as Allie put the envelope into her hand.

“My board money. You need to get down to the bank and pay that off against the mortgage.” Bea nodded. She felt horrible, taking Allie’s money, even though she recognised the necessity of it. “This is just a little something,” Allie breezed on, “to make your life a bit easier.” She handed her the package.

“What is it?” Bea asked suspiciously.

“Well, the idea is that you open the paper and then you find out,” Allie said with a straight face. Bea slowly untied the string. A gift outside of the Christmas season was an unfamiliar idea to her. “It’s supposed to be pleasant, getting a gift,” Allie complained. “You look like you think I gift wrapped a rattlesnake.”

“Sorry,” Bea replied. “I’m a bit out of practice …” she smiled at Allie, whose eyes now filled up.

“I’ll have to see what I can do about that.”

“Don’t you dare,” Bea replied vehemently. Unfurling the paper, she found a pair of thick work gloves. She smiled to herself. A totally practical present. Allie knew her so well already.

“Try them on,” Allie encouraged her. Bea slipped her hand inside and flexed her fingers.

“Perfect.” She looked Allie right in the eye. “Thank you for thinking of it.”

“You’re welcome,” Allie replied, looking pleased with herself. “Can’t have you getting any more blisters.” She reached out and took Bea’s hand, rubbing her thumb over the almost healed blister. Looking her in the eyes, she added, “I have plans for these hands of yours.”

Bea blushed.

To Allie’s amazement, supper was edible. Maybe better than edible judging by the way Debbie demolished her plateful. Bea was eating with a healthy appetite too. Perhaps it did her good to eat
something that she hadn’t cooked herself once in a while. It was possible that Allie would be some use around here after all. She might know nothing about growing food, catching fish or chopping wood, but she could learn. And she would learn because she wanted Bea able to rely on someone other than herself. She admired Bea’s work ethic, but she needed a little time to herself, to reflect or pursue her interests.

So it was that, after supper, after an episode of *Tarzan*, after Debbie’s bedtime, Allie planned to raise the subject of what Bea had been brooding on today. Her eyes, however, insisted on straying to Bea's lips. She studied the dark rose colour, the way they pursed and relaxed as her thoughts came and went, the occasional downturn that betrayed, not sadness, but determination.

Bea looked up and caught her staring. She walked over to Allie and took her hand, leading her over to the couch. She sat down and pulled her into her lap with such an intense look in her eyes that Allie found it impossible to speak. Bea touched her lips to Allie’s neck drawing a whimper from her. Allie could hear Bea breathing hard as she kissed up her throat to her jaw. She drew her head back to look at Allie, her eyes half closed. Holding her head between her hands, she ran her finger over and over the beauty spot above Allie’s lip. She leaned in and kissed it again and again, like she couldn't get enough, and Allie knew that this was something else that Bea liked about her. At the thought of that, Allie felt her pulse beating sharply between her legs. Then Bea's mouth was on hers fully and all thought was obliterated.

Chapter End Notes

I've obviously been thinking about and writing this story too much, because I dreamed about Bea and Allie so hard last night that I woke myself up and couldn't get back to sleep!

Please let me know if I'm overusing any phrases or words and I'll see what I can do. Multiple adverbs keep creeping in, but I have culled them before posting, so hopefully they are at acceptable levels now.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

They talk.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all your comments on the previous chapter. It's lovely to find that you are sticking with it. Sorry it's a bit late this week. We've just got back from a couple of days in sunny Norfolk (England, not Virginia, that is).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next day at school Allie was kicking herself for not speaking to Bea about what had been bothering her. As soon as Bea had laid that kiss on her, Allie’s mind had ceased to function and they had spent the whole evening necking on the couch, getting progressively hotter and more worked up until Bea pulled away. Allie knew that she had reached her limits for the time being. Bea had gone off to bed, exhausted. Allie went to bed too, but sleep was hard to come by. And it wasn't just that every nerve ending was alight. Bea was fretting about something: Harry or Debbie, herself, money worries. There were plenty of things that could be exercising her. She was determined that she wouldn't let this evening go the same way. Any doubts and fears that Bea had should not be allowed to fester and ruin what they were building.

All during supper, and after, Bea was casting glances at Allie that left her in no doubt about her intentions for the evening. So, whilst Bea was reading to Debbie, Allie made them some cocoa and took the cups out onto the porch to wait for Bea. This way, she reasoned, they could be close, side by side on the porch seat, but Bea could express herself to the darkening trees instead of having to look at Allie. That would be easier on her. If she could even get her to say anything.

She heard Bea come down the stairs and then pause. "Out here," Allie called to her. Bea appeared in the doorway.

"What are you doing outside?" Bea asked, looking a little put out.

"It’s a lovely evening. I made cocoa," she replied. Bea just looked at her. "Sit with me," Allie said in a coaxing tone.

"But … I thought we could … you know …"

"I want to talk to you a bit first," Allie said, with a smile. "And then, I promise, we can kiss until we're dizzy if you like." Bea blushed.

"God Allie! You make me sound like some kind of maniac," Bea protested. Allie shook her head and grabbed hold of her arm, tugging her into the seat beside her and resting her hand on Bea's thigh.
"I want it just as much as you, you idiot. Trust me, that couch is going to be begging for mercy if I get my way." Bea answered Allie's smile with one of her own. "But I know there's all sorts of stuff going on in your head." She tapped her on the temple with one finger. "All sorts of things that we haven't talked about. Things we both need to ask … or tell." Allie's heart sped up at the thought of what she wanted to tell. Did she dare say it? She handed Bea a cup of cocoa and let her sip in peace for a while.

Bea was looking straight ahead and keeping her silence. Allie knew it was up to her to initiate the conversation. "So … yesterday. I got the feeling you were worrying about something …" Bea looked into her cup. Her lips were tense and pursed. "Is it Debbie? Are you worried about Debbie?" Allie knew that this was a likelihood as Debbie would always be foremost in Bea's mind.

"Partly …" Bea conceded after a pause.

"Tell me," Allie said quietly.

"It's just … what if this …" Bea wagged her finger from side to side to indicate the two of them. "What if it's bad for her … having a mother who's not normal."

"You're perfectly normal Bea," Allie insisted. "The world tries to tell us we're not, because people are afraid of what might happen if everyone, particularly women, could choose how to live and love. They think the world as they know it would fall apart." She let that sink in for a minute. "And as for its effect on Debbie … Well, I think she's going to be better off with a mother who's happy than one that's miserable." Allie paused. "You are happy, aren't you?" Bea smiled in a way that left no doubt and Allie's heart skipped into a faster tempo.

Bea was nodding. "It is better for her without Harry here, and better that I'm happy. But then I thought about her future. How will she ever know how to choose a husband? Maybe she'll be confused and think Harry is the only kind of husband there is."

"Debbie will grow up and fall in love with someone. That's how she'll choose a husband. Nothing you or I do will influence that. My parents will attest to that. How they wish that their good example could have changed how I turned out." Allie's bitter tone made Bea finally look at her.

"What happened?"

Allie sighed, not sure how deep into her past troubles to go. "They heard rumours that I was involved with a woman. And when my mama asked me about it … I didn't deny it." Allie glanced at Bea to see how she was taking it, but she was looking away. "They don't want anything to do with me anymore. They say it's because the Bible says what I do is wrong, but I think it's really because it's bad for their reputation and therefore bad for business." Allie's voice had thickened as she related this and Bea grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze.

"That's horrible. I'm sorry. What about your brother?"

"I don't really know what he thinks. He's younger, and in line to take over the business. I don't blame him for not taking them on." They were silent for a minute. "In New York," Allie ventured, "people like us make their own families. Their parents reject them, and they build families out of their friends and lovers, open minded neighbours and colleagues." Allie swallowed hard. "We could be like that … if you wanted. Us and Debbie. Maxine and Liz." She risked a glance at Bea. She still wouldn't look at her, but her eyes were shiny with unshed tears. "Bea …"

Bea finally turned to her, her lips working. "You'd want that? With me?" Tears tracked down her face as she spoke.
“Yes,” Allie replied urgently. “More than anything. I should have said something before. I thought it might be too soon … And here you’ve been getting upset about it … I’m so sorry.”

“It was just yesterday … I realised I was thinking about us as though we had a long term future, and then … what you said to Harry came into my head … about moving on … and even though I know you only said it to get rid of him, I realised, I have no idea if that’s true …”

“It’s not true Bea. There’s nowhere else I want to be. If you’ll have me … Don’t cry …” She reached out to wipe away Bea’s tears.

“They’re happy tears,” Bea insisted with a thick voice. “I’d love to make a family with you. But I want to be fair to you. I know I’m not nearly good enough for you.”

“That’s nonsense,” Allie interrupted, but Bea continued as if she had not spoken.

“You could have anyone. I’ve made a mess of my life, and probably Debbie’s too. I don’t want to mess yours up as well. And what if you want to get married and have children of your own one day? I couldn’t ask you to forgo that …” Allie laughed. “What? Don’t laugh!”

“I’m sorry. I’m not laughing at you. That’s something else I should have told you. It’s always been women for me. When I was a little girl, I liked other girls, and when I became a woman, I liked other women. The idea of marriage and children is one I have never entertained. If I was going to marry someone … well, it would be you every time.” Allie stroked her face, sorely wanting to kiss her.

Bea smiled. “Two women getting married. Can you imagine?” Allie shook her head. Should she tell her now? It was implied in what she had just said, but would it help Bea to hear the words?

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"There's something else I need to tell you." Bea saw the fear on Allie's face.

"Whatever it is, you can tell me." She did her best to meet Allie's gaze squarely and without flinching. Allie was always so good at getting her to open up and listening when she did. She wanted to be able to do that in return. Allie's lips were trembling, and her eyes were fixed on Bea's as if to a lifeline. Bea held her hand, keeping very still and steady. "It's okay beautiful girl. Just say it.”

Allie's face pinked up fetchingly. She huffed out a breath. "I just wanted to tell you ... that I love you. That I'm in love with you." She looked down at her lap as though she couldn't bear to see Bea's reaction. Bea felt herself brim up with joy at Allie's words. She wanted to smile and shout out a laugh, but Allie still looked so serious and worried.

"Thank you," she said earnestly. "Thank you for telling me." Allie finally looked at her and Bea let forth the smile that Allie's words had generated. Allie's face was transformed as her own smile beamed out.

"Is it too much? I don't want you to be …"

"Of course not," Bea interrupted. "I love that you said it. I love you." When had that happened? She didn't know, couldn't have articulated it until this minute. But it was true.

"Please don't say it if you don't mean it …"

"I wouldn't. I do mean it." She looked at Allie intently, willing her to see it in her eyes. Allie smiled
and her gaze shifted to Bea's lips. She leaned toward her. Bea was anticipating the touch of her lips when she heard an engine drawing near and sprang to her feet just as a truck pulled up in front of the house. Fear surged through her.

*       *       *       *       *       *       *       *

Allie knew exactly what Bea was thinking, but the man who jumped out of the truck was not Harry. She could see Bea's hands shaking as she approached the visitor and hear the residual fear in her voice as she called out a friendly greeting.

"Hank. You're not still making deliveries, surely?"

"Bea. A letter came for, uh," he glanced at the envelope in his hand, "Miss Novak. Liz said you'd been waiting on it, so I thought I'd drop it round on my way home." He smiled at Allie from behind Bea.

"Oh. Uh, Hank. This is Allie Novak. Allie, this is Hank Johnson, Liz's right hand." Bea's voice had returned to normal now and she was smiling as she made the introduction. Allie got up as he came up the steps to shake her hand.

"Pleasure to meet you," she said. He was a slim but ropily muscled man of indeterminate age. He had a long face that looked rather sad, Allie reflected, until he smiled, and then you could see how handsome he was. He had dark skin and hair, but his eyes were an unusual light green, peppered with specks of brown and gold. "We were just having some cocoa Hank. Please join us."

"Oh, no. Thank you, but I have to be getting home. Here's your letter Miss."

Allie took it from him. "Thank you. But please call me Allie." Hank smiled at her.

"Garden's looking good Bea," he commented, turning back to the truck.

"Yep. How're your hogs coming along?"

"Fat as butter. You up for the usual arrangement, come fall?"

"Absolutely. Thanks for bringing the mail." Hank just nodded, climbed into the truck, and was away. They watched the truck disappear. Allie could see Bea's body sag a little as the adrenaline began to subside. She crossed her arms across her chest and dipped her head, scuffing her shoe in the dirt, her back to Allie.

When she made no further move, Allie called, "Come inside Bea." Her head shot up as though she'd just woken suddenly, and she slowly placed one foot in front of the other, coming up the porch steps. Allie held the screen door open for her and as soon as they were inside, she wrapped her arms around her very firmly. Bea was stiff in her embrace. "It's okay. It wasn't him," she murmured, rocking her slightly. After a few moments Bea sighed and began to relax.

"As soon as I saw that truck … my body reacted before I even had time to think," Bea admitted, her voice filled with shame.

"Of course it did. It's only natural. But he's not here and you're safe." Allie would happily have stayed holding Bea like that all evening, but Bea drew away.

"The letter. Is it from him?"

"I don't know. I don't recognise the handwriting." Allie held up the envelope so that Bea could see
it. She shook her head. Allie ripped open the envelope and glanced at the letter. “It’s from Maxine. Why hasn’t Harry written?”

Bea shrugged. “I don’t know. I can’t help but worry about what this silence means. I have to go into Charlottesville tomorrow. To the bank. I’ll call in on Mary and see if she’s heard from him.” She paused. “What’s Maxine say in her letter?”

“I’ll read it later. I’d rather carry on from where we left off,” Allie smiled.

Bea grimaced. “Hank kind of spoiled the moment,” she replied with a shaky laugh. She headed into the kitchen and began rinsing cups that were already clean and straightening jars that were already straight. She had gone to her safe place, Allie knew. Any minute now she would start yawning.

“Yeah. That was a close one. Can you imagine if Hank had caught us kissing? So, perhaps we should make a rule. No kissing on the porch.”

Bea nodded. “We have to be more careful,” she agreed.

“Kissing in the house is okay though …” Allie said suggestively. But Bea was still a long way from her, processing her reaction to Hank’s arrival. She was moving around the kitchen automatically, her eyes glazed, her thoughts goodness knows where. She would be back, Allie knew, given time. She went and sat on the couch and picked up a newspaper that was laying on a table. Finding her glasses, she glanced at the date. Two days old. She switched on the lamp, sat down and started reading.

After a few minutes she became aware that Bea had stopped moving about. She looked up to find Bea frozen, leaning against the sink, staring blankly out of the window. Allie cleared her throat. “It says in the paper that the depression might be easing at last,” she announced. Bea turned to look at her, her eyes beginning to focus. Allie rustled the pages, hitched up her skirt a little and recrossed her legs, slowly, and made a show of adjusting her glasses. She started silently counting to ten, and before she got to six Bea was sitting next to her, looking slightly annoyed.

“Do you always get your own way?” she asked accusingly, but with a particular purr to her voice that made Allie’s heart accelerate.

“As much as possible,” Allie replied, reaching for her hand. She brought it up to her lips and kissed the palm lingeringly.

“Mm,” Bea said. Allie kept a hold of Bea’s hand and held it against her cheek, pressing her face into it, her breath quickening.


She raised her shining eyes to Bea’s. “I love you.” Bea smiled widely. “Kiss me, damn you,” Allie insisted impatiently. Bea laughed and kissed her.

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Bea stifled a yawn. She was as happy as she’d ever been. She didn’t want to move, and yet if she lay here much longer, she’d surely fall asleep. Allie stirred against her. Her head lay on Bea’s chest, her hair tickling her face. Their feet were tangled together, and Bea was relishing the sensation of the full length of Allie’s body being pressed against hers. She smoothed Allie’s hair back from her face and kissed her forehead. “Allie cat, are you falling asleep?”

“Maybe … I love it when you call me that.” She pulled Bea closer, pushing her nose into Bea’s
neck and made no move to go to bed.

“Do you remember? Last week? When I came home, and you were sunning yourself on the porch?”

“Mm.” Sleepily.

“I thought you looked just like a cat. So content with something as simple as a patch of sunshine.”

“That drawing you did was lovely. Do you have any others I could see?” It was an innocent question, but it threw Bea back to a darker time. She must have stiffened, because Allie raised her head and looked at her with concern.

“Bea. What’s wrong?”

“I always had to hide my notebook with my drawings in it.” She forced herself to continue. “Harry hated me drawing. Said it was a waste of time. If he found it he would rip it up and then …” She stopped. Anger and fear closed her throat.

“Then he would beat you,” Allie finished for her. Bea nodded. She disentangled herself from Allie and stood up. “It’s okay,” Allie continued, sitting up. “You can say it now. It’s never going to happen again.” Bea found that Allie's calm announcement unaccountably angered her.

“You don't know that Allie,” she snapped. "We don't know where he is or what he's up to.” She stalked away into the kitchen, glaring at Allie's reflection in the now dark window. "He could reappear any day …"

"If you really think that, maybe we should get in touch with the sheriff," Allie reasoned.

"I don't know what to think!” Bea couldn't explain why she was suddenly so angry, and with Allie of all people.

"I think seeing that truck tonight scared you badly. You thought he was gone and then it seemed like he wasn't." Allie was being so calm. It was infuriating, but Bea could see the sense in what she said. "The situation hasn't changed since this morning. It's just your view of it that has changed." Bea hung her head. She had so much to be thankful for since Allie appeared in her life. Why must her past ambush her like this? Or was she just fundamentally incapable of being happy? Her hot temper, her insecurities, her actual physical fear all combined on a night like tonight to make her a horrible person to be around.

“I’d better just go to bed,” she told Allie despondently.

Allie nodded. “You’re tired, I know. But don’t go away mad at me. Please. I couldn’t bear that.” A wave of shame overtook Bea. She was so unworthy of this sweet woman. Her throat was full of tears so that she couldn’t speak, but she turned to Allie and opened her arms, hoping that this gesture would say everything that she was unable to voice. Allie walked into her embrace without hesitation and rested there.

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In the morning Allie awoke to find that a notebook had been pushed under her door during the night.

Chapter End Notes
I belatedly realised that I borrowed a line from Desert Hearts in the previous chapter. I'll correct it when I get a minute.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

An opportunity.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all your comments. Here's the next chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The hushed atmosphere of the bank was soothing after the fraught conversation she had just had with Mary. Bea waited patiently, for once, glad to be out of the harsh sunlight and traffic noise for a while. Getting to the front of the line she paid the next mortgage instalment, using the money that Allie had given her. What she was giving her was too much. It can't really have been costing so much to stay at Mrs Wentworth's, can it? Bea had already tried to return a portion, but Allie had refused. So, Bea had decided that she would put the extra aside for whichever bill next came due.

Stepping back onto the street she turned toward downtown to continue her job search, recalling Mary's surprise at seeing her standing at her door. She had invited Bea inside and offered her coffee, enquiring after Debbie, chatting about the boys, almost as though nothing had changed. Bea, however, could detect a new caginess in her manner. When Bea explained that she hadn't seen Harry for two weeks and needed to get in touch with him, Mary folded her arms and folded her lips. All she would say was that she didn't know where Harry was, hadn't seen him herself, couldn't say when he would be back.

Bea suggested to her that she was lying, and Mary lit into her with a long diatribe about Bea's shortcomings as a wife. When she told Bea that Harry had been more than patient with her for years and that she ought to be grateful that he had stuck around as long as he had, Bea decided it was time to leave. Some kind of relationship with Mary had to be maintained so that Debbie could continue to see her cousins. So, for Debbie's sake she left before she could spit out some truths about Harry that Mary would find unpalatable, to say the least. Allie would be proud of her newfound restraint.

Her face split into a grin at the thought of Allie. She loves me. Her heart bounded as she recalled Allie's words and remembered her joy when she told her that she loved her. Last night, as she had lain awake thinking about all the lovely and unlovely things that had happened that evening, she had made a resolution to be worthy of that love. So, no more flying into a temper, no more reliving the past. From now on she was going to strain every muscle and sinew to love and protect her family to the utmost. She would make the most of every moment with them. She would find a job and work hard to give them a good life. Harry would not win. Her life, and Debbie and Allie's lives, would not be spoiled by what he had done. Today was a new beginning.

A woman passing by stared at her for a long moment and Bea realised that she was still grinning. She looked at the sidewalk and attempted to school her face into a more neutral expression. But it
At last it was lunchtime. Allie had been waiting all morning for the opportunity to open her bag and take out a certain slim notebook, the presence of which had been catching at the corner of her mind since she put it in there first thing this morning. There had been no time to look at it and do it justice this morning, so she had simply brought it with her, unable to conceive of waiting until this evening. Squeezing past Bea at the kitchen sink she had placed a hand on her waist and whispered into that curly mane, "Thank you," hoping Bea would know what she meant.

Bea had astonished Allie this morning. She had expected her to be muted and despondent, much as she had been the night before. Instead Bea was brighter and more energetic than ever, whirling around, completing three tasks to every one of Allie's. True, she looked a little tired, but there was a light in her eyes and a resolution in her step that Allie had not seen before. That, and the delivery of the notebook, made Allie wonder if Bea had experienced some kind of sea change.

Carefully opening the cover Allie found some sketches of Debbie. These must have been done recently, as the little girl looked much as Allie knew her. There was a profile of her head that captured the living light in her eyes, and another of her whole figure, skipping along, just as Allie had seen her do dozens of times. Allie was astounded. These drawings were as accurate as a photograph yet managed to capture the soul of the child in the way a photograph never could.

Turning the pages, she found that most of the book was filled with nature studies. Plants, trees, views all rendered in realistic detail. But somehow, Bea was in those drawings as surely as if she had drawn herself into the foreground. Her love of the natural world radiated from every line and detail. Allie found herself running her fingertips over the pages almost as if she was touching Bea herself. One drawing in particular caught her attention. It depicted a dozen small birds perching and preening in a blossom tree. The energy of the birds as they went about their lives was coming off the page; the blossom was frothing; the tree bark was smooth and shining. Allie was no art expert, but this was the best of the lot.

Thoughts were connecting in her mind and an idea was birthing that could change everything. But what would Bea think to it, she wondered.

Her teeth set in determination Bea pushed open the door. This was a high-class hotel, and even to be entering it by the employee’s entrance made her feel conspicuous and anxious. She found herself in a shabby corridor with poor lighting. If the hotel’s guests saw this part of the establishment, they wouldn’t be too impressed. She was wondering what to do when a young man in a waiter’s uniform came out of a door to her left and hurried towards her.

"Excuse me. I wonder if you could point me in the direction of the housekeeper, or …" The man scurried past her, in a hurry to leave. At the last moment he paused, gestured down the corridor, and said, “Right at the bottom and first door on your right.” Bea was about to thank him, but he had already exited onto the street. She followed his directions and came to a door. Hoping this was the right place she gave a tentative knock. She listened hard but there was no sound in reply. Feeling twitchy and uncomfortable, she rocked back on her heels, already thinking about walking away. The dim corridor and smell of bleach was making her dizzy and nauseous. This idea was likely a dead end anyway. She should go. She was turning to leave when she remembered her newfound resolution. Could she give up this easily and still tell herself that she was trying her hardest? Steeling herself, she turned back to the door and knocked more forcefully. She was rewarded by the sound of a cough and gruff injunction to “Come in!”
Opening the door, she found herself confronted by a small man with a mightily wrinkled face and sparse hair. He was slumped on a wooden chair in front of a desk, smoking a cigar. He squinted at her through the smoke, his greying stubble showing silver in the light from the lamp. “Help you, missy?” he asked impatiently, rifling through some papers on the desk.

“Yes, hello. I was … I’m looking for a job. I hope you don’t mind me just coming along …” He held up his hand to stop her.

“Do you have any idea how many people I see who are looking for a job?” Not waiting for her to reply he continued, not unsympathetically. “I can’t employ them all you know.” Bea nodded.

“So, you don’t have anything then?” she asked. He regarded her carefully.

“What kind of work are you looking for?” he asked, taking another puff on his cigar.

“Anything,” Bea assured him. “I can cook, wait tables, clean, do laundry … I’d work hard …”

“Do you have any idea how many people say they’ll work hard?” He was shaking his head. “And then they shirk, or take off unexpectedly, or get knocked up.” He rubbed at his face. “You’re not going to get knocked up, are you?” Bea coloured and shook her head. “Let me see your hands,” he instructed. She held them out. “Other way up, dummy!” She turned them over so that he could see the palms. He inspected them and nodded, apparently satisfied. “I might have something. Come see me first thing Monday.”

“Thank you so much, Mr …” Bea said, lifting onto her toes in excitement.

“Just Stan. And don’t thank me. It’s not a sure thing. Come early Monday and we’ll see.”

Bea nodded, unable to suppress a smile. “What kind of work might it be Mr … Stan?”

“Chambermaiding,” he answered shortly. “Hard work, long hours, little pay,” he clarified.

“Sounds perfect,” Bea answered. Stan just stared at her and shook his head as though she was crazy. “See you Monday,” Bea added, backing out of the door.

“Do you have any idea how many people say see you Monday?” he grumbled, turning back to his paperwork.

Entering the house that afternoon Allie found Bea to be in the same energetic mood as she had been that morning, only now with a sense of barely suppressed excitement thrown in. Allie was hardly less excited herself, longing to share with Bea the epiphany she had had whilst looking at her drawings. The moment she and Debbie were through the door Bea had scooped Debbie up into a fierce squeeze and only placed her back on her feet to hand her one of her famed honeycomb cookies.

"Are we celebrating something?” Allie asked as Bea brought her a cookie, taking the opportunity to surreptitiously stroke her hand as she did so.

Bea gave a blinding smile and nodded. "I may have found myself a job!” she told her almost hopping with glee.

Allie could feel herself gaping. "Really? That's amazing. What is it?” She listened while Bea explained. "So, is it a full-time job?” she asked.
"I don't know," Bea replied. "It's not even a certainty yet. I guess I'll find out more on Monday."

Allie nodded. "And you really want to do it?"

Bea scoffed. "Of course! How many job offers do you think I've had since I started looking."

"It's just … chambermaiding sounds … unpleasant and maybe … not so well paid …"

Bea's face stiffened. "We can't all be teachers you know."

Allie sighed. She should have known better than to burst Bea's newly inflated bubble. "That's not what I meant. I think it's wonderful." But Bea was already smiling again before Allie had even finished speaking. Allie was taken aback. She had expected Bea to fly into a temper, but nothing seemed to bother her today. "You made an opportunity out of nowhere," she continued. "I'm proud of you."

"Thanks Allie cat," Bea replied, looking touched. Debbie was staring at her mother in puzzlement.

"Mama …?" she ventured.

"Yes, sweetheart?" Bea reached out and stroked her hair.

"May I have another cookie?"

"Alright. One more," Bea allowed. Debbie smiled, having taken advantage of her mother's extraordinary mood. "So … would you be able to keep an eye on Debbie on Monday? Or shall I ask Liz if she needs a shop assistant?" She reached out and gave Debbie a tickle. Debbie giggled and squirmed, scattering crumbs around. Bea didn't seem to mind.

"Of course. You don't even need to ask. Monday is the first day of the summer vacation, though, so maybe Debbie should choose."

"What do you think, Deb? Do you want to stay here with Allie on Monday or go to Liz and Sophie's?"

"Stay with Allie!" Debbie crowed, in a joyful way that made Allie glad. Bea met her eyes and nodded.

"I wish I could stay with Allie," Bea said quietly, as Debbie disappeared upstairs to get changed. She glanced behind her to make sure Debbie wasn't there before placing her hands on Allie's waist. She moved them up her sides, stroking her thumbs over her ribcage, stopping short of her breasts, though her eyes were straying there. Allie felt her breath coming faster and a predictable throbbing between her legs. She leaned forward and rested her cheek against Bea's, soft skin against soft skin. The best sensation in the world.

"What's got you in such a good mood today?" she asked into her ear.

"Um. Let me think. Could it be that a certain someone told me that she loved me yesterday?" Bea asked playfully.

Allie smiled. "And how do you feel about her?"

"I plan to show her later," she breathed.

Allie drew back to look at her. "There's something I'd like to talk to you about after supper."
Bea's brows drew together, and her lips tensed. "Again, Allie? Didn't we talk about everything last night?" She sounded almost petulant, like a child who has been told to do their homework instead of going to the fair. Allie gave her a level look.

"It won't take long … and I think … I hope you'll like what I have to say."

"Huh. Well …" she glanced over her shoulder. "If there's going to be a delay, I think I'm going to need to take a down payment …" and she pressed their bodies together, pulling Allie's mouth down to hers with a hand on the back of the neck. Allie felt her lips taken firmly between Bea's and her tongue brushing against them, causing Allie to part her lips and arch her body against Bea's helplessly. An electrified thread of arousal span upward through her body as Bea kissed her with such ardor that she felt it right through to the roots of her hair.

And then she was gone. Debbie was cantering down the stairs and Bea was over by the sink, smirking at Allie as she attempted to collect herself.

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Sitting side by side on the couch Allie opened the cover of Bea's notebook. She flipped through the pages silently for a minute, pausing now and then.

"Look at this," Allie instructed her. Bea raised an eyebrow but humoured her by casting her eyes over the drawings as Allie turned the pages. "You don't see it, do you?"

"What am I supposed to be seeing? I know these drawings. I made them myself, remember."

"You don't see how good they are," Allie told her, looking earnestly into her eyes.

Bea smiled. "That's very sweet of you Allie."

"No, Bea. These are really good. Look at this one." She turned the pages.

"The goldfinches in the wild cherry. I always liked that one too." She looked at it wistfully. "Why don't you have it. You could put it up in your room." She made as if to tear out the page. Allie grabbed her hand.

"No! I mean … thank you … but what I'm trying to say is that these are better than you realise."

"I'm not surprised. You've probably walked past that tree a hundred times."

"No. It reminded me of the pictures I used to see displayed in the window of an art shop in Charlottesville. This is as good as those. Probably better."

"Don't you think you might be a tiny bit biased," Bea teased, still not seeing where Allie was headed with this.

"Maybe. Maybe not. The point is, you need a job. You might be able to work as a chambermaid. Or … you might be able to work as an artist."

Bea laughed. "But Allie, this is just a hobby! Something I do for fun or because it calms me down …"

"Even better! Don't you see? You could get paid for doing something you love. Something that doesn't take you away from us for long hours. Something that makes you happy rather than
exhausted."

"I don't know anything about art," Bea protested. "Those people who sell their pictures, they've been to art school. I'm just doing whatever I feel like doing."

"You have great skill and great instincts. I don't think you need anything else." Bea looked again at the drawing. She had always been pleased with it, but was it really as good as Allie said? She couldn't tell, couldn't get enough distance from it. Harry's scorn at her drawings was etched into her mind and a few kind words, even if they were from Allie, could not undo in a moment what Harry had taken years to drive into her. Allie continued, "I think we should visit that art shop and show the owner your work. See what he says."

"I don't know …"

"What have you got to lose?"

"What if he laughs in my face?"

"I'll be there with you. He can laugh at us both." Bea didn't know if she could put herself in that position, even with Allie by her side. Just thinking about it set off a dangerous train of worries and fears. She glanced at Allie and found herself observed. Allie closed the notebook and placed it on the table before kneeling on the floor in front of Bea and taking her head between her hands. She kissed her face gently, just at the corner of her mouth. Then the same on the other side. Bea's heart started up hectically and her joints softened. "You should have more faith in yourself Bea," Allie remarked. "But, just think about it, okay?" Bea nodded unthinkingly, already moving to pull Allie into her lap, already anticipating the kisses they would share.

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Sometime later Allie was pleasantly crushed underneath Bea. Her lips were swollen from their kisses, but for now Bea was breathing quietly into her ear, their fingers interlinked, Bea's restlessness banished. "Did you know," Allie began, "that the collective noun for goldfinches is a charm? Isn't that lovely? A charm of goldfinches." Bea huffed an exasperated laugh into her neck.

"Enough already! I'll go to the damn art shop."

"You will?" Allie drummed her feet against the couch in delight.

Bea looked at her smiling face. "As if I could deny you anything. What's your collective noun? I bet that's a charm too. A charm of Novaks."

"Damn straight."

Chapter End Notes

Bit of a dull chapter, but sometimes the plot has to move along ...
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Hello stranger.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone. Thanks for reading and commenting on the previous (shortish) chapter. This is a *full* chapter, so I want no complaints. (You know who you are 😊)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saturday morning arrived and with it the uncomfortable sensation that she had promised something that she wasn't sure she could deliver. Bea lay back on her pillow and put her hands behind her head. Allie wanted her to go to the art shop and show her drawings today. She seemed certain of the quality, which Bea was not. Even if she was right, Allie couldn't possibly understand how difficult it would be. The drawings were intensely private and showing them to anyone felt incredibly exposing. Which was why Allie was the only one who had seen them. Apart from Harry. And whilst she knew that Harry's response to them had been part of his whole campaign to belittle her, the effect of his attitude still lingered.

But this was where her resolution had to be enacted. For her to be successful for herself and her family was a poke in the eye to Harry. And the harder it was to do something, the more worthwhile it was because it allowed her to prove herself to Allie. So hard bedamned. She would take the drawings and take the man's scorn. When this didn't work out, she still had the chance of a job at the hotel on Monday

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Allie was awoken early by a feeling of expectation. Was it because it was the first day of the summer break? Or was it because Bea had agreed to go to the art shop? She stretched happily, thinking about the lovely evening they had shared yesterday. Debbie had been excited about the end of school and had been pleased with her certificate, which was now pinned to the wall so that it would be the first thing she saw when she woke up.

Friday was, apparently, bath night for Debbie. So, while Bea helped Debbie wash her hair Allie made a quick supper of omelettes and salad, fresh from the garden. Together with Bea's bread and the leftover cookies it made a fine meal. After supper they sat out on the porch to allow Debbie's thick mane a chance to dry. Bea brought out a snakes and ladders board. Debbie had diabolically good luck and beat them three times in a row. She was thoroughly excited by her victories and wanted Allie to read to her instead of her mother. Allie had glanced at Bea to see if her feelings were hurt, but instead, if anything, she looked pleased.

When Allie came back downstairs Bea had put the radio on. She was propped up at one end of the couch and when she saw Allie, she opened her arms to invite her to lie back with her. Allie gladly took her place and they listened to Fibber McGee and Molly, laughing along together and enjoying
being close to one another. When it had finished Allie turned the dial, searching for some music. She found a country song, two women's voices rising and falling in turn, almost as though they were singing to each other.

Hello, stranger, put your loving hand in mine
Hello, stranger, put your loving hand in mine …

Liking those words she left the song playing and sat back down with Bea, taking her hand. Bea lifted their joined hands to her lips and kissed Allie’s knuckles, meeting her eyes with undisguised affection.

She bowed her head, she waved both hands at me
She bowed her head, she waved both hands at me
I'm prison bound, I'm longing to be free

Oh, I'll see you when your troubles are like mine
Oh, I'll see you when your troubles are like mine
Oh, I'll see you when you haven't got a dime

Weeping like a willow, mourning like a dove
Weeping like a willow, mourning like a dove
There's a girl up the country that I really love

Allie laughed. "I think we might have found our song."

Bea looked at her askance. "Really? You couldn't find something a little more upbeat?"

"Don't you like it?"

"Sure … at least I won't have to dance to it." But by this time the next song was starting up.

"This one has a good rhythm," Allie asserted and she pulled a reluctant Bea to her feet. Grinning, she lead Bea around the room in a clumsy dance, Bea blushing and laughing in equal measure. When the music stopped Allie dipped her theatrically and brought her back up straight into a kiss.

After that kisses were exchanged until both were breathless. Allie squirmed pleasurably at the recollection. Bea had been running her hands over Allie’s back and pulling her hard against her. Allie felt sure that Bea had been as worked up as Allie herself. Perhaps it wouldn’t be too long
before she wanted to take things further. Allie was still managing to keep her hands, mostly, to herself, pursuing her policy of patience like her life depended on it. She couldn’t bear the idea of Bea being spooked by anything she did in a moment of thoughtless passion.

She glanced at her clock. It was very early, but she needed the bathroom. She made her way silently up the stairs. When Bea's bedroom door was flung open her heart leaped in surprise, and then in delight. Bea's hair was wilder than ever, and she was still wearing her nightshirt; it was a plaid affair that barely reached her knees. Allie allowed herself a long stare at Bea's shapely lower legs, then ran her eyes back up Bea’s body to the open collar, allowing her mind to dwell on the thought that she was completely naked under that thin piece of fabric. Bea was also staring, but, presumably, got no joy from Allie's ankle length nightdress, selected to be suitable for boarding house life.

"Hello stranger," Allie sang in a whisper. As words put your loving hand in mine played silently in her head, Bea grinned and put her hand in Allie's.

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After a quick visit with Liz, who seemed to be getting on with Allie better every time they met, they caught the bus into Charlottesville. Allie lingered on the street corner while Bea dropped Debbie off to visit with her cousins. If Mary noticed the notebook under her arm, she didn't ask. Setting off downtown Bea's nerves picked up. Wondering why she was doing this she only had to glance at Allie to be reminded of at least one very good reason.

Allie chatted away to her as they walked, about nothing of any importance. Bea knew from the way Allie was casting regular glances at her that she was trying to put her at ease. Too soon they were standing opposite a smart looking shop. “C. Perkins & Co.” read the sign over the door. There was a display in the window, mercifully too distant for Bea to make out. Her heart rattled against her ribs and her hands slicked with sweat. She breathed out hard down her nose, willing herself to take the step off the kerb that would carry her across the street.

“Bea …” Allie was speaking. “Bea. If this is too hard, we can leave it for today.” A single finger brushed unobtrusively against her arm. Allie was gazing at her with those electric blue eyes, her expression filled with concern. Bea gave a tremulous smile.

“I can do this,” she croaked. She cleared her throat. “Just … give me a minute … and stay close. It really helps …”

Allie nodded, her expression clearing and a smile breaking out. “I’m right here, my love.” Bea filled up with happiness at her words and was able to take that first step. Reaching the shop front, she did not pause to look at the display nor deviate to avoid an unlucky pedestrian. Instead, keeping her momentum up, she pushed the door open and walked in before she had a chance to change her mind. Immediately her senses were assaulted: the smell of paint and turpentine, pencil shavings and dust; a riot of colour from the paintings on display, the tubes of pigment, pencils and crayons. But it was blessedly hushed and still. Bea stopped, could feel Allie just behind her, and took it all in. Being here was unexpectedly calming.

“May I help you?” It was only then that Bea noticed the slim, sandy haired man behind the counter. He had a quiet, tuneful voice and, as Bea stepped closer, unusually bright eyes. While she hesitated and swallowed, attempting to marshal her thoughts, he regarded her placidly and somehow, Bea thought, kindly.

“Hi. Um, good morning,” Bea blinked rapidly. “Would it be possible to speak with Mr Perkins?”
The man broke into a smile. “That’s me. Charles Perkins.” He stepped out from behind the counter and offered his hand. Bea took it but was unable to continue the conversation, still caught in a loop of indecision. How should she phrase her request? Charles Perkins waited a moment before asking, “And you are?”

“Oh. Um … Bea Smith.” He glanced at her left hand.

“So, Miss Smith. How may I help you today?” Although surprised to be addressed as “Miss”, Bea didn’t correct his assumption. “Some art supplies? Or perhaps you would like to peruse the works of some of our local artists?” Bea shook her head and brought her notebook out from where she had been gripping it against her side.

Her hands shook a little and she knew Mr Perkins could hardly fail to notice it. She gripped it more firmly, determined to get through this any way she could. “Would you look …?” she finally blurted out. “I mean … I’m only an amateur, but … these are some sketches that might be …” He let her flounder for only a moment before plucking the notebook from her hand with a smile.

“I’d be delighted to take a look.” Bea realised she was staring at him in wide-eyed surprise. She blinked her dry eyes.

“Thank you,” she murmured gratefully. She had not expected such kindness or gentility. She clasped her hands nervously together as he took the notebook over to the counter. With his back to her he laid it down and began to turn the pages. Allie moved up to her left-hand side. Bea glanced at her. Allie gave her a reassuring look and mimed some slow breaths. Bea realised her breathing was rather fast and slowed her breaths to match Allie’s.

She waited. Charles Perkins did not rush. He took his time and looked at each page. Bea would almost have preferred it if he had rushed through them and declared them rubbish. Waiting for his verdict was putting her on edge. It was so quiet in the shop and she was doing her best to keep still, but she longed to pace or fidget to relieve her tension. Instead she settled for balling her hands into fists and driving her nails into her palms. Finally, Mr Perkins looked over his shoulder and beckoned to Bea with one imperious finger. She stepped forward nervously.

“You have some talent, Miss Smith.” He spoke quietly and smiled slightly as he saw her face relax a little. “This kind of picture, nature studies and views, are very much in demand by tourists since the national park opened. As you will have seen, I have some not dissimilar works in the window.” Bea turned toward the window, unseeing, trying to absorb what he was saying. “I particularly like these ones,” he continued. “The goldfinches, this one of the pond, and this view.” He turned the pages as he spoke. “I assume you’re wishing to supply me with some works?”

Bea looked at him dumbly for a moment. “If you think they’re good enough,” she managed to reply.

“Well, these are no good,” he continued. Her heart sank. “The paper is too poor, they’re a bit on the small side, and, really, they would need to be in colour to sell well.” Bea nodded her understanding, a blush rising to her cheeks. “So, if you could manage to fulfil those criteria, I could try to sell them for you. My usual terms are a sixty forty split, in your favour.” He looked at her questioningly.

She nodded. "Thank you, Mr Perkins."

"Please. Call me Charles."

Bea smiled, disarmed by his kindness. "Well I'd better get to work, then." She started backing
towards the door.

Allie stopped her with a hand in the small of her back. "Hadn't we better get the supplies you're going to need whilst we're here?" she asked quietly. Bea looked at her uncertainly, wondering how to mention her lack of funds without embarrassing herself in front of Charles Perkins. But Allie just patted her own purse and gave Bea a meaningful look. "I plan to make an investment," she whispered. Then she stepped round Bea and approached Charles.

"Hi. I'm Allie Novak, Bea's friend." Something about the way Allie said the word friend made Bea blush to the roots of her hair. Allie shook his hand and smiled into his face in the way only she could. Then she began by asking what kind of paper they should get. Charles showed them round the shop, pointing out the materials they should consider. They picked out good quality paper, a range of pencils and a putty eraser, Allie and Charles chatting with an ease Bea could only wonder at.

"As for colour, I don't think you should start with paint of any kind. It takes a long time to master. Pastels wouldn't suit your style, so you should probably try coloured pencils. Or inks. I have a good range and you can experiment with applying them with nibs or brushes." Bea was instantly drawn to the idea of ink. She could just imagine the depth of colour they would give. She chose a small selection of colours to start out with and Charles picked out the nibs and brushes he thought she would need. Allie persuaded her to get a set of coloured pencils as well, in case the inks didn't work out.

When everything was piled up on the counter the thought of the cost of it all made Bea suddenly feel quite ill. She pressed a hand to her now clammy forehead. And then Allie was there at her side, bumping elbows with her, not so accidentally. Bea looked into her eyes and found reassurance there. "An investment not an expense, remember?" Allie told her quietly, whilst Charles pretended not to hear.

Once the total was announced Bea was a hairsbreadth from putting it all back on the shelves, until Charles announced that he would give her a ten percent discount based on his confidence regarding future sales. Bea gaped at him. "Why would you do that? You've only just met me?"

He shrugged. "I've seen your work. I know you can deliver. Plus, I'm an excellent judge of character. You won't let us down." His eyes flicked to Allie and back. Bea shrugged and conceded defeat. She watched as Allie and Charles grinned at each other. Charles loaded everything into a bag, Allie handed over the money, and Bea wondered how two strangers could become co-conspirators so quickly. The Novak charm, no doubt.

*       *       *       *       *       *       *       *

When they were out of the shop Allie watched Bea pause by the window to look at the display. Whatever she saw there, it didn't seem to dampen her excitement. She set off along the sidewalk in the wrong direction, head up, eyes distant, arms swinging. Allie scrambled to keep up with her, hefting the bag of art materials in both arms.

"Bea … slow down a bit, would you?" Bea stopped dead and turned around. With a contrite smile she went to take the bag out of Allie's arms.

"Sorry Allie cat," she said in a low voice. They juggled the bag between them for a moment. "God, I want to kiss you so badly right now," Bea whispered, her darkening eyes fixed on Allie's lips. Allie was mesmerised by the desire she saw there, and for two pins would have kissed her right there in the street. Luckily Bea chose that moment to get a grip on the bag and step away. Allie's whole body yearned toward her, but after a few deep breaths she was able to carry on walking and
speak in an almost normal voice.

"So, as we're heading this way, would it be alright if we stopped at the towers and said hi to the girls?" Bea stopped dead again and laughed.

"Where am I going?" She shook her head. "I must have been miles away."

"Miles away ... thinking about what masterpieces you're going to create?" Bea blushed. "I'm really not teasing you. I can't wait to see what you come up with." Allie watched her and could almost see a wave of pleasurable anticipation run through her. It wasn't fair that she couldn't just kiss her now, when she wanted to so desperately. Men and women did it all the time. "C'mon. It's just up here."

They continued walking, matching steps this time. "Had you met Charles Perkins before today?" Bea asked her. Allie shook her head.

"No. Why'd you ask?"

"He said yes straight away. I wondered ... if you had already spoken to him about my work."

Allie frowned. "No, of course not. I wouldn't do that. And your work speaks for itself, anyway."

"Sorry Allie. I didn't mean to suggest that you would do anything underhand ..."

"It's fine Bea. Actually, maybe I would have done it if I had thought there was any chance he would say no. And if I had thought of it."

Bea laughed. "You're such a sweetheart. I'm so happy you made me do this."

"I think you mean encouraged, don't you?" Allie said laughingly.

"Well, call it what you want, it was a good idea." They walked on in companionable silence for a minute, Bea frowning to herself now and then. Was she worried about the money they had just spent? Allie wondered. Then Bea announced, "When we get to the towers, maybe I should wait outside, or go on ahead and collect Debbie."

Allie nodded, pretending to consider it. "Or you could just say a quick hello to Maxine, because she's longing to meet you. She had all kinds of questions about you in her letter."

"Oh God. She wants to make sure I'm good enough for you, doesn't she."

Allie nodded grimly. "I'm afraid so." Bea's steps were slowing. "I'm teasing! Mostly. But you might as well get it over with," Allie encouraged.

"But I've not had a chance to prepare," she complained.

"Just be yourself, my love," Allie told her. "She's going to love you."

Bea sighed, resigned. "You never did tell me why she wrote you that letter."

"I think she was just missing our chats. There was one short paragraph about how they were all well, but missing me. Then a longish one asking about you and me." Bea chewed on her bottom lip. Allie stared hungrily and wished she could kiss her fears away. "And then four long paragraphs about Will Jackson and his lovely eyes, and his kindness ... and his broad shoulders ... well. You get the idea."
"This is the man from the hardware store?"

Allie nodded. "He took her for dinner and a movie. She called it an actual date." Allie frowned, suddenly realising that Bea and herself had never been on an actual date themselves.

"Must be getting serious," Bea commented.

"Um. Well, here we are …"

Looking at the boarding house Bea was reminded of that Sunday when she had ridden over to find Allie. She had been in a terrible state that day, thinking that she had driven Allie away with her harsh words, thinking that the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to her was over before it had even got started. But somehow they had got past that, and Bea felt as if things were better between them than ever, that every day brought a new level of joy. She looked at Allie to find herself being observed. The ardent look that Allie cast her way suggested she was following her train of thought, and Bea really hoped she was. She hoped that Allie could detect the depth of the love and gratitude that she felt so keenly at this moment.

“Allie!” a woman’s voice broke into her thoughts. A tall dark-haired woman was standing on the porch waving frantically. Allie had broken into a grin and started up the steps. Bea followed behind, trying not to let her anxiety show on her face. Allie had been engulfed in an embrace when the door creaked open again and a huge brunette, who, from Allie’s description, could only be Boomer, appeared.

“Alright Maxi, she’s only been gone a week,” the big woman complained, looking a little jealous. Then the door creaked open again and another woman appeared, and everyone was talking and laughing at once, whilst Bea stood there with her smile faltering. Just then Maxine’s eyes focussed on her. She relinquished Allie to be greeted by the others and stepped over to Bea.

“Bea,” she said simply, and the smile on her face was also in her voice and in her eyes. She reached out and took one of Bea’s hands in both of hers. “So lovely to meet you at last.” Bea felt warmed by this welcome. She had expected to feel awkward and out of place as she so often did in social situations, but with just a few words and a simple gesture Maxine had put her at her ease.

“Hi. Nice to meet you,” Bea managed to say.

“Come inside,” Maxine said, leading her towards the door. Bea looked up to find Allie’s shining eyes on them. She was smiling broadly, as if to tell Bea, I told you so. Bea gave her a half smile and a raised eyebrow in return.

When they were all assembled in the sitting room Bea stuck close to Allie, sitting next to her on the couch. Allie refused Maxine’s offer of refreshments, explaining that this was just a short impromptu visit. “Where’s her ladyship?” she asked Maxine in a stage whisper.

“Gone out, you’ll be pleased to hear. She’s not managed to replace you yet, so it’s probably best to steer clear until she does.”

“Sorry I haven’t replied to your letter …”

“That’s alright hon. A visit is better than a letter, any day.” She turned to Bea. “Not got your little girl with you today?” she asked.

“Oh, no … we left her with my sister-in-law whilst Allie and I did some shopping.”
“Show her Debbie, Bea …” Allie urged, gesturing at her notebook. Bea felt herself go cold at Allie’s suggestion. Allie looked her in the eyes and said quietly, “Just the ones of Debbie … you’ve got to get used to people seeing your work now.” Bea knew that she was right but couldn’t stop the surge of fear that ran through her. She nodded and pulled out her notebook. Her trembling fingers found the right page and she handed it to Maxine with trepidation.

Maxine gasped and smiled. "What a sweetheart! And she looks just like you … Did you draw these Bea?” Bea nodded and rubbed her hands together, still, illogically, expecting the worst. “You didn't tell me she was an artist, Allie,” Maxine said accusingly.

"I only just found out myself." Bea struggled to identify the look on Allie's face. It couldn't be pride. Or could it? If Bea could be proud of Allie's abilities as a teacher then why shouldn't Allie be proud of something she had accomplished? It made her head spin. Here she was, doing her damnest to be worthy of Allie, but the astonishing thing was that maybe Allie already thought that she was.

" … maybe you could bring her with you next time," Maxine was saying when Bea tuned back into the conversation.

"Sure …" Bea was saying, when Allie interrupted.

"Let me show you my old room Bea. Back in a minute Maxine.” Allie was at the door already. Bea muttered an apology and joined her, following her up the stairs and into a decent sized bedroom.

"Very nice Allie. Bigger than your new room. But that coverlet …"

Allie shut the door. "You don't think I really brought you up here to see the room, do you?” Bea swallowed hard. Allie was steering her towards the bed with a look on her face that left no doubt about what she wanted.

"Allie … we can't. Not here …" Bea pleaded, her heart hammering and her arms reaching for Allie despite her words. As Allie's lips met hers any resistance melted away. Pleasure coursed through her body and thought vanished for a moment. As it returned she felt them tip over onto the bed together. Allie was pushing her fingers into Bea’s hair, pressing her lips to Bea’s fervently, sighing into her mouth, seeming overcome with feeling all at once. Bea returned her kisses with equal force, craving the touch of Allie’s mouth and tongue, revelling in the waves of pleasure that each touch created. Until there was one wave that was stronger than the others, and the breathlessness now felt a little troubling. She was about to lay a restraining hand upon Allie’s shoulder, when Allie drew away, her expression conscience-stricken.

"Sorry. I got carried away. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about doing that since … you know, in the street.”

Bea smiled and stoked her hair. “It’s okay. It was lovely. I was loving it, but then it got a bit strong …”

Allie swallowed, and buried her face in Bea’s neck, seeming shy and insecure suddenly. “Sorry. If you knew the nights I lay awake in this bed thinking about you … I could only dream of having you in my arms back then.” Bea tightened her grip on Allie and kissed the side of her head firmly.

“I’m right here, beautiful girl,” she whispered into Allie’s hair. “And I’m not going anywhere.” She held her tightly. “Except maybe we should go back downstairs before people start to wonder what we’re up to …” Allie laughed. They disentangled themselves and straightened the coverlet, grinning at each other irrepressibly.
This chapter led me up so many blind alleys and had more than one false start. This is how it finally turned out and I hope you enjoyed it.

And I cheated a bit when I used "Hello stranger" by The Carter Family, as it's from 1937 not 1935. But I really like this song and it seemed to fit. I don't expect any of you to have a taste for miserabilist bluegrass, but if you fancy a listen, here it is:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_djXCWEhHKU
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for reading the previous installments. Here's the next bit. Hope you enjoy it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Allie sat at the kitchen table watching Bea. She had a book open in front of her that she was, ostensibly, reading, but every time she tried to concentrate on it her eyes drifted back to Bea. She was fascinated by Bea’s rapt face. She watched thoughts and emotions drift across it like clouds. Tiny frowns came and went, but the light in her eyes never wavered. Watching her experiment with her inks and pencils Allie saw Bea the artist for the first time. She had a kind of satisfied engagement which made her face especially arresting to Allie. And at some point Bea had rubbed her nose and left a smudge of ink there, which was adorable, and kept catching her eye. She gave up on her book, propped her reading glasses on the top of her head and rested her chin on her hands, not bothering to hide her staring, as Bea was oblivious to her in any case.

After a while, realising that the natural light had dimmed, Allie made herself useful and switched on the lights and closed the curtains. Bea worked on. Allie looked at her watch. It was getting late but if Bea was tired there was no sign of it. Allie went up to the bathroom to brush her teeth and have a wash. When she came back down Bea was still engrossed in her work. Smiling to herself, she went into her room and changed into her nightdress and unpinned her hair. Coming back to the table with the red blanket wrapped around her shoulders, she found Bea was still tightly focussed on the sheet of paper in front of her. She took her book and reading glasses over to the couch and, tucking her feet under her, settled down to read.

A comforting feeling. A delicious scent. Soft skin. Allie’s eyes blinked open. Warm brown eyes. An even warmer palm against her cheek. Bea was perched on the edge of the couch, leaning over her. “I’m so sorry Allie cat …”

“All right.”

“But I wanted us to spend the evening together …”

“We did.” Bea huffed and looked annoyed. “We were together. You were enjoying yourself. And I was enjoying myself watching you.”

Bea gave a crooked smile. Reaching over, she removed Allie’s glasses. “Maybe we could enjoy ourselves a bit more …” she whispered suggestively, leaning closer.

Allie yawned. “It’s very late.”

Bea’s face fell. She nodded. “You’re tired. You should get to bed.”

Allie grinned at her. “You’re so easy to tease.” Bea stood up, clenching her hands. Allie read her frustration in that gesture and tried to apologise with a look. Bea turned away, but Allie could tell from the set of her shoulders that she was only mildly annoyed. Coming to her feet she passed her arms about Bea’s waist from behind and was rewarded with a sigh as Bea leant back against her.
On top of her usual spicy scent Bea smelled of ink and pencil shavings. Allie laughed at herself. She had never thought that she, a teacher, would find that smell so ... *arousing*. Her heart was quickening just from breathing it in.

Taking advantage of their positions Allie pressed her lips to Bea’s neck and worked her way up to her ear. She took the lobe between her lips and sucked gently, which elicited a gasp from Bea. She kissed along from her ear to her jaw to her cheek, aching to reach her mouth. Bea finally capitulated and turned in her arms so that their mouths were joined together in a long intoxicating kiss. A piercing pulse of pleasure ran through Allie. She strained to press ever closer, the barrier created by her own thin nightgown and Bea’s dress suddenly an unbearable obstacle. Between inhaling Bea's delicious smell and kissing her, Allie was becoming seriously short of breath. She tore their lips apart, heart pounding almost painfully hard. Bea’s eyes were dark and glassy, her lips already reaching for Allie’s again. Instead Allie took Bea’s hand and laid it on her chest over her galloping heart.

“Can you feel it?” she asked breathlessly. “This is what you do to me.” Bea stared at her own hand, dark against the white cotton, for a long moment. She parted her lips as if to say something, but all Allie heard was a dry swallow. Then, so slowly, and so lightly, she moved her hesitant fingers over the thin fabric of Allie's nightdress. Allie stopped breathing, waiting to see if Bea would touch her as she had so often wished her to. The fingers settled just below her collarbone and then deliberately, and with thorough concentration, Bea stroked her fingers down and cupped her palm up, taking Allie's breast into her hand.

Allie's head swayed backwards on her neck at the sensation. Bea was holding her breast with one hand and supporting her around the waist with her other arm. Allie knew she must be able to feel, not just the jouncing of her heart, but her nipple, hard against her fingers, and the soft flesh that surrounded it. From her face it was impossible to tell what she was thinking about what she felt. She seemed frozen in place, her eyes still on her own hand.

"Bea?" Allie said breathily, trying to meet her eyes. "You alright there?"

The spell broken; Bea looked at her. "Yes," she sighed, and swallowed audibly. "You wouldn't think I would be surprised about how this feels, would you?” she asked, with amusement in her voice. "After all, I have breasts. I know how they feel. But your breast in my hand is completely different. It just feels so good ... I wasn't prepared for it." Bea moved her hand gently over and over the area. Allie's nipple became impossibly harder and her whole body broke out in gooseflesh. She breathed out hard down her nose to avoid gasping and interrupting Bea's meditation. "The weight of it, the roundness, the give of it …" Bea was now weighing it in her hand, "... all so perfect." She grasped a little firmer and Allie couldn't hold back her gasp this time. Her limbs were quivering and there was a surge of prickling heat between her legs.

"Bea …" she breathed. Bea finally appeared to notice the effect she was having.

"Do you like this?" she asked, her voice velvet deep and crackling with feeling. Allie didn't bother to reply but sealed her lips against Bea's and arched her body against her hand. When Bea responded by circling her thumb around her nipple whilst gently tonguing the inside of her lips, it was all Allie could do to remain on her feet. Bea's breath was coming harsher now, too, but Allie hesitated to escalate matters any further after how Bea had drawn back from her earlier in the day.

At that, reason began to return. Allie considered everything that had happened today. Bea had had some new experiences and, although she had seemed energised by the artistic possibilities she was now able to perceive, adding any more novelty might overload her. So, she slowed her movements, reduced their intensity, and attempted to calm the pounding of her heart. She stroked Bea's arms...
gently and drew back a little. Bea looked at her, obviously wondering what was wrong.

"Come and sit with me," Allie asked her. They sat on the couch and Allie held Bea lightly, letting her rest her head against her shoulder, feeling their pulses slow in tandem. “That was … wonderful. I only stopped because … earlier, at the boarding house, those strong feelings got a bit too much for you. I didn’t want to get to that point. I want all our … times together to be good for you. I always want you to feel good when we touch, not panicked or worried.”

Bea sighed, and when she spoke her voice still sounded unusually deep. “I can’t imagine your touch ever not feeling good. Earlier … it felt very good. And that’s why I stopped. I wasn’t sure what would happen … if it carried on. It was as if … I might fly into pieces and be lost.” She huffed a tiny sound of amusement. “That sounds crazy …”

“No, not crazy. I think I know what you mean,” Allie told her seriously. “If you ever fly into pieces, I won’t let you be lost. I’ll be right there with you to make sure you come back together again.” Allie held her more tightly against her side. I should have known, she berated herself, that she’d probably never felt sexual pleasure before. Perhaps it would feel scary, that ceding of control into another’s hands; the trust that was required might still be beyond her. Allie had been worrying about what Harry might have done to her, was still worried about what Harry might have done to her, but she had failed to recognise Bea’s lack of experience as one of the bricks in the wall that surrounded her.

“I hope you trust me, Bea,” Allie continued, “to never do anything that hurts you or makes you uncomfortable.”

Bea twisted her head up to look at Allie. “Of course. I know that. It’s my own reactions that take me by surprise sometimes. I just don’t know where to put it all.”

“We’ll just take it slowly. And I really need you to tell me. If you need me to back away, you only need to say it.” Allie looked at her pale face and almost colourless lips. Someone needed to sleep.

“Don’t worry so much. I’m not made of glass,” Bea retorted, pushing her nose into Allie’s neck and kissing the flesh there, causing Allie to twitch with surprise at the sudden jolt of sensation. She could feel Bea smiling against her skin.

“Don’t start anything!” Allie warned her, playfully. “It’s late, and you’re tired.”

“I am tired, but I don’t know if I’ll be able to sleep. I’ve got so many ideas rushing around in my head.”

“I might be able to help with that,” Allie replied with a seductive smile.

Bea looked interested. “How so?”

“I’ll make you … some warm milk.” Bea huffed in disappointment, but her eyes glittered with amusement.

* * * * * * * *

“You look nice,” Allie said, coming out of her bedroom the following morning. Bea glanced down at her sedate navy-blue dress.

“Thank you,” she replied, sketching a curtsey. She couldn’t really agree but was learning to take Allie’s compliments a little more graciously. “It’s my Sunday, going to church dress.”
Allie’s eyes widened. “Church …”

Bea nodded. “I thought it was about time I put in an appearance. You don’t have to come, but Debbie does.” She addressed this last remark to Debbie who was lingering over her breakfast. “Please finish that quickly, then go upstairs and put on your dress. When you’re ready I’ll do your hair.”

“I guess I slept in,” Allie said regretfully. “When are you leaving?”

“In about half an hour. You really don’t need to come …” But Allie had already turned back to her room.

“I’ll be ready in time,” she called over her shoulder. “The schoolteacher really ought to be a church-goer.” Bea smiled, butterflies swirling inside her at the idea of her neighbours seeing her and Allie together. Would they be able to guess by looking at them what was going on? Surely not.

“Come on, Debbie! No. No more pancakes. Save some for Allie.” She ushered the reluctant child up the stairs.

When Allie re-emerged from her room a little later, Bea, who was energetically brushing Debbie’s hair, gaped slightly so that the comb she was holding between her teeth spilled from her mouth.

Allie’s lips curled up in satisfaction. “How do I look?” Bea couldn’t say anything for a moment, because the sight of Allie in that lemon-yellow dress had the same effect on her that it had had the last time she had worn it. Dry mouthed, ears buzzing, heart pounding, she looked at Allie’s bust and felt herself blush. My hand was there, she recalled, just last night.

Gathering herself to reply, Debbie interrupted, “You look really pretty, Allie. Doesn’t she Mama?” Bea nodded, making it heartfelt, so that Allie would know how she was feeling. Allie’s triumphant smile let her know that the message was received. “But … for church?” she queried, tentatively.

Allie looked down at herself. “Too much?” she asked.

Bea nodded. “Have you ever been to a Baptist church?”

Allie shook her head. “I was raised Catholic, but … I thought a Baptist church might be more relaxed.” Bea shook her head.


“Yeeess … Another no no?” Allie guessed.

“Unless you want people to think that you’re … a lady of the night,” Bea said in an exaggeratedly shocked tone. Allie laughed at the antiquated phrase.

“I’ll change my dress and my shoes then,” she conceded.

“How about the blue dress?” Bea suggested. Allie nodded, but looked a little downcast. “Maybe you could wear the yellow one later?” Bea asked with a raised eyebrow. Allie smiled delightedly and tripped back into her room to change. It was ridiculously easy to make Allie happy, and Bea loved her all the more for it.

* * * * * * * * *
Walking along the trail to the church Debbie clung first onto Bea’s hand, and then Allie’s. Looking up at Allie she asked, “What’s a lady of the night?”

Allie blanched and looked at Bea, whose lips were twitching but whose eyes were working hard to appear nothing more than neutral and mildly interested. “Um … a lady who works a night shift,” she said finally.

“Like what?” Debbie asked innocently.

“Like … in a factory. Or a dairymaid,” she extemporised. She glanced at Bea who was looking at the treetops and struggling to hold in her laughter. Allie reminded herself that, just because Debbie had left the room, it didn’t mean that she couldn’t hear what was thought to be a private conversation. She thought about the evening activities that the two of them had been pursuing on the couch. Maybe it was time for them to be moved behind a closed door.

A group of people were gathered outside the church as they arrived. Allie recognised and greeted some of her students and met their parents. Most of them weren’t surprised to see her, having heard already, somehow, that she was now boarding with the Smiths. Bea’s shoulders were up, and she was rubbing her arms as though chilled, her eyes mostly on her feet. Allie recognised that anxiety of being in public and imagining that others could intuit something about your private life and wished there was something she could do to ease her fears. Fortunately, after a few minutes they were released to enjoy a more relaxed conversation with Liz and Sophie.

"Here's the Reverend, Bea. Do you want to …?"

Bea shook her head. "You do it Liz. He likes you." They both looked at Allie.

"I should introduce you to Reverend Lowell before we go in," Liz told her. She nodded towards a grizzled gentleman with fearsome eyebrows. "He's not as severe as he looks …"

Allie squared her shoulders, remembering what her mama always said about good posture.
"Alright," she told them. "Let's get it done."

"Good morning Mrs Birdsworth," the Reverend intoned ponderously when Liz approached him.

"Good morning Reverend," Liz replied cheerfully. "I don't believe you've met Miss Novak. She's the schoolteacher that was appointed to replace Miss Cartwright."

After a long moment during which Allie smiled, but not too much, and tried to look professional, but not threateningly so, the Reverend gave her a watery smile. "Miss Novak, I hope you are enjoying our humble village."

"Very much, thank you Reverend. It's such a beautiful place."

"Are our young people proving adept at their studies?"

Allie nodded. "They're doing Broadlea proud. I'm looking forward to hearing your sermon," Allie told him, politely, hoping that she could now sidle away.

"I am delighted to see you attending church. It sets such a good example to your students. It's so important, I always think, that the schoolmaster or schoolmistress , is someone that the children can look up to and respect."

"Well, I certainly hope to inspire them." Allie prayed that this ambiguous statement would satisfy him. He nodded at her as though they were in perfect accord.
"I must leave you now to prepare for the service. It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance."
With that she was clearly dismissed. Looking over at Bea she could see that a young man in an
unusually well-cut suit had joined her and the girls. Bea was being civil to him, but Allie could tell
from her cool gaze that she held him in no high regard. Glancing at Liz, she quickly made her way
back to Bea's side. The man looked between the two women as Allie reached them, clearly
expecting Bea to introduce them.

"Allie, this is Mr Stewart. Mr Stewart, this is Allie Novak," she finally supplied.

"Call me Jake," the man said, holding out his hand. Allie took it. It was very warm, and his
handshake was extremely gentle. "You're the schoolteacher, aren't you?" he asked. Allie couldn't
help noticing that he was exceptionally handsome. His dark hair had just the right amount of curl
and his blue eyes held a spark that drew you in.

"That's me," she replied brightly. She extricated her hand which he had held onto a little too long
for comfort.

"Morning Jake," Liz interrupted. "No Vera today?"

“She’s a little under the weather, so I asked her not to come today," he told her, turning his piercing
gaze to her. “Nothing serious,” he reassured her. “I’m sure she’ll be fine in a day or two.” He
smiled with all apparent sincerity, revealing his straight, white teeth. Liz nodded, but Allie noticed
a hitch in her answering smile. When Allie looked over at Bea, Bea was looking at Jake, her lips
pursed and dangerously pale. Allie flicked her gaze to Jake briefly to find his eyes raking over her.
He was just taking a breath to say something when Bea interrupted.

"We’d better go in," she said in a strangely strangulated tone. Bea positioned her body to allow the
girls and Allie to precede her, effectively blocking Jake’s view, her body language cutting him out
of the group unmistakably. Liz caught up with them as they entered the church and the three
women followed Debbie and Sophie to what Allie could only assume were their usual places. Once
they were seated Allie watched Bea’s face. She was clearly tracking someone’s progress and her
attention only relaxed when everyone was seated and quieting down for the start of the service.

Allie brought her attention back to the service. She followed the lead of the congregation, sitting
and standing when they did, joining in with the hymns as best she could. Bea, she noticed, only
mouthed the words, whilst Liz and the girls sang along with gusto. Revered Lowell spoke his
sermon too ponderously, but Allie found that he had chosen an interesting passage and that he
spoke about its meaning thoughtfully. On the whole, she found this service more enjoyable than
many a mass she had yawned through as a child. As they were filing out Allie noticed that Mr Pitts
and his family were part of the congregation. She saw him see her so there was no getting out of
the necessity for going over and speaking to him.

“Bea,” she whispered. “I’ve just seen Mr Pitts. I’d better go and say hello.” Bea cast her gaze
around until she spotted him.

“Old Hubert,” she said with a smile. “Go and talk to him. We’ll wait. Got to keep the boss happy
…”

Allie smiled and made her way over to the Pitts family. Mr Pitts introduced her to his wife, and
they all had a friendly, though superficial, conversation, whilst the twins tried not to look bored and
uncomfortable in their Sunday clothes. Allie was well used to the necessity of making obeisance, as
she thought of it, to heads of education boards, parent teacher associations and other authority
figures. They liked to think that they knew the schoolteacher a little bit. If this reassured them that
she was doing a good job, then she was happy to oblige.
Whilst Mrs Pitts was speaking, at length, Allie allowed her eyes to travel over to Bea. She was saying something to Liz. Liz was nodding and saying something back. Allie watched as Bea broke into a smile that made her heart flip. Bea’s arm went around Debbie’s shoulders as she bent to speak to her, and Debbie made that little excited lift onto her toes, a gesture that she shared with her mother, and one that made Allie smile every time. Allie hastily straightened her face and turned her eyes back to Mrs Pitts, hoping that her inattention had not been noticed. Luckily, Mrs Pitts had been rummaging in her purse for a handkerchief, which she now produced, and she only then returned her attention to Allie’s face.

* * * * * * *

Bea watched Allie out of the corner of her eye. Liz and Sophie had headed off home, as had nearly everyone else, but Allie was still being interrogated by Mrs Pitts. Jake Stewart was nowhere to be seen, fortunately. When she had noticed his casually insolent inspection of Allie, she had nearly started something. She had reminded herself of her resolution just in time to avoid making a scene that would surely have caused talk and might have created a difficulty for Allie with the education board. There was something about that man that didn’t sit right with her, and it wasn’t just because he was looking at Allie as though she was a dessert that he wanted to taste. It was his too pleasing manner, his overly well-groomed appearance, the way he spoke about his wife. Seeing Allie saying goodbye to the Pitts, she shrugged it off. Jake Stewart could go to the devil. She was the one going home with Allie.

Chapter End Notes

I might actually manage some plot in the next chapter.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the comments and kudos on the last chapter. Hope you enjoy this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Debbie. Get changed and then it’s kitchen duty for you,” Bea instructed, as soon as they were through the door.

Debbie drew herself up to her full height and threw out a smart salute. “Yes ma’am!” She giggled and ran up the stairs.

“Allie cat, you’re with me,” she murmured. Taking her by the hand she led her over to her bedroom door. “Why don’t you get changed ... ‘she blushed.

Allie laughed at her. “Into that dress you’re so keen on?”

Bea looked down with a shy smile. “Do you mind?” she asked.

“How could I mind, when I see the way you look at me when I’m wearing it?” Bea didn’t reply. Instead she looked at their joined hands, twisting their fingers together. “Why don’t you come in for a minute?” Allie asked, tugging on her hand. Bea’s blood surged at the suggestion.

“No time. Got to get some things ready,” she smiled and took a step back, Allie refusing to relinquish her hand.

“What’s going on?” Allie asked in a suspicious tone.

“Can’t say,” Bea replied with a smirk. She took back her hand and stepped away from Allie backwards. “It would spoil the surprise.” She grinned at Allie’s raised eyebrows and climbed the stairs to get changed herself.

Looking in her wardrobe Bea tried to choose something that would please Allie. It was only fair, after all. It would have to be the grey slacks; Bea wasn’t blind to the effect they had on Allie. But which blouse to wear? In the end she chose a loose-fitting white blouse which would be comfortable if the day turned out to be as hot as yesterday. She threw it on and buttoned it up. Then, self-consciously, she rolled the sleeves up above the elbow in the way that Allie had done with Hank’s shirt the day of the picnic. She looked at herself in the mirror whilst trying her hair back and met her own eyes. She opened an extra button at her throat, blushing at her boldness.

Bea ran down to the kitchen. Debbie was already there getting things out of the cupboards and the icebox. “Good girl,” she murmured, stroking her hair. Allie was nowhere to be seen for the moment. Bea began slicing the bread, calculating how many slices they would need, whilst Debbie set up on the other side of her, buttering as quickly as she could. Bea winced at how much she was spreading on but managed to leave her be. Once the sandwiches were made, Bea quickly wrapped them in wax paper whilst Debbie filled some jars with water. By the time Allie appeared they were nearly done. Bea allowed herself no more than a glance, unwilling to be side-tracked either by the way Allie looked, or the way Allie might look at her.
“Is it a picnic?” Allie asked, coming over to the kitchen table.

“It’s a secret,” Debbie told her firmly.

Bea kept her eyes on the old apple crate she was packing with supplies and tried not to laugh. “If you could bring the blanket from your room, that would be very helpful,” she said.

Allie hummed thoughtfully. “Okay … Are we going to the baseball, Deb?” she asked, gesturing at the baseball uniform that Debbie had changed into.

“It’s a secret, Allie. I’m not telling,” she folded her arms and gave her a stare.

“You’re very good at keeping secrets Debbie. But maybe if I tickle you …” she started round the table, wiggling her fingers in a threatening way. Debbie gave a squeal and ran off laughing. Just then there came the sound of a vehicle drawing up outside the house and a horn honking. Bea looked at Allie. She had gone very still for a moment. She turned to Bea with an anxious look, relaxing when she saw that Bea was not worried.

“It’s okay Allie. All part of the plan,” she reassured her, and began hefting the crates over to the door. Debbie added the baseball equipment to the pile, whilst Allie satisfied her curiosity by going out onto the porch to see who had arrived, and Bea went to Allie’s room to collect the blanket that she seemed to have forgotten about.

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Allie stepped outside and shielded her eyes from the bright sun. There was a truck pulled up in front of the house, but the glare on the windscreen meant she couldn't at first see its occupants. Then the door was flung open and Sophie jumped out.

"Hi, Miss Novak," she said.

"Hello again Sophie. Is that your mama in there?" she asked peering round the door.

"Yep … Debbie! Wanna ride in the back with me?" The girls scrambled into the flatbed behind the cab and settled down.

Allie approached the truck. "Hi Liz. I don't suppose you'd care to fill me in?"


"Nah. I got this. Jump in with Liz, I'll just be a minute."

"Let me help," Allie protested. Bea gave her a flat look. So stubborn.

"Mule," Allie muttered, pitching her voice just loud enough for Bea to hear. Bea laughed.

Once everything was loaded up, Bea had a stern word with Debbie and Sophie about sitting still and holding on, before squeezing into the cab next to Allie.

"Off we go then Liz but take it easy." Bea said.

"Yeah, I know. Precious cargo."

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Bea smiled to herself and relaxed. She looked straight ahead out of the windscreen, not even tempted to turn her head and look at Allie. She didn’t need to, because she was squashed between Allie and the door and the whole length of their thighs were pressed together, gratifyingly close. She enjoyed the sensation, flexing her leg occasionally and feeling an answering press from Allie. Meanwhile she listened with half an ear to Liz and Allie’s conversation. They had already covered Mrs Pitts’s asthma and Reverend Lowell’s sermon.

“What did you make of Jake Stewart?” Liz asked.


“Croco- what?” she asked.

Bea laughed. “Another of Allie’s fifty-cent words!” she teased, which earned her a dig in the ribs.

“Crocodilian. Like a crocodile, or alligator …”

“Must be the teeth,” Liz commented.

“Or the predatory looks,” Allie added. Bea hummed in agreement.

They were climbing now, along country roads, and Bea knew it wouldn’t be long before Allie worked out where they were going, if she hadn’t already. She sneak ed a look at her out of the corner of her eye. She was twisting her head from side to side, looking at the landscape, but she didn’t say anything. In fact, it wasn’t until almost the last moment that Allie recognised where they were. Bea managed to be watching her face when she realised. Surprise, then joy, followed by a pooling of moisture against her lower lids.

“Here?” she murmured. She grabbed Bea’s hand and gave it a squeeze but seemed to be avoiding looking at her. Liz pulled the truck up by the rocks where they had left the motorcycle last time. Bea heard Debbie and Sophie give out excited yips and jump down from the truck, already away to explore. Liz got out a little more slowly, calling after the girls not to go too far.

Bea turned to Allie and spoke from the heart. “This spot is pretty special to me … And I think it means something to you too. I’ve wanted to bring you back here … under happier circumstances than last time, and when I saw you in that dress this morning, I remembered. And I thought, what am I waiting for?” Bea paused while Allie brushed a tear away and smiled tremulously. “I hope you don’t mind that I made it a family affair. I wanted to bring Debbie, and it seemed like a good way to thank Liz for everything she does for me.”

“Of course, I don’t mind,” Allie said, smiling, but not entirely dry-eyed. “It’s a perfect idea. A family day …” Just then the door to the truck was flung open by Debbie.

“Come on Mama! Aren’t we supposed to be having a picnic?”

“We’re coming Debbie, if you’d just be a little patient,” Bea grumbled.

They set up their picnic in the shade of the trees. Blankets were spread on the grass and food was passed around. Bea sat and proudly watched her favourite people having fun. She watched Debbie and Sophie laughing; she watched Allie take off her sandals to feel the grass under her toes; she watched Liz lie back and relax and close her eyes. Surreptitiously she reached for the sketching materials she had brought with her, wanting to capture the moment if she could. She drew quickly and loosely for a few minutes, all shapes and impressions, nothing definite, until her subjects were rounded up by Debbie to take part in a game of baseball. Kicking off her Keds, she joined the fun.
"I'm done for!" Allie asserted a while later, flopping down on the blanket next to her. The game had broken up once the adults couldn’t keep up any longer. Bea looked her over from head to toe wanting to preserve in her memory the way she looked right now: mussed hair, flushed face sheened with sweat, lips parted, chest rising and falling rapidly, legs bare, feet grass stained. There was never anyone so beautiful. Bea rolled over onto her stomach, inching a little nearer. Now she could feel Allie's body heat and smell her sweet, clean scent of watermelon and crushed grass. Allie regarded her through narrowed eyes. "Like what you see?"

Bea laughed and ducked her head. She plucked some blades of grass, trying to control the smile that threatened to split her face in two. "Maybe …" she teased. Glancing over, she caught Allie looking down the neck of her blouse. "How about you?" she countered.

"Mm. I'm enjoying your new state of déshabille." She hooked one finger inside the edge of the open neck of Bea’s blouse and pulled it to the side to expose a little more skin.

"Allie!" Bea clapped her hand to her chest, scanning the area to check no one had noticed. She could hear Debbie and Sophie calling to each other from off in the trees. Liz was flat on her back with her eyes closed. "What happened to being careful?"

"Sorry," Allie replied insincerely. "It's your fault."

"What? How?" Bea demanded.

"Are you going to tell me that you didn't put this little outfit together for my benefit?" Bea had the grace to blush. "Don't be shy about it. I love it that you want me to look at you." She got a mischievous look in her eyes. "I love feeling you look at me," she added quietly, running a finger just inside the top of her bodice, making the flesh there dimple briefly. Bea felt the warmth in the pit of her stomach surge and buried her eyes in her hand.

"Christ, Allie …"

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"No. This is family time," Bea protested.

"Well, it’s up to you. But who knows when we’ll next be here? Everything looks so lovely today and I bet you could make a wonderful drawing," Allie said, knowing it wouldn’t take much to persuade her.

"Um. Okay. Maybe just for a while." Bea wandered over to a particular spot that Allie remembered well from their last visit. It was where Bea had stood and looked at the view whilst she told Allie how sorry she was for her anger over the incident with Harry. That spot really did give the best view, but Allie would never be able to see it again without envisaging Bea in her mind’s eye, shoulders drooping, drowned in Hank’s old clothes, so sad and sorry. What a contrast with the way she looked today: confident and happy, her skin and hair set off wonderfully by that white shirt.

Turning reluctantly away, she called out, “Who’s up for a game of hide-and-go-seek?” Debbie and Sophie both cheered, and the game was on.

Allie had managed to squeeze herself between two rocks. She could hear Debbie and Sophie looking for her, but they were a long way off finding her. She shifted slightly, trying to find a more comfortable position. Now she could see Bea, who had seated herself on an overturned apple crate with her paper pinned to a board she had brought with her. Allie couldn’t see how the drawing was coming along, but she could see the motion of her arm and hand. She sighed longingly. Really, it
would be better not to watch, but somehow, she couldn’t help it. Even from this distance, the flexing of Bea's wrist and the bunching of muscle in her arm brought associations to Allie's mind that were not entirely appropriate in her present situation.

"Found you!" Sophie crowed.

"So you did."

Several rounds later Debbie hopped over to her mother.

"Mama, my foot hurts."

Bea put her drawing aside and pulled Debbie into her lap. "Let me see." She examined the sole of her foot. "You have a thorn. Sit on the grass for a minute." Debbie sat on the ground and Bea pulled her foot up to her mouth and sucked until the thorn came free. "All done." Debbie put her arms around Bea's neck and snuggled back into her lap whilst Bea laid her cheek against the crown of Debbie's head. Allie's throat constricted painfully. Seeing Bea mothering so tenderly produced a rush of feeling that was part love and part admiration. And perhaps an iota of pain that her own mother would never embrace her like that again. "Tired Deb?" Bea asked her daughter, who had made herself pretty comfortable.

"No!" Debbie declared.

"Hm. I think we'd better be heading home. It'll start getting dark soon."

"But Mama, I wanted to climb that tree …" she complained.

"Which tree?"

"That tall one over there." Debbie pointed.

"Well, I don't know Deb. It's pretty tall. Looks more like a tree that an eight-year-old would climb."

"I can do it Mama!"

"I know you can. Go on then."

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Tree successfully conquered, they began to pick everything up and stow it away in the crates. Lifting the crates into the truck, Bea became worried, suddenly, noticing the absence of an important item.

"Lost something?" Liz asked.

"I can't see the red blanket …" She rummaged some more. "Must have left it behind. I'll go look," Bea said.

"I'll help you," Allie offered, striding to catch up with her.

They checked the picnic area, but nothing had been left behind. They searched a little further afield, until Allie said, "What's that ... over by that rock?"

Bea hurried over. "How did it get all the way over here?" she asked, picking it up.

"Can't imagine," Allie replied archly, suddenly coming up behind her.
Bea spun round right into her arms. "You didn't …"

Allie smiled, stepping forward so that Bea had to step backwards or stumble. "I think we have some unfinished business, from last time …" she murmured, still pressing Bea backwards until she bumped up against something. A tree, she surmised, from the roughness of the bark digging into her back. Allie pressed her body against Bea's firmly, causing them to sigh in unison. "Watching you all afternoon has been driving me crazy." Bea looked over Allie's shoulder in the direction of the truck. No one was in sight. She dropped the blanket and allowed her arms to circle Allie's waist, looking into her eyes. Amusement, affection, arousal; it was hard to say which was dominant. Bea's eyes drifted down to Allie's parted lips. The last time they were here, Bea had been afraid of her desire for Allie, and Allie had been utterly respectful of that. But now that she had experienced a foretaste of how it could be between them, she felt a pleasurable anticipation for the kisses that she knew Allie had in mind.

"So, what are you waiting for?" Bea husked with a smile.

Allie pressed her mouth to Bea's and this time was different from the other times. Allie was holding nothing back and Bea was momentarily shocked by the storm of passion that seemed to have taken hold of her. A powerful lick of heat in her belly caused her to respond in kind, tightening her arms around Allie's waist, looking into her eyes. Amusement, affection, arousal; it was hard to say which was dominant. Bea's eyes drifted down to Allie's parted lips. The last time they were here, Bea had been afraid of her desire for Allie, and Allie had been utterly respectful of that. But now that she had experienced a foretaste of how it could be between them, she felt a pleasurable anticipation for the kisses that she knew Allie had in mind.

"Holy cow …" Liz whispered to herself. In the early evening light, she could see the darkness of Bea's arms standing out against the pale yellow of Allie's dress. Allie's blonde head was bent over Bea's upturned face in such a way that, even from this distance, the passion of their embrace was unmistakable. Sucking in her breath, she turned back towards the truck to give them some privacy.

Creeping down the stairs to avoid waking Debbie and Allie, Bea was surprised to hear a sound from the kitchen. Rounding the foot of the stairs she found Allie, fully dressed, busy at the stove.

"What are you doing up?" she whispered, making Allie jump.

"Isn't it obvious? I'm making you breakfast," Allie replied, putting some butter into the skillet. Bea went over behind her, unable to resist the urge to touch her. She placed her hands on Allie's hips and laid her head against her shoulder blades.

"You didn't need to do this," she murmured, squeezing and stroking the flesh over Allie's hips. Allie swirled the butter around the pan and poured in some batter.

"I know. But I wanted to," she replied lightly.

Determined to get a reaction, Bea reached up and latched her lips onto the soft skin of Allie's neck, then ran the tip of her tongue daintily along until she felt Allie twitch against her. Bea chuckled into the join between Allie's jaw and neck.

"I'm going to burn the pancakes!"

"I don't care," Bea responded, reaching past her and removing the skillet from the heat. Allie turned to face her.
"Happy now?" she asked, feigning annoyance. Bea pressed her hips against Allie's, watching Allie's eyes half close at the sensation.

"Very," Bea replied. There was something utterly satisfying about the way their hips met and matched. Bea leant into it, watching a smile bloom on Allie's face.

"I had to set my alarm clock. I couldn't bear the thought of you going off all day without seeing you," Allie confessed. "Goodness knows what time you'll be home." A crease appeared between her brows. Bea smoothed it with her thumb.

"Well, Stan wasn't definite. If he has no work for me, I'll be back before you know it."

"Well, whatever happens, we'll be here waiting for you. Now, I'd better get these pancakes made. You won't want to be late."

"No. But … there's time for this …" She kissed her, gently. Once, twice, and then a third time, this final time putting into it her feeling about them being apart for the day. Allie melted in her arms.

Chapter End Notes

Well, maybe there'll be some plot next week :-)


Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone. Thanks for reading the previous chapter and thanks for all the comments. I really appreciate it. This chapter is a bit of an experiment ...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Monday, 3pm.

When I drag my weary self up the trail from the bus, I find that the whole washing line is full of clean laundry drying in the sun. It’s so strange to see. For years, the only time anything has gotten washed is when I’ve done it myself. I see my sheets, and Debbie’s petticoat, my underwear … and not just my slips. Jesus. Allie has been handling my brassieres and drawers. I feel a hot rush of shame. Those old white cotton drawers that ought to have been replaced long since. And my brassieres, totally practical garments, nothing like the fancy stuff Allie has. Well, too late to regret them now.

I go inside and find Debbie and Allie bent over a checkers board. Only it’s not checkers they’re playing, but chess. Since when can Debbie play chess? They turn towards me as I come in. Debbie bounds straight over to me for a hug. Allie stands and looks me over, assessing my mood with her eyes. I feel as though she can see the exhaustion. Certainly, the look she gives me is a sympathetic one. She bids me sit down and goes to make some coffee. Debbie speaks in one long rambling sentence, delivering every fact she has just learned about chess. I can’t take it in.

Allie brings me a cup of coffee, but it’s the hand she lays on my shoulder that I find reviving. She asks me about work and I try to tell her how it is. The filth; the speed we are expected to work at; the messes the guests leave. But I am doing a poor job at explaining. Instead, I tell her about the people. About Stan, whose face is so creased I swear he must sleep in the dirty laundry hampers at night; who is grumpy but not unkind. About Rose, who is showing me the ropes and has worked there so long that the dirt seems to have seeped into her skin. About Dimitri, who works in the kitchen and gives us a meal before we leave, piling potatoes on our plates to keep up our strength. When I tell her that I will be there again tomorrow, eight ‘til two, she just squeezes my hand and nods, but I can sense her dismay.

She says, Why don’t you go have a relaxing bath . I explain that I must work while the light is good. I fetch my equipment and set up on the porch to ink in the sketch from yesterday. I am still learning how to use the inks. I worry that I will ruin the sketch with the first line, but it comes out alright and I add a second and a third.

Monday, 6pm.

Time has run through my fingers. Allie has come out to tell me that supper is almost ready. I lean back to see what I have made. There’s a bit on the left that I’m not sure I like, but other than that I’m pleased. I know Allie is looking over my shoulder and I take my courage and look at her. She’s smiling and nodding. I knew it, she says, You’re an artist. Come and eat. I tell her I’m sorry to have left everything to her today. You can only fit so much into a day , she tells me. She says she enjoyed spending the day with Debbie. She tells me that even doing the laundry had its
It makes that feeling that only Allie can give me bubble up inside, and I laugh.

This is the best part of the day. We eat supper together and we talk. Then Allie sends me to sit with Debbie and listen to the radio whilst she cleans up. Today might be the only day in Debbie's life that I have spent so much time away from her. Debbie sits in my lap, but she is restless and tells me I smell funny. The smell of the hotel, I guess. It is a small punishment that she serves out to me for being gone all day. I take it. I feel like I deserve it. When it is bedtime, I'll read a little bit more than usual and I hope she'll understand that I'm sorry.

Monday, 9pm.

I have bathed and am waiting for Allie to suggest that we go to her room, like she did last night. Instead she tells me that I should get some sleep as I am clearly exhausted. For a moment I go cold from thinking the worst; that she doesn't want to be pressed up against me, warm and weak-kneed with kissing. Then I remember that she loves me and that everything she does ought to remind me of that. Something of my stupidity must show on my face because she relents and takes my hand. Just for a few minutes, she says, Same rules as last night. That means no hands, just kissing. My heart kicks fiercely from remembering last night. We had a closed door and the whole of Allie's bed to roll around on. I kissed her and I whispered in her ear to make her laugh. Dairymaid. It was fun and easy, and I was without fear. I lead the way. This is the best part of the day.

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Tuesday, 3pm.

I am standing at the porch rail, leaning over and looking down the trail. Surely Bea was home by this time yesterday? Then I see her in the distance and my heart leaps up. I would recognise her anywhere. It’s as if she’s emitting light on our own private wavelength. She walks slowly, for her, and her bearing is less definite than usual. I already hate the job that takes her away from us and drains her of her essential self. But when she spots me, she smiles and looks almost like usual. Debbie cannons out of her hiding place and almost knocks her over in her joy. I can’t say which of us misses her more.

Now, after only a few minutes respite, she is at her work again. I watch her adding a palette of greens to the view from the picnic spot. The knuckles of her hand look red and sore, maybe even swollen. She hunches and relaxes her shoulders and I know they ache as if she has done a day’s digging. I want to relieve that ache. I want to dig my thumbs into those muscles until she groans. But for the moment, I know she will not welcome my touch. She needs to be with her art. It is work, but, unlike the work at the hotel, it is also a salve for her.

Tuesday, 6pm.

I have made supper, and everyone eats with an appetite, though I know I am not the only one who prefers Bea’s cooking. Debbie gnaws at her corn like a beaver cutting down a tree. Bea speaks to her sharply about her table manners and she bursts into tears. The look I give Bea must be reproachful, because her glare softens and she looks at her plate, troubled. Bea is tired, Debbie misses her mother and is upset and I … I don’t know what to do. Should I mediate, or should I respect that this is mother daughter territory and keep out of it? Bea solves my dilemma by apologising.

Tuesday, 9pm.

Bea is in the bathtub. I have asked her to soak but she is so stubborn I have no idea if she will
comply. When she gets out, I will try to get her to go straight to sleep, but if she looks at me like she did last night I don’t know if I will be able to say no to her.

She appears by my shoulder wearing just a thin robe over her nightshirt. She looks so beautiful, a flush to her cheeks and a smile on her lips. I ask her how her shoulders feel now. She raises an eyebrow as if daring me to suggest she has ever had an ache or a pain in her whole life. I give her an I know better look and she shrugs, which is probably the closest I’ll ever get to an admission of weakness. My own weakness is that I cannot bear to say goodnight to her yet.

When I lead her into my room, she must have been expecting something else because, when I ask her to lay face down on the bed, she looks terrified. Do you trust me? I ask her, not for the first or last time. She nods and rests her forehead against my shoulder. I cradle her as gently as I know how and explain that I want to massage her shoulders to help relieve the pain. She looks at me, sceptical, but lies down anyway. Looking at her lying there I have such a strong urge to straddle her that it makes my ears buzz. I settle for kneeling next to her, not knowing how she might react to being under me. Would she feel trapped beneath my weight?

I touch her only through her clothes. Her body is tense and not just from overworked muscles. I talk casually about my day. The old man with the cart came to deliver the ice. Jeremiah, she supplies. I nod and carry on kneading at her muscles, drawing out the stiffness. Debbie fed his mule a carrot. We watered the garden and picked what was ripe. Debbie collected the eggs. I keep my movements predictable and slowly she relaxes. I gentle my touch and carry on talking, and finally she's asleep.

I look at her for a while. Her mouth is relaxed, almost smiling. I cover her up with the blanket, get changed hastily, and crawl into bed beside her. I set my alarm clock and switch off the lamp. I can hear her soft breathing and I feel moved almost to tears by the privilege of her trusting sleep. Every inch of my skin cries out to be laid against hers. Every bone in my body demands that they be curled around her. Instead, I shuffle just close enough to smell her skin. I will not risk waking her.

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Wednesday, 3pm.

Debbie is sitting on the porch podding peas into a colander, eating as many as not. I take a few and they burst sweetly against my teeth. I ask her where Allie is, and she looks guilty. Allie fell asleep. When I ask why, Debbie admits that they have hiked up to the glade today. Allie asked Debbie to show her one of my favourite places. That’s a long way and pretty steep going, especially in this heat, I say. She nods sadly, but I am not mad at her. She is too young to understand that Allie is not used to mountain hiking.

I go inside. Allie is lying motionless on the couch, her flimsy shoes on the floor beside her. I look into her face and am startled by how young she looks. Her face is damp, and her nose is sunburnt, but she is lovelier than ever. Glancing over to the kitchen I notice that supper preparations are underway. I look at the mess of bowls and ingredients, trying to fathom what she’s making so that I can carry on. I go onto the porch and ask Debbie if she knows what Allie is making. Puh something, she tells me, shrugging. We laugh and I sit next to her and help her finish the peas. Allie will have to explain supper when she wakes up.

I get out my picture and carry on with the colours. I smile because so far it is better than I had hoped. To the right of the picture it is an ideal sun-drenched landscape, but to the left, a band of darkness is creeping in, suggesting unease. I hope it shows something true about this place, where beauty and dread butt up against each other.
As I shade, I am thinking of this morning. The alarm jangled briefly, and I came awake with the side of Allie’s breast soft against my forehead and my face mashed into her ribs, only the thin layer of her nightgown between us. I immediately went to draw away, shocked, until Allie’s sleepy voice croaked, Stay. Although there was a smile in her voice, there was a plea too. So, I lay as I had been, and she wrapped her arms around me and sighed. Contentment I think you would call it, but when I looked up into her face, she seemed close to tears. I scooched up and kissed her face, all along a crease made by her pillow until I reached her beauty spot. I kissed her there, and it may be blasphemy, but it felt like an act of worship.

Wednesday, 6pm.

I hear the screen door creak and there stands Allie, barefooted, her hair a sight, face sleepy. I am so pleased to see her; I smile hugely at her. My heart thunders when she smiles back and, against the rules, drops a kiss on my forehead. I tease her about being worn out by her stroll up to the glade. She takes it in good humour, as I knew she would. When I ask her what she’s making for supper she won’t tell me and disappears into the kitchen to finish off. I pack up my things and water the garden, wanting to stay clear of the kitchen so I don’t ruin Allie’s surprise.

When supper is ready, it’s an astonishing mound of little parcels. Pierogi, she calls them. Like your mama used to make? I ask. Well, not quite. I couldn’t get the right kind of cheese, she explains. I sample one. It is savoury from being pan fried with butter and onions. The inside is fluffy potato and melted cheese. They’re really good. I have never tasted anything like them. Allie flushes with pleasure from the praise. We eat our fill and more.

Wednesday, 9pm.

I want to spend the night with Allie again, but I don’t know how to ask for what I want. I’m frustrated at my inexperience and take it out on the saucepan and teaspoons as I make us some cocoa. Allie doesn’t mention it, only comments that I look less tired. Last night I think I had the best night’s sleep I’ve had since I was a child. I didn’t wake up and think I heard something; I didn’t wake up worrying about Debbie; I didn’t wake up filled with self-contempt. But I just tell her that I slept well and hope she can pluck the rest of my thoughts out of my mind. And she does look at me very closely with a half-smile, so maybe she understands.

We sit on the couch and drink our cocoa. When I start yawning, she says, Time for bed and looks at me with a question in her eyes. When I open my mouth, I find I can’t say anything. God I’m useless. Kindly, she asks, Want to sleep with me tonight? I want to very badly, so I am surprised to hear myself wonder what will happen if Debbie wakes in the night and finds my bed empty. Allie nods. Is that likely? She asks. I shake my head no. I can’t remember the last time that happened. She’s a sound sleeper. I can’t meet Allie’s eyes, but I tell her I will go and get ready for bed.

I am lying in Allie’s bed, tucked between her sheets, my eyes firmly closed. I hear her come in and shut the door. She winds her clock and sets it, she switches off the lamp, the mattress dips as she gets in. I wait, listening to my own heartbeat. I count twenty beats before I can’t stop myself from turning to her. She gathers me to her with impatient arms and we both sigh. My face finds a natural position in the crook of her neck. I’m too exhausted and relieved to do more than plant a kiss against her skin.

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Thursday, 3pm.

I feel as if I have spent the entire day waiting for three o’clock. I’ve worn myself out with looking at my watch. Debbie has been clingy and affectionate with me all day. After lunch she fetched her
book and we curled up on the couch whilst I read to her. This last hour we have played game after
game of chess. She’s still losing, but she picks up ideas so easily that it won’t be long before she
starts winning. I shift in my seat and glance at the door again.

She’s here at last. Definitely late, definitely worn out, but smiling that shy smile of hers, with a
package under her arm. Debbie looks at her and blinks as though she can't believe her mother is
here. Bea throws down her parcel and raises her daughter up, Debbie clinging to her fiercely. She
looks at me over Debbie's shoulder and I see what it costs her to be away from her so much. She
sits at the kitchen table with Debbie on her lap whilst I busy myself, making sure I brush past her
as often as possible, wishing I could curl up in her lap too.

**Thursday, 6pm.**

Supper is a muted affair. Bea is exhausted. Her face is pale with fatigue and the shadows under her
eyes are the colour of storm clouds heavy with rain. As hard as she always works, these last few
days have worn her down to a nub. In my mind the corridors of the hotel are dark and airless, the
rooms gloomy and oppressive, filled with the stink of old cigarettes. Placing Bea in that setting
makes my imagination rebel. If I picture her somewhere it is here in the kitchen or on the porch,
out on a mountainside or tending to her garden. Her scents are fresh air, soil and spice, not bleach
and bitter ash.

Seeming a little revived by the food, Bea shows us her parcel. After work she had passed by a
haberdasher’s shop and stopped in to buy some material for the new clothes that Debbie would
soon need. She shows us a red cotton with tiny circular flowers, a white chambray with a pink
stripe, and a forest green gingham, all on sale, she tells us proudly, and all purchased with her first
ever earnings. *And this,* she says, with a flourish like a conjuror, *is for you Allie.* The final piece is
a lovely shade of blue, like the sky here on a really hot day, high and burning. *Feel it,* she tells me.
It is very soft and has a nap to it that will make it warm. Bea shakes it out and it flows like liquid.
She meets my eyes and tells me that she can just see how this dress will drape beautifully on me,
when she has made it. My face is hot, and I am so overcome by love and gratitude that I don’t
know what to say. She just laughs at my tongue-tied state.

**Thursday, 9pm.**

*What is this determination,* I ask, *and why am I only hearing about it now?* There must be an edge
to my voice, because her lips get that stubborn set to them. *To do better, to work harder,* she
explains, speaking to the blouse she's ironing. *To keep my temper, to let go of the past.* She seems
embarrassed to be telling me this, but I feel like I might be getting nearer to understanding why
she's pushing herself so hard. *But why?* I persist. *Because I need to,* she says. *I want to do better,
for you and Debbie.* I drum my fingers against the table, calculating how to talk her out of it.
*Bea, you're already the hardest working person I know.* She shakes her head. *I have nothing else,* Allie.
*I don’t have a college education or a career. But I can work hard, and I will.* I stand up and grab
the iron away from her so she will have to stop this busy work. She glares at me, annoyed, and I
smile, given what she has just said about keeping her temper. She crosses her arms over her chest,
aggravated now, and so I try to curb my amusement. Patiently, I say, *Debbie just needs you to be
her mother, and love her, like you always have.* I put the iron down and place my hands on her
upper arms though she won’t look at me. *And … the woman I fell in love with didn’t have a college
degree or a career, she didn’t always keep her temper. But she is kind and loving and loyal. She's
a brilliant cook, gardener, mother and friend. And she’s just at the start of her career as an artist.
So, don’t tell me you have nothing to offer.*

I study her for a moment and, oh boy, there’s that mutinous look again. How can I get through to
her? *I don’t need you to change. And I certainly don’t need you to make yourself ill by*
overworking. She huffs. I’m not going to be ill. I’m fine. I can feel my temper rising. You’re not fine. You’re exhausted every day and you can’t possibly keep this up. I have only raised my voice a tiny bit, but even so she looks at me, mortified, never having heard it before. At least tell me that you’re not working at the weekend, I say in a calmer voice. She frowns and shrugs. I don’t know, she says, Stan hasn’t mentioned the weekend yet. She hesitates. But if he does, I’ll tell him that I can’t do it. It’s a big concession. She meets my eyes, looking worried, but I am awash with relief, and it must show. Thank you, I say, sinking back into my seat. She comes around and kneels next to my chair, putting her head in my lap. I’m sorry Allie cat. I guess I’m not used to having someone worry about me, she murmurs, her breath hot on my thigh so that I squirm in place. I stroke her hair. And sexy, I say. She raises her head and looks at me questioningly. I missed that out of your list of impressive credentials, I tell her. Being the sexiest woman alive. She laughs and hides her face back in my lap.

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Friday, 3pm.

There they are, my girls, sitting on the porch, Debbie’s face hidden in a slice of watermelon as big as her head. Where’d you get that? I ask them. Hank came over, Allie says. Brought a couple of melons for us. Said he had a glut. I hope it’s okay that I took them? she asks. I nod. I’ll take him some corn or tomatoes next time I go down to the store, I tell her. I did persuade him to come in for coffee, Allie says. I look at her in astonishment. In all the years I have known Hank, I don’t think I have ever got him any further than the porch. The Novak charm, I guess. He was telling me about his niece and nephew. They go to the coloured school over at Greenborough. It’s a good school, I think, but I told him to let me know if there’s anything I can help them with. I just nod. Trust Allie to get to know more about my old friend in a few minutes than I’ve learned in years. She tugs on my hand to get my attention and when I look at her, she smiles cheekily, brim full of something I can’t identify.

Friday, 6pm

When Debbie appears for supper, having gone up to her bedroom to work on some secret project, she is filled with excitement. She whispers something to Allie, and I am beginning to get suspicious. Go on then, Allie tells her. Debbie says in a rush, Sophie wants me to go and sleep at her house tomorrow night and I have packed my bag and Liz and Allie say it’s alright but that I have to ask you. So is it? Can I Mama, please? Looking at her shining face, I can hardly say no, so when I say yes, she squeals and throws her arms around my neck. But we should all do something together during the day, Allie says, After your mama has had a good long lie-in. She is smiling while she says this, but also giving me a pointed look. I smile and nod meekly. They are both in such a good mood that I will say yes to everything today.

Friday, 9pm.

That was a nice idea, about Debbie spending the night at Sophie’s, I tell Allie. When she doesn’t immediately reply I look up from the dress that I’m mending and am startled to find her blushing. It was Liz’s idea, actually, she says. She seemed to think we should have an evening to ourselves. I nod thoughtfully, Did she? Allie blushes deeper, and I laugh and put my mending aside, wondering what could make Allie, of all people, blush like that. She called us newly-weds, Allie says in an awed tone. Now I’m blushing too, surprised that Liz would say such a thing, but not surprised at her insight or thoughtfulness. I wish I’d seen your face when she said that, I say, vehemently. I didn’t know where to look, Allie admits with a laugh, But she said it like it was the most natural thing in the world. I meet her eyes and I know she’s thinking, as am I, what a great gift it is to have a friend like Liz. Well, I guess she’s right, I tell Allie, my heart pounding. We’ve not been before a
preacher, but what we have still feels ... sacred somehow. I’m blushing like an idiot, tongue stumbling, trying to put my feelings into words. She takes my hand and squeezes it. I feel it too.

Chapter End Notes

... which I hope you didn't hate. The good news is that, if you did hate it, we're back to normal next week.
Chapter Summary

Saturday

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone. Thanks for reading the previous chapter and for your comments. As promised, we're back to the usual style this week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Allie.” A forced whisper.

“Hm?” Allie opened her eyes and blinked stickily. A movement in her peripheral vision alerted her that there was someone peeking through the crack of her bedroom door. Debbie’s head entered the room.

“You said I should wake you, not Mama,” she reminded her in the same loud whisper. Allie nodded and beckoned her in. Debbie slipped through the gap and managed to close the door without too much of a bang. She vaulted onto the bed, still in her nightgown. “I brought The Swiss Family Robinson,” she said, handing Allie a book.

“What, all of them?” Allie asked a shocked voice. “Even the donkey?” Debbie gurgled with laughter.

“No, silly!” She pushed her legs under the covers and insinuated herself into Allie’s side. “Will you read to me?” Allie gave her a squeeze and a kiss on the head.


An hour later Allie insisted on a break. Nothing more could happen until she had had a cup of coffee. "We need to be really quiet though Debbie. I want your mama to sleep in until at least nine o'clock."

Debbie scoffed. "Mama never sleeps that late."

"Well, your mama's extra tired because of her new job. So, we need to look after her a bit and make sure she gets lots of rest while she's at home."

Debbie looked thoughtful. "I could make her breakfast," she suggested.

"Good idea."

"She likes oatmeal with honey. But the honey has to be on the bottom not the top and the oatmeal has to be thick not runny."
"I didn't know that. Maybe, in a while, you could show me how to fix it just how she likes it." Debbie nodded happily. "In the meantime, let's get ourselves a drink."

"And a snack?"

"And a snack."

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“This is really good Deb,” Bea said between spoonfuls. “But I still wish you’d woken me. I feel like I wasted half the day.” She sent Allie a reproachful look that Allie was immune to, self-satisfaction written all over her face.

“Getting a proper amount of sleep is not a waste,” she told Bea, pointedly. “We should make the most of our time together, and we can’t do that if you’re too tired to enjoy it.”

“What have you got in mind?” Bea asked her, with a twinge of anticipation. Allie had persuaded her to sleep in her own room the previous night. Bea had put forward a passionate argument that she would sleep better cuddled up to Allie, but Allie was obdurate. The arrangement was in place to allow Bea to sleep on into the morning without Debbie discovering her bed empty and coming to find her. She couldn’t fault the logic, but at the moment it felt like she had gone a long time without holding or kissing Allie, and she was hoping Allie had a plan that would remedy that situation. Allie was watching her face and Bea could easily imagine that her thoughts were naked beneath that penetrating gaze. She blushed, returned to eating her oatmeal, and somehow missed her mouth with the spoon. She blushed some more, not daring to look up, knowing that Allie would be enjoying Bea’s utter loss of composure.

“Well, I think you should choose, Debbie,” Allie said. “You’ll be at Sophie’s later, so this is your best chance to spend some time with your mama. What would you like to do?”

Debbie twirled around on the spot for a moment to aid her thought processes. "Swimming!" she declared with a smile. Allie glanced at Bea.

“Alright with me,” Bea responded. “Allie?”

“I don’t have a bathing suit. But that’s okay, I can just paddle.”

“You can use mine if you like.”

“But then what would you wear?”

“I can improvise …” Allie’s eyebrows shot up. Bea had an inkling of what she might be imagining: more birthday suit than bathing suit, judging by the look on her face. Bea just shook her head mock sorrowfully, making Allie snort with laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Debbie demanded.

“Your mama’s making fun of me,” Allie replied. “I guess she knows I’m not much of a swimmer.”

“I’m a good swimmer,”” Debbie told her proudly. “Mama always says it’s important, so I can never get drowned,” she said. Bea nodded in confirmation.

“There’s usually a least one child every year that ends up in trouble in one of the creeks or rivers around here.”
“I’ll help you Allie. Then we won’t have to worry about you falling in and drowning,” Debbie said seriously.

“Thanks Deb. I reckon I could manage not to drown, but a few tips from you would be very helpful.”

“Right then,” Bea said. “We’d better get tidied up here and get down to the pond.”

Bea’s bathing suit turned out to be a practical one piece, white from shoulder to waist, black from waist to thigh, with a white cord belt that could be tied at the side in a bow. The shoulder straps were narrow, and the legs were cut surprisingly short. Allie liked it enormously and, after putting it on and admiring herself in the mirror, only wished that she could see Bea in it. Next time she was in Charlottesville she should buy herself a bathing suit so that Bea could wear this one. That would be a good investment. She threw a dress on over the top, slipped into her sandals, and went out to meet the others.

Bea’s idea of an improvised swimming costume was a pair of old canvas pants, cut off above the knee, and a singlet. With her hair gathered up into her turquoise headscarf she looked half glamorous, half ridiculous. Allie grinned at her. “Yeah, I know,” Bea said. “Luckily we’re not likely to see anyone else.” Just as well, Allie thought to herself, knowing full well how transparent and clingy that singlet was likely to become when wet.

Once at the pond, Bea laid down the towels she had brought, and she and Debbie waded in with no hesitation. Allie looked at the greenish water doubtfully. It looked nothing like the water in the municipal pool back home. She supposed it must be safe, but it really didn’t look too clean. Debbie was already splashing about whilst Bea was soaking up to her neck with a blissful look on her face. Allie spread out a towel and sat down. Perhaps she would put it off for a while. She shrugged out of her dress and lay back to enjoy the diffuse sunlight that was filtering through the leaves.

From her position floating on her back all Bea could hear was Debbie’s splashing and all she could see was the orange of the inside of her eyelids, closed against the sunlight. She consciously relaxed her tense shoulders and back. Despite her long sleep last night, she was still feeling the effects of a full week of mopping floors, scrubbing bathrooms, changing bed linen and wiping out ashtrays. This is what she needed: a chance to unwind and soothe her body and mind by being part of the natural world again.

A gout of water landed on her face from one of Debbie’s splashy strokes and she flinched, opened her eyes and put her feet down on the bottom. It was only now that she noticed the position that Allie had taken up by the side of the pond. From this angle she could mostly see the top of Allie’s blonde head and one bare arm. But what really caught her attention was her legs, one laid flat to the ground, the other slightly bent at the knee. From the glimpses that Bea had caught before it had been obvious that Allie had exceptionally lovely legs, but wearing a bathing suit, and lying in that pose, Bea was astonished anew by how long they were and how much she hungered to touch the full extent of that smooth skin, from toe to hip.

Gliding silently through the water she reached a point of the bank adjacent to Allie’s midriff where she could rest her head on her arms and devote herself to taking in every detail of her appearance. Allie’s face was in profile, and so Bea was able to admire her full cheeks and straight nose, the generous width of her mouth and roundness of her chin. With her face relaxed and her eyes closed, Allie’s lips curled naturally into a slight smile. Bea smiled herself, to see it. She was just
convincing herself that it would be perfectly respectful to allow her eyes to stray down Allie's neck and beyond, when Debbie startled her by winding her cold arms around her neck.

"Race me Mama!" she cried. Allie's eyes flew open and she turned her head in time to meet Bea's eyes before she was dragged backwards by her impetuous child. Bea did her best to hold Allie's gaze, wanting her to see the admiration there, knowing it would please her and perhaps result in an intense encounter later, like the one after the picnic last week. Allie's eyes lit up and her smile held everything Bea could wish to see; joy, desire, and anticipation.

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"C'mon Debbie! Don't let her beat you!" Allie called from the bank. It was a very splashy race that Bea could easily have won, but she slowed subtly at the end so that Allie was able to declare it a dead heat. Allie cheered and raised a victorious fist on Debbie's behalf. Bea slipped through the water towards her.

"Aren't you coming in Allie?" Allie hesitated.

"Sure." She looked around for the best place to wade in.

"Over here." Bea inclined her head to the right and swam over to an area where the bank shelved gently into the water. Allie made her way around the pond feeling Bea's eyes following her like a searchlight beam. Her skin prickled: the heat of Bea's gaze would be enough to ignite damp newspaper, never mind Allie, who was as flammable as dry tinder after their week of limited contact.

The water was cool and pleasant on her feet as she entered the pond. With the next step she felt her foot sink alarmingly into the muddy bottom and gave a worried squeak. Bea came abruptly to her feet, reaching out a hand to steady her. Allie latched on to her.

"What am I standing in?" she asked in revulsion.

"It's just mud," Bea replied, with amusement.

"Do things live in it … snakes and things?"

"I've never seen a snake here. But there are probably bugs and fish." Allie raised her gaze from her feet. Bea's eyes were warm and calm, her hand cool and steady. Allie forgot about the mud and took a step closer to her. Yep, that wet singlet was clinging, alright. She took her time and had a good look at Bea's beautifully curved and soft breasts with their dark nipples jutting dramatically from behind the translucent fabric. Bea took a breath and Allie watched as the wet cotton tightened against her skin, causing Allie's heart rate to accelerate and an accompanying rush of heat to travel down her body. She swallowed dryly, then realised that she had been staring for quite some time, and that Bea would no doubt be blushing and looking away by now. But when she raised her eyes to Bea's face, she found that, whilst her face was a little flushed, her expression was one of pleasure and amusement rather than embarrassment. Allie grinned in delight.

"You look great in that bathing suit," Bea told her in a quiet voice, her eyes raking over her as she led her into the water.

"Thank you," Allie replied. "What's going on with you today? You seem rather …" she paused, not able to find the right word.

Bea looked at her very directly. "I missed you last night."
Allie frowned. "Did you have trouble getting to sleep?"

Bea shook her head. "No … I … " She clammed up then. Allie was sure that there was more she had intended to say before thinking better of it.

"I missed you too, you know. I just wanted to make sure you caught up on your sleep."

"I know," Bea said, lightly, launching herself into the water and swimming away with a well-practiced overarm stroke. Allie watched her go. Bea had a speed and agility in the water that made her a pleasure to watch. Was it possible that she was showing off for Allie's benefit? Didn't she know by now that Allie couldn't be any more impressed than she already was?

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"You're right. That's a terrible idea," Allie said, reddening and throwing herself onto the couch.

"I … I didn't say that!" Bea protested. Allie gave her a patient look and Bea smiled that she could be so easily read.

"No. I was being selfish, imagining how I would enjoy looking at you across a candle-lit table in a fancy restaurant, without considering that you wouldn't like that. That it would make you uncomfortable." She thought for a moment. "Perhaps we should just stay in. I could cook for you at home."

Bea shook her head. "You said a date. That's not a date." If Allie wanted them to go on a date, then Bea wanted that for her. She chided herself for being such an awkward person, but really, the idea of people looking at them in a restaurant and wondering about them and maybe guessing about them made her stomach churn with anxiety.

How about a movie?" Allie asked suddenly, turning to her with a sparkle in her eyes. "We'd mostly be sitting in the dark together. People would hardly even see us … And we could go to Greenborough or … or Richmond for added anonymity." It was practically a plea and Bea could not say no, so she nodded and was rewarded with a delighted smile. "I'll take Debbie down to Liz's and pick up the truck. Then we can have a bite to eat and get ready."

"I can do that if you like," Bea said.

"Nope. I'm taking you out, remember?" Allie told her. Bea ducked her head and smiled. It was ridiculous, but it made her happy that Allie wanted so badly to show her a good time

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By the time Allie got back with the borrowed truck, Bea had made them some sandwiches, even though Allie had said she would do it. As they sat across the table from each other, eating, they decided to go to Richmond. There were two movie theatres there, so they would have a choice of what to see.

"I don't know what to wear," Bea fretted. "What are you wearing?"

"You'll have to wait and see," Allie replied with a complacent smile. "You … you should wear your green dress."

"God, aren't you bored of that one?" Bea asked. "I know I am."

"I like it. You look very elegant in it." When Bea pursed her lips disparagingly, Allie leaned
forward, cupped her face with her hand and looked into her dusky eyes. “You do,” she said firmly. “Do you remember that time I met you by chance in Charlottesville? You were wearing it that day and when I saw you in that dress my mind came a tiny bit unravelled. Maybe I would never have invited you into that tearoom if it wasn’t for that dress. And then, the day of the storm, you gave me that dress to wear when my own was wet through. All the way home on the bus I clutched it to me, because it was yours and it allowed me to feel close to you. So … I won’t hear a word said against it. And I would count it as an enormous favour if you would wear it this evening.” Speech made, she went to take another bite of her sandwich, only for Bea to grab her wrist.

“You say the nicest things,” Bea said huskily, eyes shining with latent tears. She leaned across the table and placed her trembling lips against Allie’s cheek, making a shiver run down her body.

“Maybe we should just stay here,” Allie said hopefully. Bea smiled.

“No way. I’ve been promised a date.”

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Up or down? Up would be more elegant, she supposed, but Allie always admired her hair when it was loose. Bea stood in front of her mirror, trying it first one way, then the other. Rummaging through a drawer to see what hair clips she had, she found a length of green ribbon the exact same shade as her dress. She smiled at herself in the mirror.

Going downstairs a few minutes later she found no sign of Allie. She went over to the closed bedroom door and tapped on it gingerly. “Allie? Can I come in?”

“One second!” She heard some muffled movement on the other side of the door. “Come in!” Allie called. Bea opened the door to find Allie standing nervously in front of the bed, as if awaiting an inspection. Bea smiled.

“You look beautiful,” she said. Allie was wearing a tunic style blouse of some flowing material all in swirling peacock colours. The sleeves were full and loose to the wrist, it fastened down the front with embroidered cords and toggles, and it had a stand-up collar which, together with the way Allie had styled her hair on top of her head, had the effect of making her neck appear extremely long and graceful. Her skirt was close fitting and of a dark blue, ending mid-calf, and with a single short pleat at the front.

Bea stepped up to her and ran her hands down Allie's sleeves, feeling the silky fabric. "This is lovely. Why haven't I seen it before?"

"I was saving it for just such an occasion as this," Allie told her, looking unexpectedly shy. Bea cocked an eyebrow.

"How long have you been planning this date?" she asked cautiously.

"Not planning, but hoping," Allie clarified. "Anyway, you've been holding out on me with this choker," she complained, changing the subject.

"I just this minute made it," Bea rebutted.

Allie inclined her head. "Impressive. And I love your hair up like this, though it's going to test my self-restraint whilst we're out." Bea smiled.

"Then we're in the same boat," she said, leaning in for a kiss.
“Na-ah,” Allie said, lifting her chin and smirking. “Don’t smudge my lipstick.” So that was how it was, was it?

“Later,” Bea promised. Allie’s eyes darkened.

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“So, Calm Yourself. Looks like a comedy. What do you think?”

Allie looked more closely at the poster. “I think that I can’t stand Robert Young. But if you want to …”

“Let’s see what’s on at the Colonial,” Bea interrupted. They strolled down Broad Street. At least Allie strolled, whilst Bea still seemed a little tense and kept walking ahead and having to slow down for her. Perhaps this was a bad idea, Allie reflected. She had wanted to do something nice for Bea, but maybe Bea was only going through with it for her.

“We don’t have to do this …” Allie began, laying her hand on Bea’s arm as she spoke.

“Don’t,” Bea hissed furiously, pulling away. Allie paled. This was turning into a disaster. She tried to swallow her disappointment.

“Let’s just go home Bea,” she pled, tears threatening. Bea glanced at her face and looked stricken at the upset she had caused.

“I’m sorry Allie cat,” she said quietly, steering her into a shop doorway. “I really want to do this. It just takes a little getting used to. I feel like everyone’s looking at us … and I feel like every other man I see might be Harry.” Now it was Allie’s turn to look dismayed.

“I never thought … I’m sorry. Let’s go …”

Bea shook her head. “We’ve come this far. It’s Saturday night and we’re going to the movies, just like anyone else.” So stubborn. Bea smiled at her and gestured for her to carry on down the sidewalk. Allie took a breath and summoned a smile she could only barely maintain.

“And here we have The 39 Steps,” Allie announced as they arrived outside the movie theatre. “What do you think?” Bea peered at the poster and shrugged.

“Let’s give it a go,” she suggested.

While they got in line for tickets Bea started rummaging in her purse. “Put that away,” Allie told her. “I’m taking you out, so I drive, I pay for the tickets, and you … you’re gracious about it.”

“But I have a little money now,” Bea protested.

Allie smiled. “I know. And one of these days you’ll use some of it to take me out.”

“How much is it anyway?”

“Fifteen cents.”

“Each?” Bea asked, incredulously.

“Yes. Each,” Allie replied patiently. “How long is it since you last came to the movies?”

Bea shrugged. “I guess … It must have been before Debbie was born.”
“Inflation, huh?” Allie said lightly. Bea huffed a laugh. “You’re in for a treat Bea. Movies are probably quite a bit more sophisticated than last time you came.” Once they had their tickets Allie led her over to the candy stand. “What’ll you have?” she asked.

“Candy too? I don’t think so …”

“C’mon, you’ve got to get the full experience. So … a Baby Ruth, Milk Duds, Raisinets, popcorn?”

“Uh … Raisinets, I guess.”

They took their seats in the busy theatre just as the newsreel was finishing. Allie watched as Bea looked around through the haze of smoke that was lit up in the flickering beam of the projector. Up in the balcony was a sea of black faces, whilst the main part of the theatre was entirely white. Bea’s mouth turned down at the corners, but she turned back to the screen without comment.

The cartoon was Betty Boop, Allie’s favourite. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Bea smiling at the funny bits. She felt the tension begin to seep out of her muscles, and she settled into her seat more comfortably. The B picture was an overwrought jungle adventure, but every time Allie glanced at Bea, she seemed totally absorbed. Then the main feature began. When, just a few minutes in, the mysterious woman known as Miss Smith collapsed on Hannay’s bed with a knife in her back, Bea reached out and gripped Allie’s arm, and didn’t let go for the rest of the movie. Allie liked the picture, but what was even better was slyly observing Bea’s reaction to it, and so she watched a good portion of it reflected in Bea’s eyes. Bea gasped and laughed along with the rest of the audience and Allie was so relieved that she was enjoying herself she could have cried. When the denouement arrived and the memory man was shot, they both jumped in their seats. Bea turned to Allie, and they laughed at each other for having been taken by surprise.

Filing out into the foyer with the rest of the crowd, Bea seemed lost in thought. Her cheeks were flushed, but her eyes were distant. Allie stopped.

“Bea … are you okay? Did you enjoy it?” Allie asked.

“What’s the name of that actress?” Bea asked. “The one who played Pamela.”


“I just wondered.”

“So … did you like it?”

Bea smiled blissfully. “It was wonderful …” she breathed. “Thank you so much for bringing me.” She surreptitiously slipped her index finger into Allie’s loosely cupped hand. Allie gave it a brief squeeze and dipped her eyes to Bea’s to be met with such an ardent look that her next breath was stilled in her chest. She wished she could obey her natural urge and kiss her, but that was forbidden them, so she just looked at Bea’s mouth helplessly for a long beat. Coming back to herself, she swallowed with difficulty and looked away.

“I’m glad. That was a great movie, huh? It had everything, excitement, adventure, romance, comedy …” she trailed off, feeling someone’s eyes on her. She scanned the foyer. “Do you know that woman?” she asked.

“What woman?” Bea asked, following her gaze.

“Over there,” she nodded in the direction of the ticket booth, but could no longer see her. “She’s
gone now, but she was definitely staring at us.”

“What did she look like?”

“Oh, just … ordinary really.” Allie carried on glancing around, but there was no sign of the woman now. “Shall we get going?” she asked, her thoughts already straying to what more the evening might hold.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked that.

If you haven't ever seen Alfred Hitchcock's film "The 39 steps" I can thoroughly recommend it. Sure it's in black and white and is a bit fuzzy by today's standards, but it has a modern sensibility, combining, as it does, a spy thriller with a romantic comedy. If you like "North by Northwest" you will probably like this because, in some ways, it was a dry run for that film. So, if you can find it anywhere, give it a watch. Or not. Up to you.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Saturday night

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all your comments and kudos on the previous chapter. Here's the next chapter. Hope you enjoy it.
Oh, and it's NSFW.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

All the way back to the truck through the darkened streets Bea enthused to Allie about her favourite parts of the movie. “Did you notice the bit when he was on the train, and he went into her compartment? She was wearing her reading glasses, and then she took them off and he kissed her so that the police wouldn’t bother talking to him?”

“Um …” Allie replied.

“And then later, when they arrive at the inn and she takes off her stockings and dries them by the fire?” Bea was looking into her face imploringly.

“Oh … I think I see where you’re going with this,” Allie said with a laugh.

“Well, Madeleine Carroll is a blonde, but she’s not as beautiful as you.”

“Bea,” Allie laughed, in protest. “She’s a movie star!”

She scoffed. “You could easily be a movie star. In fact, I thought you were a movie star the first time I saw you.” Allie smiled at her.

“This flattery is unnecessary you know …”

“It’s not flattery,” Bea replied. “I mean it.” Allie just shook her head, but she could tell that Bea really did mean it. “And Scotland … I would love to go to Scotland. Did you know I have some Scottish blood? On my mama’s side …” Allie turned around and walked backwards for a few paces so that she could watch Bea’s face whilst she continued to talk about her favourite parts of the movie. When they got back to the truck Allie opened the door for her and Bea climbed in. By the time Allie had walked round to the driver’s side, Bea was off again. She started the engine and pointed the truck towards home. After a while Bea seemed to notice that she hadn’t let Allie get a word in for quite some time.

“Sorry, I’m really going on, aren’t I? I’ll shut up now.”

“No, don’t. I love to hear you talk.” She glanced over at Bea, who was looking down at her hands as though embarrassed by her effusiveness. “Did I ever tell you how much I love your voice?”
“I don’t believe you have,” Bea replied, and, after a slight hesitation, she slid along the seat, coming a little closer. Allie gripped the wheel more tightly, fighting to keep her eyes on what little of the road she could see in the feeble beams cast by the headlights. “Why don’t you tell me now?” Bea invited her. Allie glanced at her in astonishment, her mind struggling to keep up with this unusual boldness.

Allie swallowed. “I think it’s the timbre. It resonates inside my head … my bones.” She sighed. “This sounds stupid.” Bea reached over and traced a line down Allie’s thigh with one finger, causing her heart to speed up and her throat to dry out even further.

“Tell me,” she said in a low voice that exemplified what Allie was trying to explain.

“It’s … it’s deep brown, like your eyes, and almost like cinnamon, which is your … the smell of your skin. It's like chocolate, but ... not so smooth. Because it has this edge, like a shiver or a purr. It all meets and does something to me … inside …” Allie clenched her jaw in frustration with herself. “I’m usually a bit more articulate than this,” she told Bea, smiling ruefully into the windscreen.

“I think that might be the loveliest thing anyone ever said about me,” Bea replied, her voice breaking a tiny bit in a way that made Allie’s heart hitch. “I always thought my voice was awful. Too deep, too masculine. Rough and broken. So … thank you.” She could feel Bea staring at the side of her face, but daren’t look at her. She made an abrupt decision and pulled the truck over to the side of the road, stopping sharply and pulling on the brakes, leaving the engine idling. "What's the matter?" Bea asked in alarm.

"Nothing," Allie replied, turning to face her. "But if you would like us to get home in one piece, I have to kiss you now." Realising that she sounded almost exasperated, she added, “If that's alright with you."

Bea huffed out a surprised laugh. They were on a quiet country road with no other vehicles around, the light from the truck's headlights illuminating nothing more than twin cones of dirt and vegetation. She gave a nod, just a single downwards movement of her head, casting her gaze into her lap. And waited. Allie took her time. She had been looking forward to this moment all day, ever since she had felt Bea's eyes practically scorching her skin at the pond. No point in rushing it now.

She reached out and brushed her fingers over Bea's mouth, allowing her anticipation to be heightened by tracing the shape of her lips. Bea's lips parted to suck in a trembling breath and Allie's restraint dissolved in an instant. Her hands snaked around the back of Bea's head and cradled the base of her skull whilst she placed her mouth urgently over Bea's, drawing on her lips as if for oxygen. When Bea responded with equal zeal, pushing her fingers into Allie's hair and pulling her nearer still, Allie felt a flame surge through her, kindled from her belly but licking along her spine up to her scalp and down to the soles of her feet.

Bea was leaning into her, their chests meeting, when her hand nudged against Allie’s hip, and then unfurled, stroking, then pulling at it in a gesture that Allie found eloquent of a need, Bea’s need, for Allie to be under her, for their bodies to be laid flush against each other in a way that was frankly impossible in the cab of the truck. Allie’s abdomen clenched fiercely at the knowledge and a sudden pressure in her ears made any rational thoughts dwindle away to nothing. “Bea,” she managed to say when next their lips disconnected for a breath. Bea’s only response was to reconnect their lips. “Bea,” she said, more firmly, pulling away. Bea looked at her, breathless, face flushed, eyes only just coming back into focus. “What do you say to taking this home?”

Bea sat up, cleared her throat and straightened her dress, wiping Allie's lipstick off her mouth with
the back of her hand. “Yes. Sorry …”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m not sorry. But this is neither safe nor comfortable,” she said with a wry laugh.

“Take me home,” Bea said, looking at her with a strange expression. Was it permission? Recognition of the point they had arrived at? Allie wasn’t sure but put the truck into gear and headed home.

Sitting across the kitchen table from each other, Bea wasn’t sure what to say or do. The immediate heat of the encounter in the truck had dissipated and Allie wasn’t saying anything, only casting occasional glances her way. Could she do this? Could she be the one to initiate the next step? She swallowed and cleared her throat.

“You know what you said in the truck, about taking it home?” She looked at Allie from beneath her lashes. “Do you … do you still want to?” Allie reached out and squeezed her hand.

“Yes,” she said, simply and sincerely. “But only if you’re ready.” Bea nodded. Was she ready? She had been burning up all day, and in the truck she absolutely had been ready. But this pause had allowed thoughts and doubts to crowd in. “I know tonight seems like a perfect opportunity,” Allie continued. “But there will be other times. I can wait.”

Bea huffed down her nose. “I’m not sure I can.” Allie smiled and pressed her hand. Bea thought for a moment, and then spoke her mind as boldly as she ever had. “You know what I would like?”

“What’s that?”

“I would like it if we could go into your bedroom.” She swallowed. “I want to take off that beautiful blouse you’re wearing. And everything else. And I want to touch you and kiss you. And … I want to … you know …” She paused, her heart pounding. “But you’re going to have to show me what to do.”

Allie smiled gently. “You shouldn't worry about that. We can do whatever we feel like. What comes naturally. And we can stop anytime we want to.” She was looking earnestly into Bea’s eyes, reassuring her that she would be safe. Bea could only nod. “Come on then.” She held out her hand, Bea took it and Allie led the way into her bedroom.

Pressed against Allie, with her arms about her waist, Bea rested for a while, reflecting that it felt different tonight, anticipating what was to come. The silky texture of Allie's blouse felt wonderful against her hands and cheek, but at the same time she was impatient for it to be gone. She began to tug it out of her skirt, feeling Allie rock against her, hearing her sigh. Their mouths met by mutual accord while Bea's fingers scrabbled fruitlessly against the fastenings. Allie began to laugh against Bea’s lips. “Let me help you.”

“Did you choose this blouse for its security?” Bea asked in frustration, defeated by her nervous fingers and the near-dark of the room. Allie laughed, struggling herself.

“I’ve got the top two undone. Pull it off over my head,” Allie said. Bea tried.

“Your cuffs … undo those first.” By this time, they were both laughing, their former solemnity forgotten, and Bea was grateful to the awkward garment for providing a vent for her nerves. Once the blouse was discarded onto Allie’s easy chair, Bea cast her gaze over Allie’s skin, luminous in the dim light from the window. Hesitant to even touch her, Bea lifted her arms and undid Allie’s already mussed hair instead, stroking it into order as it cascaded down. Allie took both Bea’s hands
in hers and kissed the palms in turn and laid them against her ribs.

“Your can touch me,” she said, looking into her eyes. So Bea did, running her hands over her abdomen and back, revelling in how smooth and warm she felt. Allie wound her arms around Bea’s neck and kissed her on the mouth, unfastening her hair and moving on to the eyelets at the back of her dress. “Is this okay?” she asked, breaking contact for a moment.

“Yes,” she breathed. And it was. It actually was. Her dress puddled about her feet.

“Lift your arms up,” Allie instructed. Bea complied and Allie lifted her slip off over her head, leaving her in just her bra, drawers and stockings. She felt a moment of shyness but that was soon melted away by Allie’s admiring looks and reverent touches. Allie stroked up her arms to her shoulders, over her shoulder blades, down her back and round her waist until Bea was shivering, every tiny hair standing on end. "I love the feel of your skin," Allie whispered.

Bea returned her mouth to Allie's. Although they had been sharing kisses for a little while now, Bea still could not get enough of the way they made her feel. Kissing Allie made her thoughts blur while simultaneously sharpening every physical sensation. So, attempting to unfasten Allie's skirt while having her mouth on Allie's proved almost beyond her. When finally the buttons were undone, Bea peeled Allie's skirt off her by sliding her palms over her silky underwear, over her hips and buttocks, causing Allie to press her hips into Bea in a highly satisfactory way.

Allie stepped out of her skirt and Bea drew away for a moment so that she could look at her. Breasts, hips, legs. All curved and shaped in a way that seemed calculated to make Bea's heart accelerate. She drew in a shaky breath and smiled at Allie. Allie smiled in return and put one foot up onto the edge of the bed as an invitation to Bea to remove her stocking. Bea swallowed hard, recalling the day that Allie had removed her stockings by the stove and how it had unsettled her. But tonight would be different. When she placed her fingers on Allie's thigh, Allie twitched and uttered a quiet sound of pleasure that made Bea's stomach flutter. She unfastened the stocking and rolled it down Allie's leg, taking her time, appreciating every inch of soft skin.

"How can your legs be this long?" Bea asked, in wonder.

"I think you'll find that they're just the right length," Allie smirked. Bea had no idea what that meant, but it definitely contained a promise, so she smiled in return.

Little by little their clothes were shed until they stood before each other in nothing but their drawers, cotton on one side and satin on the other. Bea stared at Allie and wished she had the courage to touch her, but for the moment the perfection of her nearly naked form was too daunting. After a moment Allie reached out and smoothed a lock of hair away from Bea's cheek so that she could look into Bea's face, her expression tender.

"You're so lovely Bea. Would it be alright if I touched your beautiful body?" Bea nodded jerkily.

"But maybe not … down there, just yet," she muttered nervously. Allie nodded in calm understanding and stepped towards her. Faces close together but not touching, Allie ghosted her palms over Bea's shoulders and down her arms. She stroked her hips and belly, working her way up over her ribs until her thumbs were caressing the undersides of her breasts. Bea sighed, rubbing her cheek against Allie's.

"Is this okay?" Allie asked. "Can I …?"

"Yes," Bea replied at once. Allie stroked up the sides of her breasts and brushed her fingers along the tops, circling gently until she had almost reached the centres. Then she placed her hands over
Bea's hardened nipples and gently palmed her breasts. The completeness of that touch and the heat of Allie's hands set off a ripple of feeling in Bea such that she groaned and impulsively pressed her mouth hard against Allie's. Allie responded by squeezing and kneading her breasts until Bea pulled away dizzily.

Once she had her breath back, Bea looked at Allie. Her face was open, and her eyes invited Bea to reciprocate. Allie's breasts were such a perfect size and shape that Bea's hands were already reaching for them before her mind had even made a decision. She covered them with her hands, the nipples hard against her palms, her fingers grazing the softest flesh at the sides. Allie sighed and moved her chest subtly forward. "Yes," she breathed. "That feels so good." Encouraged by Allie's reaction Bea stroked and explored her breasts, fuelled by a longing to touch them that had been several weeks in the making. Allie was making some soft sounds as Bea touched her, sounds that lit Bea up inside. She caressed her more confidently, which had the effect of causing Allie to grab Bea's behind and press her hips into Bea's. A wildness rose in Bea, spilling over so that she couldn't help but kiss Allie with everything she had.

"Wow," Allie said fervently when they were forced to break for air. She disentangled herself from Bea, leaving her feeling cold and almost bereft, but it was only to arrange herself on the bed. She beckoned to Bea, smiling. "Come here," she said, holding out her hand. Bea took it and knelt on the mattress. Allie slipped one of her legs between Bea's and pulled her down on top of her. Their hips met, and Bea sighed. She lowered the rest of herself gently onto Allie and, when their breasts met, could not prevent a groan from escaping her lips at the sheer rightness of it. Allie gripped her firmly with her arms and kissed her so lovingly that Bea felt tears start up in her eyes. Their bodies, pulled together as they were, by both passion and gravity, had not an atom’s width between them, and yet Bea's only thoughts were more, and closer.

Kissing and caressing, Allie rolled them over onto their sides. Her hands roamed freely over Bea's chest and back, Bea's breathing erratic, her hands able to do little more than grip at Allie's head or shoulders, her thoughts scattered by sensation. Allie's mouth began to make its way down her throat, across her collarbone and towards her breast. Although Bea knew exactly the destination Allie had in mind, it was still a profound shock when her mouth closed around Bea's nipple. The heat of Allie's mouth was extraordinary and when she pulled gently with her lips and teeth, all thought was eliminated as a spear of electricity pierced her from breast to seam. Bea's hips acted without her permission, bucking against Allie, while her throat emitted a desperate sound that startled her into sudden self-consciousness. At the same moment Allie's hand was sliding over her hip towards an area that Bea was now deeply aware of, prickling with heat and unimaginably wet as it was.

"Can I …" Allie began to ask, just as Bea grabbed her wrist.

"Stop."

* * * * * * * * *

Bea’s face was contorted, tears already filling her eyes. Allie’s eyes pricked empathetically and a feeling of anguish swept down through her chest.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Allie crooned, rocking her in her arms. Bea sobbed against her shoulder, inconsolable. “It doesn’t matter. It’s fine,” she whispered, along with many other soothing words, until Bea had spent her grief. Eventually, she wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand, sniffing and sighing damply.

“I’m sorry …”
“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does. I want to. At least, my brain and heart want to. My body just hasn’t got the message yet.”

Allie waited for a moment. “Are you afraid?” Bea nodded. “Because of Harry? Would it help to tell me?”

Bea gave an exasperated sigh. “I don’t even want to think about him right now, never mind talk about him. And it’s bad enough I have him in my head, without him being in yours too.”

“I don’t mind. You can tell me.”

“Not now. I don’t even want to think that anything he used to do to me has anything in common with what we might do.” Allie nodded and kissed her forehead, holding her close, a new and stronger impulse of loathing for Harry coursing through her. “I’m sorry I stopped you Allie. I just couldn’t …” she trailed off.

“I love you Bea. What we were doing was just an expression of our love, not the love itself. Nothing has changed.” She paused and smiled. “Well, actually, I did get to touch and kiss your beautiful body. That was new … and wonderful. So, you have nothing to feel sorry about.”

Bea smiled. “It was amazing. I didn’t know I could feel so much.” Allie kissed her cheek, tasting the salt of her tears. Bea let her fingers trail up Allie’s side, and tentatively kissed her shoulder. “I want you,” she sighed. “I really do.” Allie insides began to throb in response to those words. “I just need to get past this … block.” Allie squirmed, an idea forming in her head.

“There is one thing we could try,” she murmured. “If you want to.”

“What?”

“I could show you. That there’s nothing to be afraid of.” A long silence.

“What would I need to do?”

“Allie couldn’t read her face in the near dark, but she felt her hesitant nod. “Close your eyes for a moment. I’m going to put the lamp on.” Allie wondered at herself as she rolled over and found the lamp. This was not something she had done for anyone before, but she would do it for Bea. She lifted the lamp down from the nightstand to the floor before switching it on. Squinting her eyes against the glare, she pushed it under the chair so that the light was subdued, but just enough to see by. By the time she rolled back over, Bea had partially covered herself with the sheet and was watching her warily. “Don’t look so worried,” Allie said, smiling in reassurance. “I won’t even touch you.” Bea nodded cautiously and Allie began.

Allie began by shimmying out of her drawers. Bea closed her eyes. When she reopened them, Allie was just lying there patiently on her side, her bright eyes on Bea’s face, waiting for her to look. It was time to be brave. If Allie could bare herself for like this, she could at least have the courage to look. Her eyes flew to the base of Allie’s belly, where a triangle of dark blonde hair nestled modestly between her closed thighs. Looking back to Allie’s face she was rewarded with a smile. “I’m going to be thinking of you. Imagining it’s you,” she told Bea brazenly. Bea blinked rapidly and swallowed hard. Allie trailed her fingers over her own breasts, her teeth emerging to grip her lower lip. She squeezed her breasts and pinched her nipples, her breath coming a little faster. Bea knew she was blushing but found it impossible to look away. One of Allie’s hands lightly stroked her own ribs and belly, while the other continued to massage her breasts. Her
cheeks were beginning to pink and her eyes were almost closed as her breath sighed a little louder.

One hand strayed over her hip and a little way down her leg, then inched up the soft inner thigh towards its target. Bea held her breath as Allie parted her legs slightly, teasing herself by drawing circles on the sensitive skin. Bea half wanted to cover her eyes with her hand, but at the same time she didn’t dare look away or even blink. Allie’s fingers brushed only barely against the tips of the topmost hairs that covered her mound and her hips made a little flexing motion. Bea clenched her thighs together reflexively, her imagination transferring that light touch from Allie to herself. Allie rolled over onto her back, opening her legs, and now Bea really did cover her eyes. From behind her dark lids she could hear the soft sighing of Allie’s breath, and then a faintly liquid sound. A scent drifted towards her which she could not identify. It was vaguely mineral, elemental, like something from the origins of the world.

Curiosity got the better of her as Allie’s sounds and movements became more pronounced. Peeking through her fingers she could see Allie’s legs moving restlessly against the sheet, first straight, then bent at the knee, her toes curling and uncurling. Running her eyes up her long limbs she found her hand moving lazily between her legs. Bea watched as her finger circled around a bud of rosy flesh. Face on fire she glanced at Allie. Her eyes were closed, her lips parted, head thrown back, seemingly unaware of Bea’s attention. With a gentle flush to her cheeks, she had never looked more beautiful. As she watched, Allie’s movements became more purposeful and her breathing accelerated. Bea could feel her pulse thundering in her ears, could even feel it between her legs, quickening in rapport with Allie’s arousal. The motions of Allie’s hand sped up and her hips began to flex off the mattress. A trembling spread across her body, and it was obvious to Bea that the crisis point was approaching.

“Bea …” Allie moaned quietly. Bea’s eyes widened, and her heart hammered against her chest wall. She scooted a little closer, wondering what she could do to help. Allie’s breathing was fast now, gasping noisily in her throat. Tentatively Bea reached out and placed her hand on her hip and moved in to kiss her. Allie’s eyes flew open. Their mouths met and a dramatic shaking overtook Allie. Bea marvelled at the violence of her reaction and circled her arm around her as her whole body convulsed. Allie drew her lips away to utter a single cry of pleasure followed by several gasps. Gradually the motion of her hand slowed and then stilled. She breathed raggedly into Bea’s ear for a few moments before taking her in her arms and kissing her neck, and throat and any patch of skin she could reach.

“See,” she whispered breathlessly into Bea’s ear. “I flew into pieces, but now I’m back here with you, all in one piece.”

Bea held her close as her breathing and heart rate gradually returned to normal. “Thank you for letting me see that,” Bea said shyly. “It was beautiful. You were beautiful.” She swallowed. “You made it look very easy,” she added.

Allie laughed. “I’ve had plenty of practice.” Bea blushed hard, and she laughed again. “All those dark, lonely nights at Mrs Wentworth’s, longing for a certain redhead …” Bea groaned in embarrassment and hid her face in Allie’s neck. Allie went quiet for a minute. “Did you really like it?” she asked eventually. “Did it … excite you?”

Bea looked at her and rolled her eyes. “Yes ,” she replied emphatically. “How could it not? Sometimes … it was almost like you were touching me .” Allie’s face went very still, and her eyes went very dark.

“I can think of something else we can try. If you want to.” Allie’s face shone with eagerness, so Bea nodded her agreement.
Allie pushed the pillows onto the floor and lay flat on her back against the mattress. “So. I’m not going to lay a hand on you, okay? Don’t worry. You’re completely in control.” Bea was looking doubtful. Allie gave her a sympathetic look. “Take your time. You might want to take those off first.” She nodded towards Bea’s underwear. Bea’s eyes grew larger. “They must be getting pretty damp by now, in any case,” Allie said, keeping it light. Bea smiled slightly.

“Close your eyes then,” she said finally. “I can’t do it with you watching.” Allie obeyed, feeling the bed move as Bea divested herself of the final barrier. Allie badly wanted to look. She had imagined Bea naked any number of times, but for now she had to respect her limits.

“All right?” she asked.

“Yes,” Bea whispered.

“All right,” Allie invited her with a smile, holding out her arms, her eyes still shut tight. The mattress moved again, and she felt Bea’s legs against hers, and then the weight of her body lowering onto her. Allie sighed, Bea groaned, their hips and bellies met, and Allie’s heart rejoiced. She opened her eyes, straight into Bea’s speculative gaze. Allie placed her hands, palm up, to either side of her head. “My hands are staying here,” she assured her. To her surprise, Bea placed her hands atop them, transferring her weight from her elbows onto Allie, and interlinked their fingers.

“Mine too,” she said gravely. All Allie could do was smile delightedly. Bea seemed to have caught the gist of what she had in mind and was playing along. She raised her head up towards Bea’s lips in a kiss. Bea moved away teasingly. “Na-ah. I’m in control, remember?” Allie laughed as her head sank back to the bed.

“That’s right.”

Bea made her wait, but it was worth every excruciating second. Eventually she lowered her mouth onto Allie’s and kissed her thoroughly, leaving her breathless. She drew back with a glint in her eye. During her next kiss she drew Allie’s tongue into her mouth, causing Allie’s heart to pound as though it might burst. They kissed again, neither of them able to get enough, each of them getting more and more breathless, until Allie felt Bea’s hips move against hers and a tiny sound escape from her lips. Allie sighed into Bea’s mouth and squirmed slightly against her. Bea answered with a movement of her own. Allie wriggled until one of her thighs was between Bea’s leg. Experimentally, she flexed it upward almost imperceptibly. Bea gave a shuddering sigh and moved against her.

Allie kept her thigh firm at just the right angle. When she felt the smooth glide of Bea’s arousal against her mind flipped over for a moment, her enjoyment was so complete. Bea’s eyes were closed, her hair falling around her face in a curtain. Allie watched the changes in her expression as she focussed on finding her pleasure. She was pushing down on Allie’s hands, raising herself up, finding a rhythm against Allie’s leg. Allie’s heart was pounding, her own arousal spreading wetly between her thighs. Every now and again some part of Bea would come close enough to her mouth for her to venture a kiss or a lick, but mostly she just watched in fascination as Bea’s lips pursed and her face reddened. Occasionally she frowned endearingly in concentration. Then her mouth fell open and her movements took on a new urgency. Allie braced herself against the increased vigour of Bea’s rocking, a slick of perspiration forming between them. Bea began to tremble, and her movements lost some of their rhythm. At the same time, she lowered her face to Allie’s apparently trying to kiss her but lacking the presence of mind to join their lips effectively. Allie obliged by kissing her as sweetly as she knew how and was rewarded by Bea trembling harder and then jerking suddenly against her, crying out against her mouth and collapsing on top of her. Allie
moved her thigh gently against her and Bea gave another twitch, and a shudder before settling her face into Allie’s neck and sighing deeply.

Allie wrapped her arms around Bea’s bare back. This closeness was what she had dreamed of all these long weeks. The sex was all very lovely, but this feeling of satiation and intimacy was the pinnacle as far as she was concerned. Bea was very still. Was it possible that she had fallen asleep? Suddenly she spoke, right by Allie’s ear. “I love you.” So fervently it made Allie smile.

“I love you too,” she replied easily. Bea raised herself up onto her elbows and looked into her face.

“Thank you for that. That was …” she sighed, apparently not able to come up with the words. Allie smiled and kissed her.

"I should be thanking you. For trusting me."

"But thank you for persevering. I know I'm all over the place with this stuff."

“I didn’t do anything. That was all you, remember? You were in control. Of your own body and your own pleasure. You took it and it belongs to you. You own it."

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked this bumper (in more ways than one!) issue. More than 5,000 words, you lucky people. The longest chapter yet.

As you know, this is my first work of fan fiction, so obviously it's also my first go at writing a scene like this. I have had an interesting week trying to make it romantic, sensual and meaningful without making it unintentionally hilarious. (I actually had the phrase “Bea's knees” at one point!) Only you guys will be able to say if I was successful. And kudos to those of you who have gone before and already written this kind of stuff.
Bea sat in Allie’s chair and studied her in the early morning light from the window. She could still hardly believe it: that a woman as gorgeous as that would take the trouble to get her to the point where she could express herself physically. Allie really did have the patience of a saint, though at the moment, with her blonde hair spread over the pillow and her naked body only partially covered with the sheet, she looked more like an angel. The sunlight burnished her hair, and her cheeks still held the barest flush of rose. One breast was uncovered; the silken nipple the exact same shade of pink as her lips. Even the blonde down on her belly was lit up. She was a study in gold, pink and white, and if Bea had had her drawing things with her, she would not have been able to resist making a picture.

She had woken early and taken herself off to the bathroom without disturbing Allie. They must have shifted position during the night because, when she awoke it was, once again, to find her face pressed into Allie’s side. When Allie had encouraged her to go to sleep last night, she had thought it impossible, she was so keyed up. Also, there was the fact that Allie was cuddled up as close as she could get to her back, so that Bea was acutely aware of her breasts against her back and the way her hips cupped her behind. But she must have slept despite that, as she knew no more until dawn, and the urgent feeling of a full bladder. As she leaned forward in the chair, attempting to memorise what she saw, Allie’s eyes flickered open.

* * * * * * * *

Allie smiled. “What are you doing all the way over there?” she complained sleepily, shifting on her pillow. She looked at Bea, eyes widening, her body already responding to what she saw. If this was how Bea was going to look every morning, she wasn’t going to be long for this world; her heart wouldn’t take it. Bea was leaning forward in the chair, watching her intently. Allie couldn’t decide what was more erotic: the way Bea was looking at her, with the quality of observation that she usually reserved for her artwork, or the fact that the robe that she wore draped over her shoulders was completely open down the front, allowing her a teasing glimpse of her naked body.

“The view’s pretty good from over here,” Bea countered.

“It’s spectacular from where I’m sitting,” Allie told her. Bea rolled her eyes. “Have you been watching me for long?” Allie asked slyly.
Bea shrugged. “No, not really,” she replied in an offhand manner, which she spoiled by adding earnestly, “You look like an angel, lying there.” Allie chuckled ruefully, attempting to tidy her hair.

“If I’m an angel, I’m a pretty badly fallen one,” she said, stretching.

“You’re not. I think … maybe there’s a higher power that approves of us, maybe even brought us together. I can’t bear to think that we met solely by chance.”

Allie smiled at the idea and held out her hand, inviting Bea to join her on the bed. Bea placed her hands against the mattress and proceeded towards Allie on her hands and knees. Her open robe allowed Allie to see first one breast and then the other as she slowly stalked up the bed, her deliberate smile letting Allie know that she was well aware of the effect this was having on her. Once she reached the head of the bed, she lay down on her side and smirked into her face. Allie puffed out a breath, struggling to control her smile. She reached out one hand and, with two fingers, careful not to touch Bea at all yet, lifted out of the way the flap of fabric that covered Bea’s uppermost breast. The dark nipple immediately puckered under her gaze and Allie swallowed hard. She lifted her eyes to Bea’s face, surprised to find that her expression was already loose and unfocussed, her lips parted to suck in air. Allie leant forward and touched the tip of her tongue experimentally to the underside of Bea’s top lip. Bea sighed Shakily and her eyelids drooped closed. Allie shifted herself and placed the tip of her tongue against the edge of Bea’s nipple. Bea took a deeper breath. Allie circled with her tongue, briefly licking every part of the nipple before drawing away again, still avoiding touching Bea at all with her hands. She blew gently on the dampened area, watching the nipple crinkle further, and an outbreak of goose bumps spread across her whole breast. Bea shivered lightly.

Unable to resist any longer, Allie put her whole mouth over Bea’s nipple and drew it into her mouth, caressing it with her tongue, and sucking gently to gauge Bea’s reaction. Bea arched her back and made a sound that might have been, “Um.” Allie heard only approval in that sound and, feeling as though Bea had granted her permission, gave first one breast and then the other the full attention she felt they deserved. Bea sighed Shakily and her eyelids drooped closed. Allie shifted herself and placed the tip of her tongue against the edge of Bea’s nipple. Bea took a deeper breath. Allie circled with her tongue, briefly licking every part of the nipple before drawing away again, still avoiding touching Bea at all with her hands. She blew gently on the dampened area, watching the nipple crinkle further, and an outbreak of goose bumps spread across her whole breast. Bea shivered lightly.

“Allie …” Bea whispered. Allie looked at her face. Her eyes were open now, her expression nakedly hungering. Allie moved herself up Bea’s body so that they were eye to eye.

“Tell me. What can I do for you?” she asked in a low voice. Bea answered by gripping her face with both hands and pulling her into a kiss that melted her bones. Christ. Bea’s passion had matured within the space of a few hours so that Allie’s thoughts were scattered and her intentions misplaced. Allie pressed herself into Bea and drew her arms around her, pulling her close. Bea’s hands roamed over her body and caressed the small of her back for a moment before they curled over her buttocks and pulled Allie into her firmly so that they both gasped.

“Touch me …” Bea said into her ear. Allie’s heart set up a clamour in her chest. She ran her hands down Bea’s back only hesitating for a moment before skimming over her backside. Bea sighed and kissed her. Allie stroked it again and then gave it a two-handed squeeze. She could hardly believe that Bea was allowing her to do this. Not just allowing her, but also encouraging her. Should she carry on and wait for Bea to stop her when it became too much? Or should she cool things off until she could find out if she was really okay with this? Bea removed her mouth from Allie’s and
looked into her eyes.

“Allie … stop thinking so much.”

“Sorry …”

“Just do what you want. You know I’ll stop you if I need to.” Allie nodded, not sure if it was possible to switch off one's thoughts at another's behest, but willing to try. Do what you want. That was a long list, but … She brought her hands to Bea's hips and stroked and held them, getting a feel for the bone and muscle. She ran her thumbs over the soft flesh on the inside of each bone. Be's muscles jumped under the skin. So Allie did it again and Bea writhed against her. "Tickles," she explained. Allie smiled and ran her fingers up her ribs so that Bea erupted into a fit of squirming laughter. Allie grinned and kissed her laughing mouth. She gripped her hip again and allowed her hand to stray a little so that it brushed against the hair at the base of her belly. Bea went very still and Allie panicked that she had gone too far. But this time, when Bea grabbed her wrist it was to draw her hand towards her, not push it away.

When Allie's fingers made their way beyond the curls, she couldn't help but sound a hum of appreciation, the heat and slick wetness of Bea's folds were everything that she had imagined. Bea's head was thrown back and her breaths increasingly heavy. She held on tight to Allie.

"All this for me?" Allie teased, stroking through the moisture, confident now that Bea was not afraid of her touch. "I always knew you were generous, but …" Bea huffed a laugh.

"Too much?" she asked between breaths.

"God, no." Allie said feelingly. "Perfect."

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Bea was already at the point where she didn't know what to do with herself, and yet the pleasure kept building. She felt as if she were spiralling up into the air. At some point, she would be coming down, but for now Allie was just taking her higher. She felt that hot mouth close over her nipple and those fingers become slightly more insistent. Another hand was roaming everywhere, one moment on her breast, the next in her hair. She couldn't keep track of her pleasure. At first, it had been centred under Allie's hand, but now it was everywhere. Her belly felt tight and no matter how much she flexed her feet it wasn't enough. Allie changed her touch slightly and suddenly Bea was on the brink and could wish for nothing except Allie. Had she said that out loud? Because somehow Allie's lips found hers at the exact moment she needed them, and Bea latched on to them for dear life while ribbons of electricity seethed through her body and blacked out her thoughts.

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"I guess there's no point in asking if you liked that?" Allie said smilingly, once Bea's breathing had returned almost to normal. Bea laughed and looked at her. Allie stared back. The brilliants in her eyes, the broad grin, the flushed cheeks: Allie had never seen her look so happy. Her eyes darted around her face taking in what appeared to be extra colour in her lips, an extra fullness to her skin, all trace of tension gone from her brow. This was Bea as she was truly meant to be. A Bea that most people would never be privileged enough to see.

"Christ, Allie … what was that?"

"What can I say? It's my special power," she teased. Bea smiled and kissed her. Kissed her and smiled some more. Her hands cupped Allie's ass and then set off on a trip that took in her hips,
belly and breasts, all the time smiling.

"Excuse me," Bea finally said, scooching down the bed.

"Where are you going?"

"I need to spend some time with your lovely legs," she explained.

Allie laid back while Bea stroked and kissed from her feet up her legs. By the time Bea reached her thighs, Allie was squirming in place. The sensations from Bea's hands and lips were augmented by the way her hair tickled against her skin, and her arousal was becoming increasingly imperative.

"Bea …"

"Um?" Once she saw Allie's face, she smiled.

"Oh …" She scooted back up the bed and laid her fingertips questioningly against Allie's belly.

"Don't feel you have to …"

"I want to." She smiled into Allie's eyes. "Don't worry. I've been taking notes." Her fingers travelled down a little and stroked the hair there. "Soft," she murmured, and slipped her fingers between Allie's legs. Allie gasped at the jolt of sensation and twined her arms around Bea's neck.

"You feel so good," Bea told her, her voice dropping at the same time that she dropped her mouth onto Allie's, kissing her deeply, feelingly. Allie's hips strained up from the mattress and Bea slid a thigh over hers to keep her in place. "Like this?" Bea asked, moving her hand just so. "Here?" Allie gasped and nodded. Bea's touch slipped lightly over her most sensitive part.

"More …" Allie suggested, and Bea pressed a little firmer, moved a little faster. Lost in sensation, Allie forgot herself for a time in her enjoyment of the freedom to touch Bea wherever and however she wanted. She handled her breasts and her ass and revelled in tracing the curve between her waist and her hips. Then she felt Bea's lips travel down her breast and take her nipple into her mouth. Groaning, she arched her back, feeling her pleasure escalating. She wound her fingers into Bea's hair, moving her hips in concert with Bea's hand and, when Bea's teeth closed on her nipple, felt an uncontrollable shaking begin. Bea tightened her grip and took her over the edge into thoughtless pleasure.

When she came back to herself, it was to find Bea holding her close and sighing into her ear. Allie cuddled into her and stroked her back.

"You're obviously a very attentive student," she commented dryly.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to please the teacher," Bea laughed in return.

Allie wished that they could stay like this forever, but after a few minutes, she had a need that was becoming urgent. She began to slide out of Bea's arms.

"Hey. Where are you going?" she protested.

"Nature calls," she said over her shoulder as she disappeared upstairs to the bathroom.

By the time she came back downstairs, Bea was in the kitchen, her robe fastened tightly. "I didn't mean for you to get out of bed," Allie said in disappointment.

"It's just temporary," Bea soothed. "Coffee?" she asked.
"I suppose so," Allie said.

"You're not going to sulk, I hope," Bea admonished her with a laughing look. "Get back into bed and I'll bring it in."

"Anyone would think you didn't like having me naked in your kitchen."

Bea didn't miss a beat. "You're beautiful but very distracting," she countered. "Too distracting to be around boiling water."

Allie put her hands on her hips, and lifted her chin as though posing for a photograph. "I guess you have a point, darling," she drawled, tossing her hair and stalking off into the bedroom to the sound of Bea's laughter.

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They drank their coffee sitting up in bed, Bea blatantly ogling Allie's bare breasts, not caring about the amusement in her eyes. After a little desultory conversation, Bea laid her head on Allie's chest and curled into her side. When she next opened her eyes, she wasn't sure if she had slept or not. She glanced up at Allie. Her face was serene and watchful.

"Hey," Bea ventured.

"Hey. You went out like a light."

"Sorry."

"You really need to stop apologising. It was my absolute privilege to have you fall asleep on me."

Bea kissed her softly.

"What's the time?" Bea asked.

Allie glanced at the clock. "Nearly ten."

"I'll get cleaned up and then make us some breakfast … before it turns into lunch."

"Whilst you do that, I'll go and fetch Debbie."

Bea looked at her wonderingly. "I thought … you might want a little more alone time …"

"Always," Allie replied unhesitatingly, and kissed her. "But I mustn't be selfish. Debbie's been missing you. And as you're back to work tomorrow …"

"Thank you Allie cat. I've been missing her too," Bea said, touched by her thoughtfulness. She stroked her face and brought her lips to Allie's to give her a kiss intended to relay her gratitude and good fortune. When it quickly became something more heated, Allie pulled away with a laugh.

"Don't start anything," she warned her. "Or we might never leave this room."

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"Biscuits and gravy!" Debbie said gleefully. "Thank you Mama." Allie took a bite and shook her head.

"I don't know what you put into these, but they're amazing."
"Made with love. It improves the flavour." Allie smiled to hear such sentiment from Bea of all people. "Did you get much sleep last night Debbie? Or were you and Sophie up late?" Bea asked. Debbie told them all about her time with Sophie and Liz, gloriously incurious about what her mother and Allie had been up to, in the way children can be. "Sounds fun. But you might need an early night tonight."

"I'm not tired and I thought we were going to make tomato pie for supper," Debbie complained.

"Well, how about you come and help me pick the biggest, ripest tomatoes we can find?" Allie watched them disappear outside and went upstairs to have a long soak in the bath.

When she came back downstairs feeling refreshed, the tomatoes were sliced and draining, and Bea and Debbie were cuddled up on the couch, asleep, a storybook abandoned on the floor beside them. Allie was struck anew by how alike they looked. It was mainly the hair and the shape of the face, she supposed, but how fortunate that Debbie showed not a trace of Harry's blandly callous features. She left them to sleep, glad that Bea was laying down reserves for the week ahead.

Allie busied herself with whatever chores she could find that would not wake them. A couple of hours later, she was sitting on the porch making a hash of replacing a button on one of Debbie's dresses when Bea hurried past her, dressed in her overalls, heading for the shed. Allie watched her go and then, a minute later, return wearing a belt of tools. Allie stared at the way the belt rode her hips. Bea looked preoccupied, so Allie cleared her throat and adjusted her glasses. That got her attention all right. As she drew level with her, Allie looked at her over her glasses and said, "If you're trying to start something with that get-up, I'm not sure I'm in a position to do anything about it." Bea blushed. Allie smiled, loving that Bea still had that reaction even after everything they had done last night and this morning. Bea opened her hand to show her a small brass lock.

"I'm being a good landlady and providing my boarder with a little extra privacy," she replied, brandishing a screwdriver.

"So thoughtful. Do you think I'll have cause to try it out, say … tonight?"

Bea smiled.

Chapter End Notes

In memoriam: Leah Bracknell a.k.a. Zoe Tate from Emmerdale, whose death was announced today.
September, Bea reflected, stepping out into the noticeably cooler morning. Where did the last few weeks go? She couldn’t think that she had ever known a busier few weeks in her life. But they were also amongst her happiest and most productive. She was dividing her time between the hotel, her artwork, jobs around the house and, most time consuming of all, preparing for the coming of fall and winter. This meant making sure that they had enough firewood to see them through, cutting and sewing winter clothes for Debbie, and harvesting and putting up the produce from the expanded garden. She had a long-standing arrangement with Hank to exchange a bulk quantity of garden produce for a slaughtered and butchered hog which would provide them with meat through the winter. Preparing it all was exhausting, but the feeling of purposeful labour was a joyous one. And on top of all this she was attempting to share any spare time between Debbie and Allie. She made sure she got plenty of early nights and felt like she wasn’t doing too badly at covering all the bases.

Allie, predictably, didn’t always agree. She thought Bea was spreading herself too thin and wasn’t shy about telling her so. If she had her way, Bea would quit her job at the hotel and devote herself to her art. Bea recognised that the way things were going at the moment was unsustainable, but could not justify giving up her job until she found out if she could actually earn money through her drawings. It had taken her this long to produce four pieces of work that she was sufficiently happy with to show to Charles. Now to see if they could be sold. She had arranged with Allie that the three of them would meet up in Charlottesville after Bea’s shift today and they would visit the shop together. This meant that Bea wouldn’t need to go into town on the weekend, and, she wouldn’t need to bring her work with her to the hotel, as Allie and Debbie would transport it later.

Walking down the trail to the bus, Bea suppressed a smile as she thought of Allie. The last few weeks had brought them closer than ever: their increased physical intimacy had continued apace as Bea learned what Allie liked and Allie gradually showed Bea new ways they could enjoy each other. It had reached the point now that, sometimes, all Bea had to do was look at Allie, or catch the scent of her hair or skin, and every nerve in her body would light up in expectation. Bea thought of it as being like that experiment she had read about in the newspaper once, where the dogs were trained to salivate when they heard a bell. When Bea divulged this thought to Allie one evening, she had giggled helplessly for a while and then said, "Ring-a-ting-ding, Rover," and led her into the bedroom.

Yesterday afternoon was a case in point. She had arrived home to find Allie on her hands and knees in the garden, weeding, and dressed in Bea's overalls. Wearing her clothes when she was away from home was something Allie confessed to finding comforting. She said it stopped her from missing her so badly. But just that view of her shapely behind and the glimpse of bare leg where she had rolled up the pants was enough to cause Bea’s rational mind to be overridden by … well, what could it be called if not lust? It was hard to say what Bea might not have done if Debbie hadn’t at that moment appeared with the watering can. Allie had calmly stood up and brushed her hands off on her thighs, that maddeningly knowing expression on her face, that smile on her lips. Bea
sighed. Just thinking about Allie’s lips brought on the urge to kiss them: an outcome that was hours away.

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Allie blew some strands of hair away from her face. Despite the coolness of the early morning, the glass had steadily risen, and now it was another sweltering day. Not the best day for filling the kitchen with steam, as she made yet another batch of canned vegetables. The water was boiling, so she covered the pan of Mason jars with the steamer lid and looked at her watch. Bea had said that everything should steam for at least ten minutes to make sure the contents would get hot enough to kill any germs. She looked at the rows of already filled jars, those that were cooling on the table, and the ones on the shelves that Bea had already made. Those, together with the raw vegetables that had already been stored in the root cellar and the pork that Hank would provide, made up the entirety of their winter food stores. So far. Allie looked forward to the day they would run out of jars … although they did look pretty: a kaleidoscope of hues from the imperial purple of the cabbage through the vivid green of the sliced beans to the vermillion of the tomatoes. Perhaps this was the real reason Bea went to all this trouble every year: she just enjoyed the beauty of the filled shelves. Allie mentally chastised herself for even thinking it. The reason she had always done it was to ensure that she and Debbie would never starve, even when Harry left them for weeks with no money.

It was a fault, she knew, this habit of romanticising Bea, but how could she not? To Allie she was the archetypal mother, artist, and woman of the soil. Besides, draped on her bed, she resembled a figure from what Allie considered to be the most romantic of art movements, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. From the first moment of seeing her, Allie had been arrested by her appearance. One cup of tea later and she was in love with her, and, for a time, it had seemed like nothing might come of it. But over time Bea had managed to lower her walls until, at last, they had come together. Since that wonderful and difficult first night Bea had surprised her by being more open to the sensual side of their relationship than Allie had foreseen. The first time Allie had suggested that she put her mouth on her, Bea had looked shocked, but also intrigued, and when Allie’s mouth did settle there, she had practically levitated off the mattress with the intensity of her pleasure. Allie smiled at the memory, noticing that she was remarkably hot all of a sudden, in a way that could not be wholly accounted for by the canning. Which was steamier, she wondered, her thoughts or the beans? Shoot, the beans! She pulled the steamer off the heat and lifted one of the jars out with a tea cloth. They looked alright, but they’d definitely had more than ten minutes and she hoped they were not ruined.

She looked up at the sound of the creaking of the screen door, seeing Debbie enter with another bowl of green beans. “Look Allie!” she held it up for her inspection. “I found lots more.”

“That’s great.” Her heart sank. “Put them on the table. I think we’ll have to do those later. We should have some lunch and hurry up and go meet your mama.” Debbie clapped her hands excitedly at the thought of going into town.

“Will I be able to go and play with Caleb and Benji?” she asked.

“Mm. I’m not sure. We’ll have to see if there’s time.”

An hour later they were outside the store waiting for the bus, Bea’s artwork under Allie’s arm, carefully flattened between two boards and fastened with cords for safe keeping. Hank was filling a car with gas for a customer, but when he had finished, he wiped his hands on a rag and came over to chuck Debbie under the chin.

“Allie,” he nodded.
“Hi Hank. How are you?” He was smiling, but there was an uneasy look in his eye that caught Allie’s attention. “What’s up?”

“Can we … “ he indicated with his head that they should go to one side. A vague sense of dread followed her as they retreated a few feet from where Debbie was playing. “I don’t want to make any trouble, but I got to tell you what I heard the other day.” He fixed Allie with a pained look. She sighed.

“Go ahead,” she sighed, already fearing what he was going to say.

“I heard two fellas talking. One of them was saying what a fine-looking woman you are. No disrespect. And then the other fella says how if he wanted to get with you, he’d have to get past Bea Smith, because she’s mighty interested in you herself.” Allie’s heart was pounding with fear and anger. Here we go again. “Then there was some snickering and … comments I won’t repeat.” Allie laid a hand on his arm.

“Thanks Hank. I get the idea. Who were these two charming gentlemen?”

He looked around to make sure no-one was within earshot. “It was Matthew Pike and Jake Stewart. You know them?” Allie nodded.

“Matthew Pike’s the one with black hair and crooked teeth?”

Hank nodded. "And Jake Stewart is … well, bad news. Steer clear of him."

“I’ve seen them both at church.” She sighed and suddenly thought to wonder what Hank was making of all this. She shot him a questioning glance. He replied with an unwavering look.

“I got my ear to the ground. Some folk round here hardly even see me, so I hear things. I’ll let you know if I hear anything else.” He hesitated. “I don’t want to tell you how to behave … but you and Bea should be careful. You don’t want to fuel these rumours. It could get ugly.” Allie nodded. Was it possible that Liz had told him about them? Or did he just have his own suspicions? She took a chance.

“I know. Believe me, I know,” she replied, feelingly. He nodded in understanding and smiled.

“With a bit of luck, it’ll die down. Try not to worry.”

“Yeah. I gotta go …” she indicated the bus drawing up. She bundled Debbie on, paying their fares, her mind already occupied with a terrifying question: how the hell was she going to tell Bea?

Charles lifted his head and gave Bea a piercing look. "Your style has matured since the last time I saw you."

Bea blushed. In her private thoughts she attributed the blossoming of her work to the corresponding unfurling of her love life. "Then you’ll take them?"

He nodded. "This one's going in the window." He indicated the view from the picnic spot. Bea smiled.

"You like it?" He nodded again.

"What’s this?” he asked, pointing to the bottom right hand corner.
"Oh … Allie said I should sign my work, but … I wasn’t sure, so I drew in a honey bee on each one. Kind of like signing it, but not. ‘Cause of my name …” she explained, nervously.

“Yes, I see. I like it.” He glanced at Allie with friendly amusement. “And regarding your work as a whole, your use of colour is as good as anything I’ve seen. It'll sell, for sure. And it'll draw customers into the shop." He smiled, shrugged one shoulder and raised his eyebrows at her. "I wish you'd walked in here five years ago. You're going to be very good for business." He clapped her on the arm and began explaining about mounting and framing. Bea could see Allie's told-you-so grin from across the shop. She knew that she was blushing with pleasure at Charles's words, but she was smiling too hard to care.

Leaving the shop half an hour later, Bea paused outside and looked at the window for a moment, imagining what it would be like to walk past and see her own work displayed there. Debbie hugged her around the waist, jumping up and down with excitement.

"We should celebrate," Allie announced, her face glowing with pride. Looking at her, Bea became lightheaded: just for once she felt maybe she deserved that pride. "There's a malt shop just down here. How about an ice cream Deb?"

"Yesss!"

"Oh, I don't know Allie. Hadn't we better earn the money before we spend it?"

"C'mon Bea. How often does something like this happen?" Her eyes held a plea that Bea was defenceless against, so she gave in gracefully and allowed Debbie to drag her along the sidewalk to the malt shop.

On the bus journey home, Bea reflected on their afternoon. Allie had been her usual ebullient self at first, excited by Bea's success. But when Bea had offered her a taste of her sundae, she had flinched from the proffered spoon in a most uncharacteristic way. She was right, of course. They shouldn't allow such obviously affectionate gestures in public. After that Bea observed her more narrowly, noticing that she was quieter than usual, the cheeky gleam in her eye dimmer. What could be bothering her?

On the trail up to the house, Debbie ran on ahead, so Bea took the opportunity to question her.

"So, spill it. What's up Allie cat?" she asked quietly. Allie's head whipped round.

"Who says anything's up?" she asked defensively. Bea sighed.

"I'm not blind. You've been so happy, and now something's gone and taken the shine off. You'd better tell me what it is."

Allie groaned. "I was going to tell you later. I didn't want to spoil this for you."

"It won't. Tell me."

"You're not going to like it," Allie warned her.

* * * * * * * *

Bea's face had stiffened into a mask as she listened to Allie's retelling of the conversation she'd had with Hank.

"How does Jake Stewart know about us?" she growled.
"He doesn't. He can't, obviously. He's just guessing, or … trying to stir up trouble."

"Why?" she wondered aloud. "Oh, this is about him liking the look of you," Bea told her. Allie scoffed. "The first time he saw you, his eyes were all over you, don't you remember?" Allie couldn't think what she meant. "I remember, because I really wanted to punch him, but I restrained myself. It was outside church … the day of the picnic." Allie nodded. It was coming back to her now.

"So, he thinks I'm a lesbian because I wouldn't flirt with him? Rather than because he thinks we're together?"

Bea shrugged, looking uncomfortable. "Maybe. Or maybe he could sense how much I hated his eyes on you."

"Well, there's not much we can do about it. Except be more careful than ever."

All through preparing and eating supper Allie watched Bea's face become more immobile, her shoulders become more tense, her hands become fists and her lips harden. She hardly spoke and, once they had finished clearing up, she sat at the table, ostensibly studying the paperwork Charles had given her, though her eyes were clouded. Allie laid a hand on her shoulder. Nothing. It was like caressing a plank of wood or a piece of stone. Allie's stomach dropped: she had feared she would take it badly.

"Want me to do Debbie's bath?" she asked. Bea finally looked at her.

"Sure," she agreed, but her face was still closed to her. Allie sighed and climbed the stairs.

Once Debbie was bathed Allie went and got changed. Somehow, she had ended up almost as wet as Debbie. She was sure Bea didn't have this problem when she did bath time. She ran back up to read a bedtime story, but twenty minutes later there was still no sign of Bea. Debbie's eyes were drooping, and Allie couldn't justify keeping her up any longer. She tucked her in. "Want me to go and see if Mama can come up and kiss you goodnight?" she asked. Debbie nodded sleepily.

Downstairs Bea was still sitting in the same position, her head in her hands.

"Bea," Allie's voice came out louder than she had intended, and Bea flinched. "Your daughter needs a goodnight kiss." Bea jumped to her feet, looking a little ashamed. She wrapped her arms around her middle and climbed the stairs with deliberation.

"Thanks for doing bath time," she said when she came back down. She just about managed to look Allie in the eye. "And thanks for not washing her hair. It was way too close to bedtime." It was only now that she appeared to notice that Allie was in her nightgown. "Is it really late?"

"No. Your daughter just got me really wet." That generated a faint smile. Allie went up to her and took her hand, smoothing out her fingers and warming it between her palms. "I know that what Hank said has thrown you for a loop, but please don't do that. Don't go away from us like that."

Bea looked at the floor. "I don't mean to." Allie nodded. "I don't know if I can …"

"I think I get it," Allie interrupted. "It's a reaction to danger, something you learned from all those years with Harry. You distance yourself, so it won't hurt so much."

"Maybe. But also, my mind can't stay away from imagining what might happen … in the worst case." Allie's heart was aching. She hated to see Bea like this.
"Tell me." Bea shook her head and looked at the floor. "Tell me the worst thought," she insisted. She stroked Bea's hand, wishing she would look at her. Bea swallowed.

"Debbie. They take Debbie away." Allie felt a pang of shock at the idea.

"Who? Who could take Debbie away?"

"The county. If they decided I was an unfit mother."

"That won't happen," she said, automatically. But her mind was calculating. Could that happen? "I would never let them. And I don't believe you would either."

"I would never let them. And I don't believe you would either." she told her firmly, though her heart was jouncing with terror. She put her arms around her, but Bea was still rigid with fear. This was all her fault. She should have had the strength to stay away from Bea all those months ago. She had known rumours could start and cause a lot of trouble, but she had selfishly pursued her anyway.

"How could we stop them?"

"We could leave. Go out of state … if we had to." Not much comfort there. "Become fruit pickers in Florida … join a travelling circus." Bea huffed a minute sound of amusement. "Anyway, we shouldn't borrow trouble. It's one comment from one creep. Probably nothing will come of it." Bea breathed out and finally looked at her. Her expression was still pained, but she was more present now. Present enough to be glancing at Allie’s neckline, her eyes travelling down to her bust, where the thin cotton of her nightgown did a poor job of hiding her breasts. Allie leaned her forehead against Bea's, assessing her mood. She put her hands on Bea’s waist and saw her chest heave, heard her swallow. Allie drew her into the bedroom and locked the door.

Bea said nothing and made no move, but her eyes had gone very dark. Allie quickly stripped her of her clothes and laid her on the bed. She still felt as stiff and brittle as a twig. Allie touched her urgently and brought her to a quick, hard climax. Then, once her body had unclenched, she took a long, slow time, kissing her languidly and then loving every inch of her with her hands and her mouth, until Bea was almost delirious with it and implored her, "Finish it." Which Allie did, putting her mouth over Bea's at the last moment, because she knew Bea loved that, muffling her cries.

When Bea put her hands on Allie, she knew she wouldn't last long, but managed to whisper into her ear, between gasps, "I love you, Bea … do you know … how much? … God, I love you … so much … more than you know … I love your touch …" She kept it up, right until the moment she could no longer form a coherent thought. When she came down, she could feel tears on Bea's face. "Don't cry …" she pleaded, distressed, wiping them away.

Bea shook her head, and laughed shakily. "It's just your sweet words … they really got to me." She held Allie’s face softly between her hands, as though it was the most precious thing in the world, and kissed her tenderly. "I've never felt closer to you than I do tonight. I love you Allie cat … and you're right. Everything will be alright." Allie’s heart swelled with love and relief, because she had said and done the right things, and now Bea was comforted. Bea drew her close and held her until she slept.

* * * * * * *

A while later, Bea grudgingly disentangled herself from Allie’s warm body and went up to her room. She always tried to sleep in her own bed on Friday and Saturday nights because Debbie liked to come into her bed for a cuddle when she woke up on the weekends. She slipped into her nightshirt and climbed between the cold sheets, lying very still, shivering slightly. She did feel better now, after accepting the love that Allie offered so liberally, and hearing her words of
reassurance, but she still couldn’t quite shake the thought that Allie knew no better than she did how this would all turn out.
Chapter 24

Happy Halloween!
Thanks for all the comments and kudos - you're all very generous, and I hope you enjoy this new chapter.

On Saturday Allie was relieved to find that Bea’s positive mood had survived the night. She and Debbie were up and singing in the kitchen at some sickeningly early hour. She tried putting her pillow over her head to muffle the sound and go back to sleep, but a few minutes later there was a tap on the door. “Come in,” she sighed, resigned. Debbie somehow elbowed the door open and came in carrying a cup with both hands, walking very gingerly, so as not to spill a drop. Allie propped herself up on her pillows. “Good morning Debbie … if it even is morning.”

“Mama sends you this coffee, and asks if you’re ever getting up, lazybones,” Debbie grinned, handing her the cup, thrilled to be delivering such a cheeky message. Allie gasped in mock outrage. "Thank your mama for the coffee and tell her …"

"Tell her what?” Bea asked, poking her head around the door, smiling. Allie looked at her, and felt her stomach give that excited flip that it so often performed around Bea. Bea's lips were twitching with mirth, her eyes were sparking, and her hair was curling as though it had a thousand volts passing through it. She appeared to be relaxed and happy, and Allie toes curled in pleasure just to see her. If Bea was at all worried about what they had heard yesterday, it didn't show.

"Tell her … she's looking very pretty this morning. And so are you, Miss Smith."

Debbie laughed. "Come on. We're making breakfast."

Bea lingered against the door frame whilst Debbie scampered off.

"I'm glad to see you so cheerful," Allie told her.

"And I'm glad to see you wearing your nightgown," Bea retorted.

"Yes, luckily I got chilly in the night and put it on. My hot water bottle had wandered off," she pouted.

"Honestly. Didn't you get enough of me earlier on?"

"Never,” Allie replied, looking at her through her lashes, only half in jest.

Bea scoffed. "You're insatiable."

"I'm insatiable? That's a bit rich."

Bea laughed.

"Mama!” Debbie called. "Can you help me slice this bread?"
"I'd better go before she cuts herself. How do you want your eggs?"

Allie shrugged. "I'm easy."

"Tell me something I don't know."

Bea was determined not to, as Allie put it, borrow trouble, so she was going to do her best to give them all a fun day, aware that, all too soon, Allie and Debbie would be back to school and they would have less time together. Debbie was desperate to teach her how to play chess and Bea submitted more or less gracefully, she felt, to the humiliation of being tutored by a seven-year-old, while Allie took the opportunity to get on with some lesson planning. Bea took the red pieces, while Debbie opted for white, and it wasn’t long before the red pieces began to pile up next to the board. Bea had got the moves memorised alright but couldn’t seem to think in the right way to prevent Debbie’s attacks and, by lunchtime, she had to admit defeat. Chess was not going to be her game.

After lunch Bea declared a mini Olympics would take place in front of the house. She set up an obstacle course, a high jump and a long jump. There would also be running races, a three-legged race and a sack race.

“Allie, has your watch got a second hand?”

She glanced at it. “Yes,” she replied, her eyes shining with a happiness that Bea attributed to the rare light-heartedness that she was showing. Bea smiled at her. She was so beautiful. The memory of how Allie had made love to her the previous night came back to her in a rush. How lucky she was to have someone in her life who was prepared to spend so much time making her feel good, drawing her away from the dark places that still dwelt in her mind. She felt her cheeks become inflamed by the swell of arousal that the memory caused to saturate her body and pool in the base of her belly. Allie watched her with avid eyes and Bea felt sure that she knew exactly what she was thinking and feeling.

“Who wants to go first?” Bea asked thickly, collecting herself. Predictably, Debbie’s hand shot up.

“All right, Deb. So, you weave between the bean poles, then balance along here, then you have to crawl under this tarp …” Bea explained the route to her. “And then run and touch the tree and see what time you get. Allie, you good to time it?”

Allie nodded, and waited for the second hand to reach the twelve. Debbie took a sprinter’s start pose and waited with determination set in every line of her face and body. “Ready, set, go!” She set off at a terrific pace and took the whole course with the speed of a greyhound and the agility of an eel. Bea cheered her along, loving the fierce expression on her face. There was no way Debbie would let anyone beat her if she could help it. Bea went next, knowing she would struggle to get near to Debbie’s time, cursing when she snagged her overalls on a pole and became entangled, ruining her time.

Allie was laughing at her annoyance, apparently amused that anyone could get competitive over a bit of fun. “Too slow, Bea,” she told her. “Debbie’s got you beat.”

“All right, let’s see how you do then!” Allie gave her watch to Bea and accepted the challenge, setting off with great enthusiasm. When she reached the tarp she knelt down, pushed her head under and stuck her ass in the air. It was a choice view, but Bea didn’t have much opportunity to appreciate it because she was laughing so hard. Allie had a peculiar technique which made it appear as though a giant caterpillar was rippling along under the tarpaulin; a giant caterpillar in no particular hurry.
When she finally emerged from the other end, her hair was all over her face and she staggered over to the tree to finish.

“That was good, right?” she asked breathlessly, grinning.

“Not even close,” Bea replied. “But good effort. You get an A plus for being entertaining.”

“Hey!” Allie dug her in the ribs, pretending to be offended.

The Olympics continued, with wins and losses on all sides. Allie aced the long and high jumps, despite Bea’s best efforts, but the honours for the running races were split between Bea and Debbie.

“No fair!” Allie declared, when Bea won her heat against Allie by a goodly distance. “You’re too fast. You need a handicap.”

“What do you suggest?” Bea asked, gamely.

Allie thought for a moment. “You run with Debbie on your back. That should slow you down.”

“Allrighty,” Bea grinned. “C’mon Deb. You can be my jockey. I reckon I’ll go even faster with you on board.” Debbie jumped up and held Bea around the neck, gripping with her legs.

“Gee up, Mama!”

“Hold on. We haven’t started yet …”

“Ready … Go!” They raced off, their bare feet raising clouds of dust, Debbie hollering at Bea and kicking with her feet to make her go faster. It was closer this time, but Bea still came in ahead of Allie, who collapsed on the ground, her chest heaving, while Debbie, still perched on Bea’s back, cheered, her arms aloft in victory.

“We won!”

At that moment a car drew up in front of the house. Bea turned around to look. A man got out, put on his broad-brimmed hat, hitched up his pants, and started towards them.

* * * * * * * *

Allie’s heart was pounding, and not just from the running. There was no mistaking that uniform. This could not be a good thing. Bea was peering at him, recognition dawning. “Shorty Burdette? Is that you?” she asked in a tone of disbelief. Shorty. That had to be an ironic nickname, as the man was at least six three. He smiled as he ambled over.

“Bea,” he said nodding at her in a friendly manner. Bea walked up to him and shook his hand, seeming pleased.

“It’s been an age. How the hell are you?”

“Good. Good, thanks,” he replied. “Having fun?” Debbie was still perched on Bea’s back and Allie suddenly remembered she was sitting on the ground. She hastily got to her feet and brushed herself off.

Bea laughed. “Just foolin’ around.” She let Debbie slip off her back. “This is Debbie, my daughter.” Shorty tipped his hat to her.
“Last time I saw you, you were just a little bitty thing,” he said. Debbie smiled up at him.

“And this is Allie Novak, my lodger.” He touched his fingers to his hat brim.

“Nice to meet you ma’am.”

“Sherriff,” Allie replied, cautiously.

“God, yes. I suppose I’d better be calling you Sherriff Burdette now, huh? Congratulations,” Bea told him. “C’mon inside. I’ll make us some coffee and we can catch up.”

“Actually Bea, this isn’t a social call …” There was a long silence during which the sheriff kept a neutral face and Bea started to look panicked. Allie was equally alarmed but did her best not to show it. The silence continued to stretch on until Allie couldn’t stand it any longer. She stepped up to Bea and met her eyes.

"Shall I …" she began, gesturing at Debbie.

Bea swallowed and looked away in confusion. "Um. Yes. Could you take Debbie up to her room so that Shorty and I can talk?" Allie nodded and held out her hand to Debbie. She hated leaving Bea to hear whatever this was alone, but it was imperative that she remain 'just the lodger', so she had to play her part.

She took Debbie into the house, picking up the chessboard and the box of playing pieces on her way upstairs. As they set up the board Allie looked at Debbie carefully, but she seemed unconcerned by the visit from the sheriff, so Allie decided not to pursue the issue for now.

The minutes stretched out painfully. Allie tried to concentrate on the game. She could hear the murmur of voices from downstairs, but there was no way of knowing what was being said. Allie's mind was frantically turning over the possible reasons for the sheriff's visit. A death seemed the most likely, but Bea didn't have any family except Mary, Don and the boys. And Harry. Could this be the news they had been waiting for? Or could it be that the rumours about them had already reached the authorities and that this visit was about concerns for Debbie's welfare? Nausea swept through her at the thought and sweat broke out on her face and down her back.

"Check," Debbie declared. Allie refocussed on the board, having no memory of how she had got into this position. She moved her king out of the path of Debbie's threatening bishop. Allie heard the screen door creak open and the sound of a car start up. She got to her feet and stood there indecisively, desperate to go to Bea but not wanting to leave Debbie on her own. The screen door creaked again, and Allie got to the window in time to see Bea heading off into the woods at a rapid pace, distress evident in every line of her body. Allie turned away from the window just as Debbie made her move. Allie watched with a sense of dread as the red queen was removed from the board.

"You weren't concentrating Allie, and now you've lost your queen," Debbie told her smugly.

Allie's heart pounded. "Well done, Deb. You win," she replied, attempting to sound ordinary, tamping down her fear and anger for Debbie's sake.

"The game's not over yet," Debbie said with a frown.

"I concede," Allie replied, folding her arms over her chest and gripping her arms, holding herself together. "I can't beat you with the pieces I've got left."

"That's the first time I've beaten you!" Debbie exclaimed. "But I don't think you should give up so easily … ” she added quietly.
"Don't worry. I won't," Allie replied, looking out of the window. Debbie brow creased in puzzlement as she joined her at the window.

"What are you looking at?"

"Just wondering where your mama has gone."

"Which way did she go?" Allie pointed. "Probably gone up to the glade," Debbie said judiciously. "It’s where she goes when she needs to think," she added, her brown eyes meeting Allie’s calmly. Allie smiled, surprised at her perspicacity. It was hardly Debbie’s role to reassure her, but she did feel a little heartened by the girl’s level-headed attitude and her calm acceptance of Bea’s behaviour.

Whilst Debbie tidied away the chess game, Allie went downstairs to make a start on supper. Every fibre of her yearned to just take off after Bea, to catch up to her and hold her steady and make her tell her what was going on. But she couldn’t. Debbie needed her here, and the fact that Bea was gone meant that she didn’t want to be around Allie right now. As much as she was hurt by that fact, and as much as she hoped it wouldn’t always be this way, Allie had to accept that this was how Bea coped with adversity.

A slip of white paper caught Allie’s eye. A note was lying on the kitchen table: *Sorry, need to clear my head. Back soon.* It was scrawled untidily in pencil and signed off with the barest outline of a bee. Allie felt her brow loosen a little and her shoulders drop. Communication … of a sort. You might even call it progress.

Throughout supper and its aftermath Allie must have glanced at the door a hundred times, each time expecting to see Bea coming home to them, each time disappointed. When she settled down to listen to the radio with Debbie, she hardly heard a word, and when she read her a bedtime story, she was barely aware of her own voice. She kissed Debbie goodnight and told her that her mother would be home soon, having no idea if that was the truth. Then she went downstairs and paced and brooded whilst the dusk settled heavily on the silent house.

Allie was so lost in thought that it was a while before she registered a distant sound. Her head came up and she hurried over to the window. It was the sound of an axe splitting wood, and, sure enough, there was Bea over at the chopping block by the shed, taking her feelings out on a hunk of wood. Relief drenched her anxious mind. She was fine, physically at least, and she was home. Allie was able to take her first deep breath since the sheriff arrived. She perched by the window and watched Bea swing the axe, legs braced, arms extended. From this angle she couldn’t see her face, but judging by the ferocity of the blows, she was still pretty upset. Allie held herself back and let her be.

Once Allie decided it was getting too dark for chopping wood to be a safe occupation, she steeled herself and went outside to confront the situation. She walked carefully around Bea at a distance, not wanting to startle her, until she was facing her. She waited until Bea put the axe down in order to collect another piece of wood before she spoke.

“Bea. You’ve got to come inside now, it’s getting dark.” Bea said nothing, just looked down at the ground, her arms hanging limply by her sides, her chest heaving from her exertions. Allie approached her slowly and slipped her left hand into Bea’s right: it was red hot and trembling. “Come inside now,” she repeated, tugging gently at the hand. Bea allowed herself to be led into the house. The minute they were inside Allie put the light on and tipped Bea’s face up so that she could look at her properly. Her eyes were red, her face flushed, her hair wild and filled with tiny fragments of wood. She couldn’t, or wouldn’t, look at Allie, so she simply sat her down at the kitchen table. “You must be hungry. I kept your supper warm on the stove. Do you want it now?”
Bea shook her head and then laid it and her forearms on the table. "Is Debbie alright?"

"She's fine. She's sleeping."

“You must hate me for running off like that,” she said, her voice muffled but nonetheless agonised. “Especially after yesterday.” Allie studied the top of her head and sighed.

“Of course I don’t hate you Bea,” she said, unable to keep the exasperation out of her voice. “But I was worried about you. You’ve been gone for hours. Anything could have happened.” She let that sink in. “And I’m disappointed that you didn’t stick around to tell me whatever it is that’s got you so upset.” She watched as Bea’s hands tightened into fists, a gesture she knew denoted frustration with herself rather than anger at Allie. But it was impossible to stay annoyed with her for long, so she laid her hand on her head and worked her fingers into her curls until Bea sobbed and abruptly buried her face into Allie’s midriff.

Allie pulled her to her feet so that she could hold her properly. Whilst Bea sobbed convulsively into her neck, Allie held her tight against her body. She smelled wonderfully of earth and wood shavings, but she was so hot Allie began to wonder if she was ill. Once Bea’s heaving sobs had calmed somewhat, Allie laid her palm against Bea’s forehead. She was hot, but it didn’t feel like a fever. Allie walked her over to the couch and sat her down, then fetched her a tall glass of water and watched her empty it thirstily. "Better?" she asked whilst Bea caught her breath and dried her eyes. When she nodded Allie just launched in, afraid that if she didn’t ask now she would lose her nerve. "Tell me what the sheriff told you. All of it. Even if it's the worst thing."

"So, they found the truck." Allie swallowed. She asked the question. "Did they find Harry?"

Bea shook her head. "No. See, that's what I thought. That the only way he's been silent so long is that he's dead."

"So that's it? They found the truck?"

"Not quite." Bea rubbed her hands over her face and took a deep breath. "On the front seat … they found a shirt. A bloody shirt. And the truck … it had been hidden. Covered in branches so it wouldn't be found." Bea sniffed and looked at Allie, her eyes filling again. Allie was dumb with surprise, feeling as though she had suddenly been drenched in icy water. She suppressed a shiver. What did this mean? "The sheriff’s department are investigating. Shorty asked me all kinds of questions, and …" Bea took her hand gently, "… judging by how he looked at me, I'm a suspect. The prime suspect in Harry's disappearance."
Allie was quiet for a time, thinking through the possible circumstances that could have led them to this point, Bea supposed. She was squeezing her hand, looking concerned but not giving in to panic. Bea was grateful. If Allie fell apart, what would she do? She felt a pang of shame that she hadn't been as stoical herself. When would she ever be the person Allie needed and deserved? Now would be a damn good time.

"Tell me exactly what you told the sheriff," Allie finally said, breaking into her thoughts.

"He wanted to know when I had last seen Harry." She looked at Allie, whose eyes were steady on her face. Bea marvelled at her calmness. Was she holding herself together for Bea's sake? Or was it possible that she hadn't grasped the seriousness of the situation? "I told him about that night, but I didn't tell him everything." Allie nodded. "Probably for the best. Telling him that you hit your husband over the head with a shovel probably wouldn't have looked too good." Bea could only ascribe her flippant tone to a necessity to protect herself.

She clenched her jaw and forced herself to speak, contrary to what her sense of dread was telling her. "Actually … I told him about that."

Allie groaned. "Bea. What were you thinking?"

"I needed to tell him the truth. After all, I didn't kill Harry. The part I missed out was you. I told him I was alone that night."

Allie was silent for a long beat, her eyes wide. "So, you lied to the sheriff, but you admitted knocking Harry out with a shovel?" Her voice was laced with disbelief.

"Yes. I told him that we fought. I told him about the shovel. And then I explained that we agreed to separate. That Harry drove away with a bump on the head but otherwise in good health and that I haven't seen or heard from him since. It's as close as I could get to the truth without involving you." She gazed into Allie's face, silently imploring her to understand.

"But I am involved, Bea. You can't think that there's any way that Debbie or I can avoid involvement. If you're involved, we're involved. Besides, if I hadn't shown up that night, we wouldn't be in this position now. You've got to let me take responsibility for my part in this."

"You are responsible. In the very best way. If you hadn't shown up, Debbie and I would still be miserable, and I would still be being pummelled whenever Harry felt vexed. Do you think I would have a job?" She asked insistently. "Do you think I would be making art? Being loved? Do you think Debbie would be settled and happy, like she's become since you came into her life?" Allie's eyes were downcast, but Bea was determined to make her see. She reached out and lifted her chin with one hand, making their eyes meet, trying to show her what was in her heart, pounding as it
was. "You don't see it, do you? Debbie's learning from you. And I don't mean because you're her teacher. She's learning how a family should be. How to have fun. Do you think she would ever have started playing chess without you? Reading the books you've encouraged her to try? You must have noticed that the imaginary pets have disappeared." Bea watched that realisation cross Allie's features. "Because she doesn't need them anymore." Bea swallowed. "I know I was hard on you after that night, but you were right to force the issue. I was so used to our lives the way they were. I didn't realise how bad it was until you showed me how good it could be. So. There's no way on earth that I'm going to let you get into trouble for what you did." She felt so grateful to Allie for the love she gave her. She was terrified that the future she had dared to imagine for them would soon be cut short but looking back she had not found a single turning point where she would have taken a different path, even knowing where it would lead them.

Allie remained silent, searching Bea's eyes. Bea held her gaze, needing her to know that she meant everything she had said. Finally, she smiled and glanced away. "I think that might be the most I've ever heard you say in one go," she said with a strangled laugh. "I'm glad you feel that way, but from a certain angle I've brought you nothing but trouble. Yesterday, when you said what you did about fearing that you'd lose Debbie, I felt horribly responsible …"

"God, Allie, you can't be blamed for what other people say or think about us."

"Maybe not. But we have to live in the real world, where ignorant people might say and do things that would destroy what we have." A shadow of fear was creeping into her eyes, but she glanced away almost before Bea could recognise it.

"Allie. You said not to borrow trouble, and we won't. We'll face each test … but only when it arises. And together." Bea placed her palm against her face and kissed her gently but feelingly on the lips. "I love you beautiful girl and what we have is worth fighting for."

Allie nodded and pressed her cheek into Bea's hand. "Anyway," she sighed, brightening, artificially, to Bea's eyes. "What's done is done. And you're going to have to stick to the story you told the sheriff, otherwise it'll look suspicious. It seems like the two of you know each other, so I guess he's not inclined to make you out as a murderer …"

"Yeah, Shorty and I went to school together. We palled up. He was always getting teased about his height and I was always getting it about my hair, so we were natural allies. But the fact that he knows me cuts both ways. He's seen me lose my temper enough times to know that it's not impossible that I could have killed Harry. I'm sure he remembers the day I whupped Peter Willet's ass for making fun of Jenny McDonald, and Peter was a foot taller than me and fifty pounds heavier …"

Allie was smirking, obviously interested in this nugget of information from Bea's past, and happy to avoid the implications of what Bea was trying to tell her. "I'd like to have seen that. So, who was this Jenny girl?"

"Just a girl in my school, a couple of years older and very smart. Peter always made fun of her because she wore glasses."

"So, you … liked her …?" Allie was grinning impudently now, almost banishing the darkness.

"No! " But Bea was blushing, some vague echo of a long-forgotten feeling ricocheting around inside her head.

"God, you have a thing for girls with glasses!" Allie teased.
"I do not," Bea denied. But Allie was smiling and looking at her in that special way that meant she wanted her suddenly.

"You're so adorable when you blush," Allie told her, her lips finding Bea’s and kissing her urgently. Bea accepted her mouth with relief, suddenly glad that neither of them could now speak of this impending disaster. Her body reacted without restraint, pushing Allie back onto the couch, her tongue slipping between her lips, making her groan and press against her. She pulled Allie's hips against her with one arm, her other hand snaking up inside her blouse, while her mouth travelled down to her throat, sucking and kissing her soft skin. Bea placed her hand over Allie's breast, wishing she had the dexterity to whisk her bra away with one hand like Allie had often done with hers. Impatience won out and she pulled the brassiere cups away and up, pushed her blouse up too and hungrily filled her hand and mouth with Allie's tender flesh. Allie's breathing was becoming harsher, her hips pressing into Bea, encouraged by Bea's circling arm.

"Bedroom," Bea murmured, her breaths laboured.

"Um," Allie replied, winding her legs around Bea's waist in a way that made her blood surge. Bea came up onto her knees, pulling Allie with her, managing to stand as Allie held on round her neck, kissing her Feverishly. They made an unsteady journey across the room. Bea flung the door open and headed for the bed, planning to deposit Allie there while she closed the door, but Allie clung on so that she was forced to turn them both back around, feeling blindly behind Allie for the door handle. Once the door was finally closed, Bea could see no reason why she shouldn't just press Allie up against it. So she did, Allie groaning her approval. Crushed together, pulses hammering in unison, holding Allie’s weight on her hips, Bea allowed herself, for once, to feel the power of her own actions, and her hands roamed mercilessly over Allie’s breasts and ass, revelling in every helpless sound she made.

Desperate to feel Allie give herself over to her, Bea slipped her hand under Allie’s skirt and up the leg of her drawers. It was awkward to get her hand between them, so Bea put her other arm under Allie’s ass to take some of the pressure off her hips and braced it with her thigh. The space she had created was just enough and she was able to skim her fingers between Allie’s legs, before gliding between her folds, astonished at how aroused she had become in such a short time. Allie threw her head back against the door, gasping noisily as Bea stroked that most sensitive spot. Bea kissed her way up her lengthened neck to her ear, gently biting the velvety lobe, increasing the motions of her hand in concert with Allie’s accelerated breathing. She rocked into her rhythmically, loving the feeling of power it gave her as Allie’s sounds grew more desperate. “Let go for me,” Bea whispered in her ear. Allie began to tremble against her. Bea didn’t let up one bit, keeping her motions firm and regular. Allie dropped her head to Bea’s shoulder and bit down on her as she cried out sharply once, and then again, her body jerking against Bea, while Bea’s head swam with satisfaction.

* * * * * * * *

"That was ..." Allie began, searching for the right word.

"Amazing?" Bea supplied. "Sexy?"

Allie laughed. "You said it. Sexy." She kissed Bea thoughtfully. "I was going to say sudden, actually. Weren't we in the middle of a conversation?"

"Mm," Bea replied vaguely, no keener to think about that just now than Allie herself.

"Then what happened?"
"You kissed me. And …" Bea trailed off.

"Lit the blue touch paper. But I neglected to stand well back."

Bea laughed and buried her face in Allie's neck. "Sorry if it was a bit too …"

Allie rolled onto her back, pulling Bea on top of her. "Never apologise for wanting me. And it wasn't too much. It was very … god. Very …" Allie's body and brain were still fizzing and couldn't come up with the word. Bea was laughing.

"Allie Novak lost for words. I never thought I'd see the day."

Allie put on a stupefied expression. "I think you broke me." Bea laughed again and Allie just had to kiss her. That laughing mouth, that shy smile: it would be her undoing. And speaking of undoing, Bea was wearing entirely too many clothes. Her fingers started in on the clasps of her overalls, a tiny part of her mind aware of some danger crawling nearby, something that required her attention. But this new urgency made it easy to ignore.

"What do you think you're doing?" Bea asked her teasingly, removing her hands from the fastenings. "I haven't had my fill of you yet." At the look in her eyes and the suggestive way Bea said that word, Allie felt a violent clench between her legs.

Some time later, Allie lay in Bea's arms enjoying the closeness and a warm buzz throughout her body. She placed a lazy kiss against Bea's chest, just below her collarbone, planning a trail of kisses that would take her mouth lower. Bea's stomach took that moment to announce its emptiness with a loud gurgle. Allie's head shot up.

"You never got your supper," she recalled, stricken by her forgetfulness. "Do you want it now?"

"Mm. I could eat," she replied, not moving. Allie planted one more kiss.

"Come on. You must be hungry," she said, sitting up and rearranging her disordered clothing, finding the items that had been discarded.

"I'm kind of chilly," Bea said, sitting up. "I'll just get a sweater," and she padded off upstairs whilst Allie headed for the kitchen.

"Well, it's pretty much dried out," Allie told her when she returned, examining Bea's plate. It didn't look too appetising.

"It's fine," Bea said shortly. Allie watched her as she ate hungrily, noticing that she had put on that dark teal sweater. Allie hadn't seen it in months, as it had been too warm, but looking at it now reminded Allie of the day of the rainstorm and what Bea had told her about it. Just the fact that she was wearing it suggested that she was feeling fragile and her heart cringed at the knowledge. Yesterday's news had seemed bad enough, but now life had thrown them a curveball that neither of them had been prepared for. Allie had to be honest with herself: she had managed to forget about Harry these last few weeks, eclipsing him with her newfound joy. How foolish that seemed now.

"We should make a plan," Allie said, once Bea had finished eating.

"What do you mean?" Bea asked wearily.

"We need to find you a lawyer. A good one. Just in case."

"We can't afford a bad lawyer never mind a good one," Bea objected.
"The money I promised Harry. We can use that. It's not looking like he's going to need it …"

Bea looked pensive. "Is this it? Is he really dead?" Allie sat down beside her and put her arms around her, resting her face against her shoulder.

"I don't know …"

"I've wished him dead so many times, but just now it would be really helpful if he wasn't. A body turns up and Shorty'll be knocking on our door for sure." She ran her hands over her face in frustration. "If I'd just hit him a bit harder … then at least there would be a reason for all this," she growled.

Allie pulled her into her lap, breathing in her comforting smell of wool and freshly cut wood, enjoying the gentle scratch of her sweater against her skin. "Don't say that. That's not you. You showed him more mercy than he deserved, but it's better that you don't have to live with something like that."

Bea gave a bleak smile. "We need to talk to Liz and Maxine. Warn them that they might get a visit from the sheriff. Make sure that they don't let on that you were here that night."

Allie sighed. "Yeah, I suppose." They were both silent. Bea’s face was downcast, and Allie could only wonder what she was thinking. Allie’s mind churned over possible scenarios and solutions, whilst still hiding from the black dread that slithered, hardly glimpsed, on the edge of her consciousness. “Do you think we could find out what actually happened to him?” she asked finally. “Then we could point your friend Shorty in the right direction and get you out of the spotlight.”

Bea laughed mirthlessly. “You’ve been reading too much Nancy Drew.”

“No, really,” Allie insisted. “Even if we could only find someone who might have wanted him dead, it would give Shorty pause for thought.”

“That would be quite a list …” Bea said, starting to sound interested.

“Exactly … So, go on then.”

“What?”

“Make a list.”

“Mm. Someone he owed money to. Someone he cheated at cards. Someone he got into a fight with or said something to while drunk. Someone he annoyed at work. A girlfriend. A girlfriend’s husband …” she trailed off.

Allie nodded. “Quite a list,” she said emphatically. “You already sound like a less likely suspect.”

“But how could we find anything out?” Bea protested.

Allie shrugged. “We ask around. At the quarry. Try some of the shadier nightspots in town …”

“I should ask Mary again,” Bea said suddenly. “She said she didn’t know where he was, which may or may not be true, but she might know something else.”

“Right. Now you’re thinking,” Allie said, pleased to have something positive to consider.

“But maybe we should leave it a few days, let Shorty do his job. I know him. He’ll do his best to find out what really happened.”
“Alright. If you trust him.”


“No reason,” she replied airily, holding her closer, not wanting to bring Bea’s mood down with her own personal feelings about the law. Bea relaxed into her arms and laid her head in the crook of her neck. “It’s late,” Allie said. “Why don’t we go to bed?”

“Yes. It’s been a long day,” Bea murmured, making no move to rise.

“I know it’s Saturday … but will you sleep with me tonight?” Allie asked plaintively. Bea laughed. “I don’t mean that,” Allie protested. “I just don’t think either of us should be alone tonight.” Bea made a sound of agreement. “I can set my alarm clock if you want, so you can still be up before Debbie.” Bea lifted her head and looked at her.

“You’ve … got … a deal,” she said emphatically, between kisses.

Sliding into bed in the darkened room she immediately felt Bea's arms reaching for her. Bea held her close, their feet entwined, their lips met as naturally as breathing. Bea kissed her softly but lovingly, so differently from earlier, then lay quietly in her arms. Allie lay quietly too, but her mind was restless with the events of the day. She could tell that Bea wasn't sleeping either. Maybe neither of them would sleep tonight, but Allie didn't mind. It gave her more time to enjoy this feeling of being in Bea's embrace.

A long time later, maybe in the very darkest part of the night, Allie heard Bea's lips part. "Allie, are you awake?" she whispered.

“Yes,” she replied, drawing closer still.

"Allie … If I should get taken away or …"

"Don't!" Allie told her, her stomach turning over in panic, the knowledge of what she was about to hear suddenly rearing up, ready to strike. "Don't even say it!" She put her fingers over Bea's lips in an attempt to silence her, whilst hot tears brimmed and fell.

"If I go to prison … or if I get the chair …" Bea continued mercilessly, "will you take care of Debbie for me?" Her words were venom in Allie’s veins.

"It won't come to that …" Allie whispered ferociously, tears running into her mouth.

"I hope not my darling." Allie clung on to that precious endearment as though it would save her. "But there is no one else I trust to care for her. So I'm going to need you to promise."

"I won't," Allie declared. "We're going to raise her together. I've set my heart on it." Bea stroked her hair and wiped her face.

"I want that too." Her voice was kind but implacable. "Allie. We have to face up to it. It could happen. And …" It was only now that her voice cracked. "I won't make it unless I know that Debbie will be safe. Promise me now and I won't mention it again." Allie didn't reply. Of course she would always look after Debbie, but to agree to this felt like condemning Bea. "Please," Bea whispered. Allie sighed, her breath rattling.

"I promise."
Hi everyone. Thanks for reading Chapter 25, and for your comments. I hope you like this.

The alarm clock jangled, and Bea reached over Allie to silence it. It hadn't woken either of them. Bea wasn't sure that she had slept at all, and Allie slept on, exhausted after a lengthy spell of crying. Bea hadn't known it was possible for one person to contain sufficient tears for the grief Allie had spent during the night. Holding her, talking to her, nothing had done any good: she had been literally inconsolable until, at length, she had fallen into an exhausted sleep.

She had been looking at Allie's face ever since the room became light enough, castigating herself for being the cause of her swollen eyes and blotchy skin. Her eyelashes were still clumped damply together and the skin around them looked sore. Her beautiful girl. Perhaps she shouldn't have spelled out what was at stake, but last night it had been all she had been able to think about. She had forced Allie to join her on that bleak cliff edge for her own selfish reasons. Or, more accurately, reason: Debbie. If Bea could no longer be there for her, then Allie must. At one time, the loss of her mother would have destroyed Debbie, but Bea knew that she and Allie had become a team since she had been away working at the hotel so much. Allie had not mentioned what her role as surrogate mother meant to her, but Bea had eyes, and could see that she had fallen for Debbie in the same way she herself had, almost eight years ago. The two of them would be alright.

Not that she was giving up. Allie had given her hope last night. There were at least things they could do to improve their chances. And Bea had had plenty of time during the night to think everything over. Having not killed Harry she was not about to allow herself to be punished for it if she could help it. The last few years had been punishment enough.

Allie began to stir, making a pitiful attempt to open her gluey lashes. Bea leaned in and kissed one eye and then the other, allowing the warmth of her breath to help unstick them. When Allie did manage to peel her lids apart, Bea's conscience smote her anew on seeing how bloodshot her eyes were. Focussing on Bea's face, Allie gave a smile almost as blinding as her usual one. It pained Bea to witness such loving forgiveness.

"Good morning," Allie croaked, giving her a gentle kiss.

"Morning sweetheart."

Allie examined her face. "Didn't you sleep at all?" she asked in dismay.

Bea shrugged. "Maybe a little." She smoothed her thumb over one of Allie's eyebrows. "How do you feel now?"


"I'm sorry Allie. I think I said too much. More than …"
"No. You made me face the truth." She placed her hand against Bea's cheek. "It would be easier to hide my head in the sand. But this is better. I think I'll be able to help us more this way."

"I know you will," Bea assured her with a kiss. "You're full of good ideas." Bea kissed her again, so grateful for her sunny disposition.

"Now you're giving me ideas," Allie replied, kissing her in an entirely different way, while skimming her hands over Bea’s body. Bea's blood leapt up and for a minute everything else faded away.

"Debbie will be awake any moment now," Bea told her regretfully when their lips finally parted. "I have to go."

"Only if we can continue this later," Allie insisted.

"It's a date," Bea promised.

Allie grabbed the front of her nightshirt to detain her a little longer. "I need specifics," she smiled, kissing her again.

"Tonight. This bed. Nine o'clock," Bea told her with a laugh.

"So … less of a date, more of an assignation," Allie whispered suggestively.

"If that means what I think it means, then yes," Bea told her, sealing the deal with a final kiss.

* * * * * * * * *

Debbie was staring at Allie across the table as they ate breakfast. Allie had bathed her eyes with cold water but was aware that it hadn't made much of an improvement. She smiled at her to reassure her but couldn't think how to explain her appearance without lying. She looked at Bea, who had deduced her dilemma. She finished her mouthful.

"Deb, you know the sheriff called round yesterday? He came to let us know that he found Daddy's truck. But no one knows where your daddy is, so the sheriff is going to try to find out." Debbie nodded without comment, uncharacteristically quiet. Allie didn't believe for a minute that she was as uninterested as she appeared. It was just that she understood that Harry was a person who upset her mother and now, it must seem, Allie too. "He might come round again if he has questions to ask us. It's nothing for you to worry about."

Debbie dropped her toast onto her plate and came around the table and put her arms about Allie. "Don't cry Allie. He isn't very nice to us anyway, not like a daddy in a storybook. I don't miss him at all." Allie's eyes spilled over again, much to her own frustration. She gave Debbie a long squeeze whilst she composed herself.

She wiped her face. "Thanks Deb. I feel better now." She glanced at Bea, whose eyes were suspiciously shiny, but who was smiling at the two of them.

"Finish up your breakfast Debbie. Church this morning."

Allie looked at her. "We're going to church?" It had been several weeks since they had last attended. Bea nodded.

"Seems like a good time to make an appearance," she replied, raising her eyebrows. Allie nodded. Time for a charm offensive. Time to look respectable before the rumours about them, or about
"I'll put on my most demure dress," Allie told her. "But I'm not sure what I can do about this." She indicated her face.

"There's time for it to calm down yet. Just … no more crying."

By the time they arrived outside the church, the small family was washed and brushed and outfitted for Sunday worship. Allie immediately got into a conversation with some of her students and their parents, whilst Bea and Debbie approached a family that they were acquainted with. Allie knew Bea disliked this kind of superficial socialising, but when she looked over to see how she was getting on Bea was looking engaged, if not exactly relaxed.

As Allie wound her way through the crowd, greeting people she knew, smiling at everyone. She was unable to detect any difference in attitude from any of the congregation. She took a deep breath, relieved that rumours didn't appear to be circulating after all. Spotting Liz, she made her way over to say hello.

"Morning love," Liz greeted her warmly. Taking a second look at her face she frowned and added, "Everything alright?"

Allie puffed out a breath and rolled her eyes. "Tell you afterwards?"

"Sure. Come over for coffee after the service."

"Thanks Liz."

"Bea alright?" Liz asked, watching her friend chatting to an elderly couple.

“Yes,” Allie replied, her eyes on her love, a smile tugging at her lips. “Bea’s … “she had been about to say wonderful , but was just modifying it to fine , or some such more neutral word, when she glanced at Liz to catch her watching her face with a smile.

“Don’t bother. Your face says it all,” she said, grinning. And that was half the problem, Allie thought to herself, straightening her face. Just then she caught sight of someone, just the side of a face before a tall man's back obstructed her view, someone who was familiar in a way that chilled her and raised the hairs on her neck. She frowned in that direction until the tall man moved away.

“Liz … who’s that woman in the grey dress?” Allie asked, trying not to sound worried.

“Where are you looking?” Liz asked.

“Just there, next to Jake Stewart.”

“That’s his wife Vera. Have you not met her?”

“No. But I’ve definitely seen her before,” Allie replied, dread sinking through her. She wanted nothing more than to go straight over to Bea, to speak to her and be reassured. But it was better to wait. People shouldn’t witness her dependence on Bea and conclude that there was something unusual in their closeness.

“Want me to introduce you?” Liz offered. Allie shook her head.

“Here’s the Reverend. We’ll be going inside any moment.” The crowd began to bunch up and head into the church. Bea said goodbye to the people she had been speaking to, and Debbie and Sophie
materialised at her side as she made her way over to Allie and Liz. They joined the throng waiting to go inside. Once they had taken their seats Allie took the opportunity to whisper to Bea.

“Vera Stewart,” she said. Bea looked quizzical and began to turn her head to seek her out. “Don’t look.”

“What about her?” Bea asked quietly.

“She’s the woman who was staring at us that time we went to the movies.” Allie tried to point out the significance of this with just her eyes. Bea just shook her head and looked bemused. “Later,” Allie told her. The service was just beginning.

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Liz twirled her cup thoughtfully in its saucer. Bea had filled her in, first on what Hank had overheard and then on the discovery of the truck and the sheriff’s questions.

"You don't need to worry," she reassured them, patting Allie's hand. "If Shorty comes around here asking questions, I never saw you that day." Allie smiled weakly.

"Thanks Liz. I don't want you to get into trouble on our account," Bea told her. "But I think we can keep Allie out of this."

"Of course. You're my oldest and dearest friend. Anything to help." Bea's relief and gratitude made her pull Liz in for a rare hug. Liz laughed. "You're clearly good for her," Liz told Allie, with a smile. She drew back to look Bea in the face. "And Bea, love, I shouldn't worry. There's no body. They can't arrest you for murder with no body."

"Maybe not. But something has happened to him. Someone hid the truck, so his body could be discovered at any time."

"It could take months or years or … never. You can't live as though you have an axe hanging over your head." Liz spoke with great finality and Bea felt somewhat comforted. "Now, this other business with Jake Stewart. What's going on there?"

"This is what I was trying to tell you, Bea," Allie interrupted. "Vera Stewart is the woman who saw us together at the movies, and it's her husband who's been running his mouth about us. I say that's no coincidence."

"But we weren't doing anything wrong …"

"Of course we weren't …" Allie took her hand.

"I mean, we weren't doing anything to make her think there was something going on between us."

"If either one of you was doing that thing you do …" Liz began.

"What thing?" Bea interrupted indignantly.

"That thing … like Allie this morning. When she looked at you and her face went all soft and kind of glowing." Liz was smiling but looking a little embarrassed to be mentioning it. Bea frowned at Allie, who blushed.

"Sorry … I didn't even realise I was doing it," Allie objected.

"Don't blame Allie, love. I've noticed that same lovestruck look on your face a time or two," Liz
pointed out. Do I really do that? Bea wondered, feeling her face heat up. Allie was looking at her fondly, so she smiled reluctantly and shook her head at herself.

"So, what I’m thinking is that Vera told Jake her suspicions about us, and he added them up with something he noticed that time he met us outside church," Allie said.

“And add that to the fact that he might have felt you scorned his advances, and we have a motive for him spreading rumours,” Bea added.

“But what can be done about it?” Liz asked. “Ask him nicely to stop? Tell him he’s mistaken?”

Bea shook her head. “From what I know of him, I don’t think that would help. Besides, it’s probably too late.”

“I don’t know. I didn’t notice any difference in people this morning, so maybe Matthew Pike is the only person he’s said anything to,” Allie said.

“Maybe I could drop a few words with Vera next time she’s in the store. Send her in the wrong direction. Tell her that Allie has a beau …” Liz suggested. Bea turned cold for a moment.

“Please don’t,” she said. There must have been something in her tone of voice, because Liz looked taken aback, but Allie just squeezed Bea’s hand.

“Let’s make that a last resort, huh Liz?” Allie proposed. “Whilst we’re here, could I use your telephone?”

“Oh course.”

“I’m just going to speak to Maxine, in case the sheriff thinks to call in at the Towers with questions,” she told them, heading into the store.

“How’s she taking it?” Liz asked as soon as Allie was out of earshot.

Bea sighed and focussed her attention on her hands. “She was very upset last night.” Bea’s eyes stung, thinking about it. “But she’s pretty tough. She’ll be alright.”

“I know. You’re pretty tough yourself but … don’t be too proud to ask me for help if you need it.”

Bea gave a grim smile and nodded.

* * * * * * * *

Leaving work on Thursday Bea decided to make an impromptu visit to Perkins & Co. Charles had said he was going to put one of her pictures in the window and she had a sudden desire to see it for herself. Maybe it would give her the fillip she felt she needed to get through the rest of the week. But when she got there none of her pictures were in the window. Feeling a little annoyed with herself for allowing her hopes to be raised, she pivoted on the spot and was just making off down the street when the shop door opened. “Bea!” Charles called. She turned to him with a slight smile, expecting him to come up with some excuse for why he hadn’t, in the end, put it in the window. “It sold!” He beckoned to her excitedly. “Come on in. I was going to telephone the number you gave me and leave a message, but now I won’t have to.” Bea followed him inside in disbelief.

“You really sold something of mine?” she asked, shocked.

"Yes. The view I put in the window," he grinned at her. "I don't know why you look so surprised
…” Bea attempted to retrieve her eyebrows from their new location somewhere up near her hairline. "… it's a gorgeous picture. I hope you're getting busy with some more pieces for me."

"Sure," Bea murmured, still trying to take it in. "Who bought it?"

"A gentleman visiting from New York. He said it would remind him of his vacation." Charles scurried over to the counter. "So, here you go. Your first proceeds from your art," and he opened the cash register and handed her a bundle of banknotes. Bea just stared at it.

"This can't be right," she protested.

"He paid one hundred and fifty dollars. So that there is ninety dollars … which, by my calculations, is your sixty percent split," Charles replied, amusement dancing in his eyes. *Ninety dollars.* "Looks like the faith your friend placed in you was well founded," he added. Bea felt a blush rise up at this remark, but she knew he was right to point out Allie’s involvement. Although this was a personal triumph for Bea, it never would have happened without Allie’s unflagging belief in her. She nodded humbly.

"Thanks Charles,” she said, gesturing to him with the sheaf of money. “And thanks for your faith in me too.”

“Are you kidding me? Easiest sixty bucks I ever made,” he grinned. “But seriously, we’ve got to stick together, right? And I hope you’ll keep on supplying me …” he hinted.

“Of course.” Bea tucked the money into her purse. She already knew exactly what some of this money was going to be spent on. Each day after work she had been walking by store windows and picking out the things she would buy for Debbie and Allie, if only she had the money. Her heart beat faster at the thought of spending so much money; after all, she had a long standing relationship with thrift. But she was also excited to imagine the pleasure on their faces when they saw what she had chosen for them.

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Allie was fretting. It wasn’t like Bea to be so late, and ever since the sheriff had come around, she lived in fear of Bea being whisked away for questioning or incarcerated without warning. Bea had wanted them to hold off on seeing a lawyer in case it was unnecessary, but after Allie’s nightmare had woken Bea on Tuesday night, she had agreed that Allie should investigate it. Consequently, she had visited the library yesterday and made a list of local lawyers. They had an appointment to speak with a Mr Wyndham tomorrow at four.

Allie's nightmare had plagued her now for several nights in a row. It was always the same. Bea was gagged and tethered with cruel straps to an unholy contraption of wires and cogs, fan blades and pistons, smeared with filthy gunge. She wrenched at her bonds, silently imploring Allie to help her. In her dream Allie knew she had to act quickly, to release Bea before a switch somewhere was thrown, but she was paralysed, limbs immovable, watching helplessly as the tears coursed down Bea’s face. It went on and on until, blessedly, she jolted awake to find herself in her own bed with Bea’s arms around her.

It was a ridiculous nightmare. She could see that afterwards. The apparatus her imagination conjured up was some kind of ludicrous Rube Goldberg machine. But whilst she was dreaming it, it was real and horrifying. Bea had been so sweet, gentling her trembling body and kissing her until the ordeal was, if not forgotten, then at least stripped of its power, and she could sleep again. In the morning, Bea told her that a lawyer would be able to tell them more about what was, and what was not, worth worrying about, so to go ahead and find someone. Allie hoped he would tell her that her
nightmare was as far-fetched as it seemed during daylight hours.

Bea hurried up the trail. The packages were awkward, but she was so excited to tell Allie and Debbie her news and give them their gifts that she was hardly slowed at all. Catching sight of Allie standing on the porch, she threw her a smile. A few steps more and she noticed how Allie was hugging her arms around her ribs, her shoulders tense.

“What’s the matter?” she asked urgently. Allied smiled.

“Nothing, now you’re home,” she said apologetically. Bea gave her a wry smile, suddenly understanding.

“Come inside,” she gestured to the door with her head. Allie opened the door for her. Bea came inside, lowered her parcels onto the couch, and immediately put her arms around her. “Sorry,” she told her. “I didn’t think.”

“It’s okay. It’s not your fault I’m so … pathetic at the moment.”

Just then Bea felt a thump against them as Debbie arrived from the kitchen, wrapping her arms around them both. “Mama, hug me too!” Bea laughed, picked her up and settled her on her hip.

“Ugh. You’re getting so big.” Bea met Allie’s eyes, intercepting the beaming happiness now shining there, her worries forgotten for the moment. “I have some good news,” she told them, laughing as she was showered with squeals of happiness and exuberant hugs.

“I knew it,” Allie told her earnestly.

“That’s why I’m so late. I stopped by the shop and heard the news from Charles. And then, I just had to do a little long overdue shopping,” she told them, gesturing at the parcels. Debbie’s eyes went very wide.

“Are any of those for me?” she asked with an awed gasp. Bea glanced at Allie just to see her happiness. “I think one or two might be. Let me see … I think you might like this one,” and she handed her a package. Debbie tore into it with enthusiasm.

“My very own glove! Thank you Mama,” and she put it on straight away.

“That old one of Benji’s was all split …”

“Allie, come pitch to me so that we can try it out!” Debbie called, already heading off to fetch the ball.

“What about these others …” Bea started to say.

“Let her enjoy the glove, first,” Allie told her. “We’ll do the others in a bit.” Debbie reappeared and grabbed her hand, pulling her to the door. “I’m so proud of you,” Allie managed to say, before she was dragged away.

Bea made some coffee and sat on the porch to drink it while watching Debbie and Allie try out the new glove, tears starting up without warning. She wondered at herself. It was unlike her to be emotional over something as commonplace as bit of baseball practice. Perhaps the threat hanging over her was crystallising her thoughts and forcing her to realise how fortunate she was to have
these two people in her life. That was what was probably behind her uncharacteristic spending spree, too. If she didn't treat them today, maybe tomorrow would be too late.

After supper the rest of the parcels were unwrapped. A pair of shoes for Debbie's constantly growing feet and a copy of *Little House on the Prairie*, newly published and displayed in the window of the bookstore Bea passed every day. Allie had read *Little House in the Big Woods* to her, a loan from the library, and Debbie had loved it. She clutched her new book to her chest possessively.

For Allie there was a heavyweight dark blue coat to see her through the winter. It was long, mid-calf, with a belt. It buttoned on the left and it had an expansive collar that could be fastened at the throat in bad weather. Allie tried it on, and it looked every bit as good as Bea had known it would. The final parcel was for Allie and was the one Bea was most excited about. When Allie opened the box and parted the tissue paper, her face flushed with pleasure. It was a sweater that Bea had been admiring for weeks. The moment she had seen it she had imagined Allie in it. It was the only thing she had ever seen which was the same shade of blue as Allie's eyes. It was made of the softest, warmest wool: the kind of sweater you could wear against your skin with no irritation. It had a collar, a tiny pocket over the left breast and a few mother-of-pearl buttons at the neck. Bea imagined that it's waistband would sit perfectly on Allie's hips. It had been ludicrously expensive: unbelievably, as much as the coat, but Bea could not do without it.

Allie was stroking it appreciatively. "Aren't you going to try it on?" Bea asked her.

"Not right now," she said. "Later." Bea heard a promise in those words and the resulting smile nearly split her face in two.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you can visualise Allie's lovely new jumper.
Hi everyone. Thanks for your kudos and comments on the previous chapter. Here we go ...

"What's the matter with you today?" Rose asked in annoyance. "Yours are 216 through 226." Bea looked at the room number. 232.

"Sorry …" she sighed, and gathered together her things, setting off back down the corridor. The word distracted didn't really cover Bea's state of mind this morning. I've sold a picture, she thought jubilantly. Now she really didn't want to work here anymore and was planning on giving Stan her notice. And then … she was thinking about last night.

When she had gone into Allie's room, ready for bed, dressed in her nightshirt, Allie was sitting up against her pillows, wearing her new sweater, waiting for her, her eyes on Bea's face. The colour was perfect on her, just as Bea had predicted, and the excited fluttering started up again inside her belly.

"Looks gorgeous. Let me see," she said, walking around the bed. Allie slipped out from under the covers and stood up, showing Bea that, apart from the sweater, she was completely naked. Bea's heart set up a violent thumping. Even by Allie's usual standards of teasing, this was in a new league. She turned a slow pirouette, ostensibly so that Bea could appreciate the sweater, but really so that Bea could get a good look at every part of her that wasn't covered with soft blue wool. Which was most of her. Miles of leg, her smooth ass, the sweet juncture of her thighs. And Bea had been right about the way it would sit on her hips. Allie watched her watching.

"Aren't you going to touch it?" she asked archly. "It's so soft." Playing along, Bea reached out and fingered the sweater's collar and ran her hands down the sleeves, watching Allie's lips tremble in anticipation.

"Mm. Feels good," Bea husked. All she could think about was cupping Allie's behind and pulling her against her, but she was also beginning to appreciate that delaying a little seemed to increase the pleasure they both felt when they finally succumbed. So, she stroked the sleeves, down and then up, down and then up, each time almost brushing against the sides of Allie's breasts, watching her chest rise and fall.

Becoming impatient, Allie said, "This part here is especially soft." She plucked at the pocket over her left breast.

"Really?" Bea asked. "Let me see," and she placed her hand there, almost overcome by how gloriously yielding Allie's breast felt through the sweater. Allie sighed and arched towards her. Bea brought her other hand into play and revelled in the feeling of Allie's nipples pricking insistently at the fabric covering them. Her pulse was pounding between her legs and her self-restraint was fading fast. "Mm. Very soft. But I think this part is softer," she rasped as she slid her hands around Allie's back and ghosted them over her ass. Allie made a sound almost like a growl and Bea felt heat flush her body in response. Just as she cupped that soft flesh and began to pull Allie against
her, she felt Allie grip and lift the cotton of her nightshirt, so that by the time their hips and thighs touched, naked skin met naked skin in a supremely satisfying way. Their mouths joined in a kiss that almost buckled her knees and a curtain of want obscured her thoughts. She pulled Allie tight against her and allowed her hands to explore everywhere - under the downy garment and beyond.

After that the sweater was removed, carefully folded and forgotten about. Bea was light-headed just remembering what came next. It was still with her: the feeling of Allie's long naked body pressed against hers and Allie's voice in her ear, sighing her name as she was transported by the joy of their union. Lately, it seemed every time they touched each other the experience was more intense than the last time. If Bea had found their first encounters heady, she had no words to express how much more intoxicating they were now. Did this come from experience? Or the deepening of their love and trust? Or was it the threat of separation that heightened each encounter?

This train of thought was not conducive to effective work, so she resolutely turned her mind to what the day held in store. After her shift was finished, she planned to go and speak to Stan about quitting. Then, she figured she had enough time to visit Mary. She had some questions to ask her. And, at four, she was meeting Allie to speak to the lawyer she had found. Quite a day. But first she had rooms to clean. She grabbed a corner of the dirty sheet and tugged it onto the floor.

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Allie smiled to herself as she shook out the bed sheet and pulled it tight. She couldn't resist. She opened her wardrobe and there it lay, neatly folded on the shelf. She ran her hands over it. Such an extravagant gesture. She had never owned anything so fine. What had possessed Bea? She would have sworn that financial caution was bred into her bones, and yet the sweater was no mirage. Granted, Bea had been excited to have sold her first picture, but it hadn't escaped Allie's notice that she had not bought anything for herself.

She was worried about what this might mean for Bea's state of mind. She had had those initial hours of panic immediately after she'd heard about the discovery of the truck, but since then she had been pretty composed and collected: concerned, but mostly doing better than Allie was, and providing support and cheer in a touchingly dedicated way. It was as though, once she had extracted that promise from Allie to care for Debbie, her focus had shifted away from herself and onto the other two thirds of her family. Did her gifts represent a need to provide for them? To make sure they had something to remember her by? Allie closed the wardrobe door firmly and leant against it, as if she could shut that thought out of her head.

“Allie!” Debbie called, running into the house. Allie met her at the bedroom door. “Sheriff’s here,” she gasped, wide-eyed. A surge of panic ran through her at the thought that Harry’s body might have been found, or that there had been some other terrible development. She fought it down and laid a reassuring hand on Debbie’s shoulder.

“Oh. I’ll deal with it,” she said, sounding peculiarly calm, even to her own ears. When she stepped out onto the porch, she found Shorty standing by his car, hat in hand, whilst another officer stepped out of Harry’s truck.

“All right, Sheriff,” Allie called with a defiant lift of the chin. “What can I do for you?”

“Good morning,” the Sheriff replied. “Miss Novak, wasn’t it?” She nodded her agreement, and they met at the porch steps to shake hands, Allie able to look him in the eye from the vantage point of the highest step. Did she imagine the sympathetic look in his eyes? Perhaps he was not the monster her imagination had transformed him into over the last few days. Perhaps he was just a man trying to do his job. And an old friend of Bea’s besides.
"If you’re looking for Bea, I’m afraid she’s not here just now."

“That’s alright. I just came to return the truck,” he said calmly. “We’ve finished with it down at
the office, so Bea might as well have the use of it.”

“Thanks. I’ll tell her you stopped by,” Allie said, hoping to cut this short.

“Actually, as I’m here, perhaps I could ask you a few questions?” What was that look on his face?
Allie couldn’t decide if he was cautiously friendly or carefully neutral.

“Debbie. Go to your room,” Allie told her, and heard her scamper away. Allie sat down on one of
the porch seats and gestured for Shorty to sit too, which he did, slowly and deliberately, taking out
a notebook and pencil. He took down her details: name, date of birth, occupation. She gave him the
address of Mrs Wentworth’s boarding house as her previous address but admitted, when pressed,
that she was formerly resident in New York.

“When did you start boarding here with Bea?” he asked her. She told him the date. “And why did
that come about?”

“Well, the boarding house was expensive, and I wanted somewhere cheaper, closer to work. This
seemed ideal,” she responded, hoping she sounded natural and truthful. He nodded slowly.

“And whose idea was it? That you board here?”

“I don’t really remember. It just came up in conversation,” she replied, wondering what the correct
answer was to this question. Bea would say: the truthful one. “I think it was me. Yes. It was my
idea.” Her heart was pounding. Perhaps she didn’t ought to be answering these questions. What if
she was making things worse? But surely, to refuse to answer would be more damning.

“What did you make of Mr Smith?” he asked her, observing her face appraisingly.

“I’ve never met him, actually,” she replied. “Bea and her husband had separated before I came to
live here.”

“But you were friendly with Bea before that. Surely you met him at some point …” Allie shook her
head adamantly.

“He was never here. As far as I could tell he wasn’t much of a husband or father,” she said, trying
to calm her voice, hoping that her hatred for Harry wasn’t leaking into her voice. Shorty just
nodded, licked the point of his pencil and made a note. Allie was beginning to find his placidity
infuriating.

“That’s all for now,” he said with a guarded smile, closing his notebook and tucking it into his
pocket. “Thank you for your help. I’m sure we’ll have this all straightened out in no time.” He
shook her hand, hitched up his pants and headed back to his car. As he passed by the newest part of
Bea’s vegetable garden he paused and looked at the recently turned dirt for a long moment. His
face didn’t change one iota, but Allie’s heart leapt with fear. What was he thinking? That Bea had
killed Harry, buried him in the garden and sown winter cabbages over him? She could almost have
laughed. Then he was gone, leaving Allie sitting there, her legs trembling weakly

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"What can I do for you ?" Stan asked, that expression on his face that Bea could never quite
interpret. It was either amused or bemused. She preferred bemused: she quite liked the idea that he
couldn’t work out what she was doing working here.
"Hi Stan. Look, I really appreciate you giving me this job, but …" she began hesitantly.

"Don't tell me. You're leaving to get married. Or you're pregnant. No? You're moving to Ohio. You've got a job as an exotic dancer. I've heard it all before." He pretended to be such a curmudgeon, but Bea had seen him give some of the other girls second and even third chances.

She smirked. "Nothing like that …"

"Save it. It don't matter what the reason is, you're quitting, right?" Bea nodded.

"Sorry … But I can stay on until you find someone new," she assured him.

"Not necessary. Do you know how many people I got asking me for work?" Bea didn't reply, used to his way of speaking by now. He stuck his cigar between his teeth and opened a ledger on his desk. "Let me see what I owe you …" He ran his finger down a column and grunted to himself. Opening the tin cash box that permanently resided by his elbow he drew out her wages and handed it over. His shrewd eyes met hers for a moment. "You were an … okay worker," he growled.

"Thanks," Bea replied, taking the money. Was that supposed to be a compliment? He was still looking at her appraisingly. "Is … that it?" she asked, wondering if he had something more to add. He turned away, back to his paperwork.

"Yes, that's it," he growled. "What did you expect? A fanfare?" Bea smiled and shook her head ruefully.

“See you Stan,” she told his stooped back. She might even miss the old sourpuss.

Next stop Mary's house. This was a conversation she was looking forward to even less than the one she'd just had.

On opening her front door, Mary’s eyes narrowed. This was generally her expression on seeing Bea. Usually Bea would put it down to dislike, but today she looked closer, wondering if, today, it was suspicion. Shorty had to have spoken to her about Harry by now. Did Mary now suppose that Bea had murdered her brother?

“What do you want Bea?” she asked wearily.

“Can I come in?” she looked behind her, as if suspecting nosy neighbours. “I don’t think we want to have this conversation on the doorstep.” Mary looked up and down the street and reluctantly stood back so that Bea could enter. “Are the boys here?” she asked, not wanting to do this in front of her nephews.

“No. They’re out. Running wild with their friends, I guess. Making the most of the last day of the vacation. You haven’t brought Debbie round for a while,” she commented, her face softening at the mention of the little girl.

“Yeah. I took a job, so I’ve been pretty busy.” Bea didn’t mention bringing Debbie over in the future. Better to wait and see how this conversation panned out first. Mary led the way into the kitchen. Bea was surprised to find her brother-in-law, Don, leaning against the wall, smoking a cigarette. “Don. Didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Accident at the mill. Some poor bastard got caught in a machine, so they sent us all home for the afternoon while they clear it up,” he replied, the cigarette trembling in his hand.

“Christ,” Bea said. “Will he be alright?” Don shrugged, a pained look in his eyes.
“We had the sheriff round the other day Bea. Asking about Harry,” he said.

“That’s why I’m here. As I’m sure he told you, they found his truck, but no sign of Harry,” she began.

“Sounds to me like they suspect some kind of foul play,” Don butted in. Bea nodded and took a deep breath. Best get it over with.

“I’m pretty sure they think I killed him,” she said, watching Mary’s face. “But I didn’t. So, I came to ask you if there’s anything, anything at all that you can think of that might help me find out where he’s gone or what’s happened to him.”

“I told you last time,” Mary said, eyes hard. “I haven’t heard from him and I don’t know where he is.”

“But maybe there’s something else you can tell me. Names of people he played cards with, places he went … a woman he was seeing. Anything at all. Maybe I can find out where he is.” Mary scoffed.

“Harry isn’t like that. And don’t pretend you care about him or want him back. You’re just looking to save your own skin. Well, we can’t help you,” she said with finality, shooting a look at Don. “I reckon that if the sheriff thinks you did something wrong, then … so be it.”

“Mary, come on …” Bea appealed frantically, attempting to reason with her. “I know you never thought I was good enough for Harry, but you can’t mean that. And … he’s your brother … you must be worried about him.” But Mary just turned her back on her and began clattering pans around, signalling that the conversation was over. Heat bloomed through Bea's veins and boomed angrily in her ears. “You'd rather paint me as a murderer than admit that your precious brother was a vicious drunk, a gambler and a womaniser. Open your eyes Mary!” A skillet bounced off the kitchen floor by Bea’s feet.

“Get out!”

Bea was at the garden gate, swinging it open violently, by the time Don caught up with her. He grabbed her arm and whispered urgently.

“You didn’t hear this from me, but he mentioned a girl to me, name of Imogene.” He glanced towards the house, clearly worried that his wife would catch him.

“Do you know her surname? Where she lives?” Bea asked desperately. Don shook his head.

“That’s all Harry told me. But he sounded pretty keen on her. I got to go …”

“Okay,” she said, laying a hand on his arm. “Thanks Don.” He gave a grim smile and hurried back to the house.

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Bea had arrived at the lawyer’s office only a minute before their appointment, so Allie hadn’t had the chance to tell her about Shorty’s visit or the returned truck before they were shown into Mr Wyndham’s office. He was a middle-aged man with thinning hair and a round face. Allie would be inclined to trust him based on his appearance, but he was a lawyer, so she withheld judgement for the moment. Bea rattled through the background to her situation with admirable rapidity and a lack
of emotion. The lawyer listened closely, sometimes interrupting to ask a question. His eyes flicked

to Allie a time or two, but he didn’t ask why she was there, or what her relationship was to Bea.

Perhaps they wouldn’t need to get into it. Or perhaps they would. When Bea stopped speaking, Mr

Wyndham sat in thought for a moment.

“It’s unclear at this time whether you are likely to be arrested or face trial, but I’m happy to advise

you. If you pay a small retainer now, I can lay it all out to you, and anything you tell me will be in

confidence.” He looked at them, his eyes going from one to the other. Bea looked at Allie. She

nodded, satisfied that Mr Wyndham was up to the task.

“How much?” Bea asked, opening her purse.

“Five dollars for now. That pays for my retainer and an hour of my time,” he smiled reassuringly.

“This is a standard contract Mrs Smith. If you’ll just sign, we can begin.” Bea signed. “First things

first. You’ll be relieved to hear that the death penalty is rarely enacted against a woman. Here in

Virginia, the last time was in 1912. So, let me reassure you, that will not be your fate.” Allie felt

something inside her unclench, even though she had not been aware of it until that moment. Tears

welled up in her eyes and she looked down at her lap in an attempt to disguise her powerful

reaction. Bea of course knew.

“That is good news Mr Wyndham,” Bea told him, reaching out and squeezing Allie’s hand briefly.

“I always like to set client’s minds at rest where possible. Now,” he said looking at her seriously. “I

must ask you if everything you have told me is true.”

Bea pursed her lips. “Not entirely. What I didn’t tell you, or the sheriff, was that Miss Novak here

…” she indicated Allie, “was there that night.” Mr Wyndham tapped his pencil on his blotter and

frowned thoughtfully.

“I take it that, by this omission, you sought to protect Miss Novak from possible implication in any

crime you might be accused of?” Bea nodded definitively.

“You did not kill your husband? Everything else you told me happened as you said?”

“I didn’t kill him. I hit him with the shovel, as I told you. When he came around Allie convinced

him to leave, permanently, in exchange for fifteen hundred dollars. He drove away. He was

supposed to contact us for the money, but … he just disappeared.”

“Has it occurred to you that Miss Novak here is a witness to your innocence? If you amended your

story …”

“No. Allie stays out of it.” Allie knew that look. Diamond was more yielding than Bea in this

mood. She tried anyway.

“He’s right, Bea. We both watched him drive away …”

“Why would anyone believe that now, after I lied the first time? I have to stick to my story,” Bea

said forcefully. Allie opened her mouth to protest.

“Well,” Mr Wyndham said placatingly, “the investigation has hardly begun. There’s time to think

about all this and see what the sheriff turns up.” He pursed his lips. "I have to ask you this Mrs

Smith, and I don't mean to offend you, but on the night in question you said that your husband hit

you. Can you tell me, was there a history of marital cruelty?”

Bea looked at the wall and Allie saw her jaw close like a vice. She seemed unable to answer, her
throat working soundlessly. Allie couldn't bear to watch her distress and hoped Bea would forgive her for answering for her.

"Yes. He was violent towards her for years."

He nodded. "That's an important mitigating factor should this ever come to trial. Do you understand Mrs Smith?" Bea managed to nod, causing tears to spill down her face. Allie ached to hold her and comfort her, but that would have to wait.

"In the meantime, if the sheriff wants to talk to you again or if, God forbid, you should be arrested, you must telephone me right away. I'll give you my card before you leave …"

"Um. This seems like a good time to mention that the sheriff called by the house this morning …" Allie interrupted.

"What?" Bea looked stricken.

"He returned the truck. Said they had finished with it. I didn't have the chance to tell you yet …"

"Did he ask you any questions?" Mr Wyndham asked with a frown. Allie nodded and recounted the entire conversation. "So, you corroborated Mrs Smith's story?"

"Of course. What else could I do?"

"It's fine. But from now on neither of you speaks to him unless I'm present." They both nodded. "Really there's nothing more you need to do at this point, except stop worrying. It's common practice to look first at the spouse in cases such as this. The only evidence they have is circumstantial. As soon as the sheriff turns up some information about your husband's whereabouts, you'll be in the clear."

As he seemed to wrapping up the appointment, Allie quickly inserted the question that had been troubling her.

"In the event of her arrest, Bea has told me that she wants me to take care of her daughter." How she wished she could say our daughter. "I don't know where we stand … legally. How can we make sure that happens?"

"Well. I can draw up a document expressing the wish that you have custody, but it will only help if there are no overriding claims. I'm thinking of the child's father or another close relative. Or the county, in the case of any welfare concerns." He looked at their worried faces. "It's worth doing. It makes Mrs Smith's wishes clear … just in case." Allie nodded. "Mrs Smith?"

"Yes. Please." She looked exhausted, ready to bolt. Allie couldn't wait to get her home.

"I'll have it drawn up. Make another appointment for next week and we'll get it signed."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so now you're thinking I have a knitwear fetish, but I totally don't. Honest.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

A big thank you to all of you who are following this, especially those who comment. I really appreciate it. I believe those of you across the pond have some kind of a holiday today. Enjoy.
Oh, gets a bit NSFW-y at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sunday afternoon was proving to be a busy one. Allie and Debbie would be back to school the following day, so Allie was occupied with making sure she had everything prepared for the coming week’s lessons.

“Stand still Debbie!”

Bea had Debbie up on a kitchen chair so that she could pin up the hem of her new dress at the right length, but the little girl was becoming restless, making the job twice as hard for Bea, who wanted all the new clothes completed today if possible. Allie’s blue dress was almost finished, and Bea had it in mind to do a final fitting this evening, maybe after Debbie had gone to bed. Her heart caromed excitedly against her ribs at the thought. “Okay, you can jump down and take it off … carefully. You’ll stick yourself with the pins …” Debbie was almost tearing the dress off in her haste to get away.

“Can I go play now?” she asked, pulling on a too small blouse and a pair of pants inherited from her cousins.

“Alright. But I’ll need your help later if you still want muscadine pie for dessert, so don’t go too far.”

“I won’t …”

Bea glanced at Allie who was sitting at the kitchen table looking over some paperwork. The jigsaw puzzle that she and Debbie had begun on Friday was pushed to one side so that she could spread out her books, papers and other paraphernalia. She was evidently concentrating on her work, so Bea didn’t disturb her, despite the strong temptation she had to kiss her. A temptation partly occasioned by those provoking glasses.

She sat down at the machine and tried to focus on sewing Debbie’s hem straight, but her mind wandered back to Friday evening. When they had arrived home after the visit to the lawyer and after picking Debbie up from Liz’s, Allie had insisted that Bea should lay down on her bed while she prepared supper. Bea had gone reluctantly, convinced she would not sleep. But when she jerked back into consciousness sometime later, she did feel a little brighter. Coming downstairs she discovered Allie and Debbie attempting a jigsaw puzzle featuring a scene of a river valley in gorgeous autumn colours, with two hunters wearing coonskin caps in the foreground, aiming rifles at a buck. She paused to admire it.

"Where did this come from?" she asked.
"It was in that box of things that Aunty Mary gave us a while back," Debbie told her. Bea felt a throb of regret that her row with Mary earlier in the day would have unhappy consequences for Debbie. "I don't think Caleb and Benji care for puzzles." Bea pulled up a chair and looked at the pieces.

"I think this goes up here …" Before long she was absorbed in the challenge. Minutes later she looked up to find Allie watching her with a smile.

"You're pretty good at that," she commented.

"You just need to get your eye in, with the colours," she explained.

"I don't think I'll ever get my eye in," she sighed, still holding the same piece between her finger and thumb that she had picked up some time ago.

"Perhaps you need to wear your glasses," Bea said with a smile.

"I'm not sure where they are …" Allie looked around vaguely.

"Let me find them for you," Bea began, standing up. Allie laughed; eyebrows raised.

"I'm going to help Debbie with her bath now. But hold that thought," she smirked. Bea felt her cheeks heat up at the implication, and her lips curled up in a smile she couldn't contain. "Your supper's on the stove. We've had ours." So, Bea ate her supper and fitted a few more pieces, eventually forcing herself to stop and leave the rest for Debbie and Allie.

“Imogene?” Allie asked, sounding bewildered. They were sitting on the couch and, now that Debbie was in bed, telling each other about their days. “What is she? A showgirl?” Bea shrugged.

“Could be, for all I know. That’s all Don knew,” she explained.

“It’s a pretty unusual name. Maybe we can find her …” Allie took her hand and met her eyes. “I’m sorry you had that horrible row with Mary, but … really. What is wrong with that woman?”

“And I spoke to Stan. Quit my job …” Bea blurted out. Allie’s eyes widened.

“Thank goodness,” she said vehemently. “I didn't like you working there.”

“I never would have guessed,” Bea replied dryly. Allie grimaced.

“Sorry. But think of all the time you’ll have for your art now.”

“More to the point, when you and Debbie get back from school, I’ll be able to give you my undivided attention,” she smiled.

“I like the sound of that …” Allie replied, leaning in for a kiss.

A few minutes later Allie abruptly broke off from their latest kiss. “I forgot to tell you something,” she said, a worried look in her eyes. Bea listened to Allie’s description of Shorty’s reaction to the newer part of the garden, and her interpretation of what it meant. But, despite Allie’s fear, Bea couldn’t take it seriously.

“Let him think that, if he likes,” she laughed. “Better still, let him dig it up and look for him. I’d like to see that …” Allie gave her a shove.

“Seriously? He thinks you murdered your husband and buried him in the garden. How can you find
that amusing?” Allie asked, sounding irritated.

“Sorry sweetheart, but I’m beyond concerning myself with what Shorty thinks. Let him dig. We both know there’s nothing there, so why worry?” She gave her another kiss. “And that was quick thinking, by the way, about the document for you and Debbie. Once that’s signed, I’ll feel a whole heap better.”

“Tell me we won’t need it …” Allie begged, her eyes glazing with tears.

“We won’t. It’s just a safety net,” Bea told her emphatically, smoothing her hands down Allie’s arms.

"You were very brave back there at the lawyer's. Telling Mr Wyndham everything," Allie said. "I could see how hard it was for you." Bea flushed with shame.

"I wasn't brave. I was terrified. I couldn't even say it …"

"You got through it. I was proud of you." Then Allie had kissed her in such a way that Bea had felt it, all Allie's love and pride, right down to her bones.

Bea examined the hem. It wasn’t her best work, but it would have to do. She looked at the kitchen clock. She reckoned she just had time to take advantage of the fact that they had a little privacy. She would collect that postponed kiss and then call Debbie in to help her with the grapes for the pie. She slid her arms around Allie’s shoulders. “Hey beautiful …"

Much later, and the dress fitting had developed into something else entirely, as Bea had suspected it would. The soft, heavy fabric had proved difficult to work with, but Bea was now satisfied that she had done it, and Allie, justice. The finished dress was close fitting on the arms, bust and abdomen, but flared out from the waist to flow in soft drapes over Allie's hips and legs.

"I wish you could see how beautiful you look," Bea told her, standing back to admire her. Allie had given her a long, weighted look, enough to make Bea tingle with anticipation.

"I can," she said. "I don't need a mirror when I can see it in your eyes." Bea's breath caught in her throat and her heart bounded impetuously. "Now ... take it off," Allie urged her quietly.
"Everywhere you stuck me with your needle … it all needs kissing better." Bea was already unfastening it before Allie had finished speaking.

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"Hi, baby girl! Good day?" Bea called out as Debbie ran into the house. Allie watched Bea's outstretched arms and face fall as Debbie ignored her and ran on, up the stairs. "What the heck?" Bea said turning to Allie, who had been dreading this moment for the last two hours.

"You may notice we're a little late," Allie began. "That's because I had to keep her after school as punishment. For punching Jimmy Morris during afternoon recess."


"I wish I knew. She won't talk to me about it, and Jimmy clammed up too." She dropped wearily into a chair. “Jimmy can be pretty obnoxious, but even so …"

"Well, she'll damn well talk to me about it," Bea said, starting for the stairs.

"Wait …" Allie said, taking hold of her arm, hesitant to get between them but knowing that Bea
getting mad at Debbie wouldn't help. "Please don't yell at her. She hates disappointing you more than anything. Just … give her a chance to explain." Bea paused and took a breath, squeezing her eyes closed for a moment.

"How did you get so wise?" she asked finally. Allie smiled, feeling shy.

"From watching you. I want to get this mothering thing right … or outdo my own mother at least. You do it better than anyone … so long as you keep your temper," she added, hoping Bea wouldn't take offence.

"Right," she nodded, looking at her feet. Abruptly she met Allie’s eyes with a wry smile. "I'll give her a hug. See if she'll spit it out on her own."

Allie went to her room and got changed. She lay down on her bed knowing that she ought to get on with marking the day’s work but feeling unable to concentrate for wondering what was happening upstairs. Only the second day back at school and already a problem, and not one that could be left behind at the schoolroom door. Suddenly remembering that she was supposed to be looking over Martha and George Pitts’ college applications, she forced herself upright, headed for the kitchen table, and got to work.

When Bea and Debbie came downstairs half an hour or so later, Debbie appeared happier, whilst Bea looked troubled. Sending Debbie out to start on her chores, Bea came and sat down beside Allie who gripped her hand in trepidation.

"Well?" she asked. Bea’s expression made her heartbeat become arrhythmic with fear.

"Debbie told me that Jimmy said: Your mama's a queer." Bea pronounced the phrase bravely, but Allie's heart turned over at the sound of that word, and at the way it twisted even Bea's beautiful lips with it’s ugliness. "She didn’t know what it meant, but from his tone she decided it was something insulting and punched him in the gut. I didn’t know what to tell her …” she trailed off. Damn it, damn it, damn it ...

“So, what did you tell her?” Allie asked as calmly as she could, trying to follow Bea's lead and keep her head.

“That she shouldn’t punch people. And that if anyone says anything like that to her again, she should go to you.” Allie nodded.

“What did you tell her about that word?”

“I kind of fudged it," Bea admitted. "I don't want to lie to her, but I need to protect her for as long as I can. So, I just told her it was a word grownups use when they want to be nasty. She seemed satisfied."

“I doubt Jimmy knows what it means any more than Debbie does. Which means he overheard it somewhere. What do you know about his family?”

“They have one of those tiny hard-scrabble farms west of here. I guess they must have a hard time making ends meet, like so many families since the chestnut blight and then the depression.” She shrugged. “Other than that, I don’t know anything about them. Why?”

“Just wondering if they’re friendly with Jake Stewart or Matthew Pike … or if word has spread further.”

Bea hummed thoughtfully. “I’ll ask Liz tomorrow. She’ll probably know.”
Allie switched off the lamp and slid over the cool sheets to Bea, drawing her in and holding her close as she had longed to ever since that word had materialised in the air between them. *Queer.* Allie knew she had brought this down upon Bea and Debbie, and longed to make things right.

“I’ve been thinking … maybe I should hand in my notice and see if I can get a new position at a school in Charlottesville or Richmond. Somewhere I won’t …”


“It would create a kind of … buffer zone between our private life and Debbie,” she explained. “At Broadlea school I can’t protect her from the nastiness she experienced today. It could happen again …”

“But if you quit, it’ll just confirm in people’s minds that the rumours are true,” Bea insisted.

“Mm. Perhaps.”

“We’re better off riding it out for now. Pretending we’re unaware. You’re a wonderful teacher and those children deserve the best … even if some of the parents don’t.” Allie kissed her.

“I’m glad you think so. All I do is bring you trouble …”

“All you do is make me happy,” Bea replied with a kiss. Allie sighed and nestled closer into Bea’s neck, breathing in her scent, comforted and sleepy. “You know I’m all in, right Allie?” Bea asked suddenly, after a long silence.

“What do you mean?”

“Whatever happens, however bad things get, the three of us will stick together. Even if we have to leave here altogether …” Allie pulled back in shock.

“What?”

“If we had to leave Broadlea and live somewhere else, it wouldn’t be the end of the world. If we were together it wouldn’t matter,” Bea said firmly. Allie pondered that for a long moment.

“I can’t imagine you and Debbie living somewhere else. Certainly not in a city. You love this landscape. It’s part of you. It’s in your bones … for generations,” she protested.

“It would be a wrench, I’ll admit. And it’s all Debbie’s ever known. But … we’d be alright. We’re not some species of tree nymph, you know. We wouldn’t wither away if you transplanted us,” Bea mocked. Allie gave a quiet exhalation of a laugh, because Bea was so close to the mark. She did have some romantic notions about Bea’s connection with this landscape. Allie imagined them leaving here forever and groaned internally at the idea of Bea and Debbie giving that up for her. It was too much.

“I’m going to solve this, darling. I don’t know how yet, but I will,” she swore. She could hear the smile in Bea’s voice when she replied.

“Alright Allie cat. I believe you. But for now, you’d better get some sleep.”

Bea marked the movement of the early morning light across the room. She watched as it lit up the
tips of Allie’s eyelashes and gilded her hair. As the light grew stronger the interfusion of rose and cream within her skin became visible. Her smooth lips gleamed faintly and then parted to draw in her waking breath. She turned her face towards Bea and opened her eyes, their gazes locking. Allie smiled dreamily.

“Why are you awake so early?” she asked, blinking.

“Couldn’t miss the chance to watch you sleeping,” Bea replied, only half joking. Allie rolled into her arms.

“Something keeping you awake?” she asked, the concern in her tone naked.

“Not really. Just ... you know. Thinking,” Bea replied, wrapping her arms around her waist and breathing her in.

“Thinking what?” Allie asked. Bea had, in truth, been worrying over the troubles of the past couple of weeks. For all her reassurances to Allie, sometimes she couldn’t help but take them out of their box and turn them over. Examine them from every side. What if ... What then ... But this morning she only had the heart for a consoling lie.

“That we need to decide what to get Debbie for her birthday. It’s not long now.”

“Hm. Eight years old … What would she really like?” Allie pondered aloud.

“I was wondering if we could take her to the zoological park in Norfolk but … it’s a heck of a way and I’m not sure the truck is up to it.”

“Shame. She would love that.” She thought for a minute. “You know what every eight-year-old should have? A bicycle,” she said triumphantly. Bea scoffed.

“Well you’d have to teach her to ride it!”

“Can’t you ride a bike?” Allie asked in amazement.

“Nope. We could never afford anything like that when I was a child,” Bea explained. “Besides, have you seen how steep it is around here? It’s not the most practical means of transport.”

“Hm. I hadn’t thought of that. I had a beautiful blue bicycle when I was a child, with white walled tyres. I went everywhere on it,” she reminisced. A thought appeared to strike her. “But I’ve seen you ride a motorcycle …”

“With a sidecar,” Bea explained. “I’ve never tried it without.”

“I can’t believe you can’t ride a bike …” Allie persisted.

“I have other abilities you know ...”

“I know,” Allie replied suggestively.

“Not those. I can ride a mule … barebacked,” Bea told her proudly, and watched as Allie’s eyes went very dark.

“Can you indeed?” she purred, wriggling against her. Bea laughed.

“I know what you’re imagining, but it was the mule that was bare … not me,” she told her. Allie pouted.
“I know that … but still …” she said thoughtfully. She rolled onto her back, pulling Bea on top of her. “Tell you what. You be you, and I’ll be the mule,” she said, a little breathlessly. Bea shook her head but obediently levered herself into an upright position so that she was astride Allie’s hips. “Mm, I like that,” Allie said approvingly.

“You’re crazy,” Bea told her laughingly, until Allie slipped her hand between her legs and her laugh became a gasp.

They moved together for a time, their breaths matching, until Allie adjusted her hand a little, a question in her eyes. So far, the memory of the pain and shame that Harry had caused her had meant that Bea had not had the courage to decide how she would feel about Allie being inside her. And Allie had been so patient and respectful, never even suggesting it, although Bea had seen the thought cross her face. She knew how she loved being inside Allie. It was the most wonderful and intimate feeling, and she wanted that for Allie, but she feared a bad memory being triggered, and an unhappy experience for them both. But she did trust her. Nothing they had done together had felt like anything that had happened with him. So, Bea nodded, and Allie’s eyebrows shot up in another question. Sure?

"Yes," Bea told her. A pause and then a single long, cool finger, so gently slipped inside her. Distantly she heard Allie’s sigh of pleasure. There was no pain. Of course there was no pain, idiot. This was Allie. Still, tears of gratitude sprang up. She settled herself, filled her lungs. Then Allie flexed slightly, found an indescribably sensitive area and Bea's breath was suddenly gone. Her body began to move of its own accord and her breath came back with a loud inhalation. This was nothing like she had expected: not only was there no pain, but the intensity was off the chart. She wanted to open her eyes to watch Allie’s face, see if she loved this too, but every part of her was focussed tightly on how this felt. How Allie felt inside her.

After a minute Allie paused her with a hand on her thigh. Bea opened her eyes, wondering, only to have them slam shut again as Allie pressed into her again more expansively. Christ, that felt ... extraordinary. She moved against Allie’s hand with increasing urgency, her heart pounding harder and faster against her ribs. Just as she was beginning to lose all sense of where she ended and Allie began, she felt a hand close around her breast, spiking her pleasure. Her breath deserted her again and after a moment of excruciating anticipation, she found herself convulsing around Allie’s fingers, over and over, as her mind drained of thought.

It grieved Allie to imagine what Bea must have gone through and to know that some part of her, even now, expected intimate acts and physical pain to go together. Allie still didn’t know the exact details of what she had suffered. Bea was, justifiably, reluctant to speak of it when the topic most naturally arose, which was in the bedroom, as now, and Allie hadn’t yet found a way to ask her at another time. So, when Bea gave her approval, Allie’s eyebrows shot up in surprise and a strong pulse of arousal swept through her. Really? They were really doing this? Allie had just started to regret her tentative query, thinking that, in the passion of the moment, she had pushed too far. But Bea was braver than she had expected.

Allie’s heart pounded as she slid into her as gently as anyone could. Her own body clenched empathetically as she luxuriated in that intimate feeling for the first time. Bea was very still. Was she okay? Her mind just had time to begin a frantic scrabble of panic when, suddenly, Bea moved against her hand and gave a great gasp of pleasure, and Allie was drenched in a wave of relief and delight. And now she could relax and enjoy what she was witnessing: Bea straddling her, her face and breath telling the tale of her pleasure. It was the sexiest thing, seeing Bea moving above her, unselfconscious, unrestrained, her expression as untamed as her hair. Allie just wished she’d had
the presence of mind to remove her nightshirt first so that she could have seen all of her. Next time. For now it was more than enough. She felt her own desire spiralling up, watching.

The second finger was inevitable and perfect. Bea was moving harder, gripping tighter. Allie felt her own arousal building quickly as she crooked her fingers and pressed her palm against Bea, hearing her whimper. It wouldn’t take much for Bea to reach her peak now. Allie reached under Bea's nightshirt and took the perfect round of her breast in her hand, and thumbed the nipple. There was a startled gasp, a sudden silence as she seemed to forget to breathe, and then she began to spasm powerfully, clamping around Allie, her head falling back, a low groan emerging from her throat.

When the last pangs had fallen away Allie carefully withdrew her hand and Bea collapsed on top of her, immediately seeking out her lips for a long, loving kiss. Their hearts thumped together for a time whilst Bea incoherently explained how she’d liked that, and how wonderful Allie was, kissing her all over her face between words. Allie just chuckled and grinned and held her close, so happy that Bea trusted her enough to have taken this step. Bea chattered away, and Allie wondered if this is what she’d be like drunk. And then the next moment she was asleep, her head cushioned between Allie’s breasts. She glanced at the clock. They had a few more minutes until the alarm went off. She closed her eyes.

Chapter End Notes

So, I know most of us probably don't find the word "queer" remotely upsetting, so completely has it been reclaimed. But try to imagine how gay people might have felt about it in 1935 and put yourself in Bea and Allie's shoes for the purposes of this chapter.

Jigsaw puzzles were a massive craze in the 1930s. Jigsaw puzzle libraries even sprang up so that people could get their fix. I like a good puzzle myself, though I appreciate that they have a terribly granny-ish image now.
Bea was on the porch packing away her inks and pencils when a truck drew up in front of the house and Hank jumped out. He wiped his hands on the thighs of his pants before coming over and shaking her hand.


“Tolerable, thank you.” He glanced at her face and then away. He gestured to her makeshift easel. “Mind if I take a look?”

“Not at all,” Bea said stepping out of his way. She was beginning, finally, to become more comfortable with people seeing her work.

“That’s the pond just yonder,” he said with a surprised grin, pointing. Bea nodded, pleased that he had recognised the exact place: hers and Debbie’s longtime favourite swimming spot. And now Allie’s too. He shook his head and folded his arms across his chest. “Liz told me you were making some good money with this, and now I see why.” There was a pause while Bea wondered if he was going to say why he was here. Hank was not one for dropping in without a reason.

“I’m just about to put some coffee on. Want some?” she asked, expecting a negative, like every other time she had offered.

“I was hoping to speak to Allie, if she’s here …”

So that was it. Hank and Allie seemed to have hit it off in a big way. Bea wasn’t surprised. Allie had a way of charming even the most reticent people. Maybe it was the way Allie’s eyes always glittered when she spoke with someone she liked … or loved. Hank would have been the recipient of that look too, though not with the special meaning that Allie saved for when she was looking at Bea. Her heart sped up at the thought and she needed to clear her throat before she could speak. “They’re not back from school yet, but she won’t be long. Come on in and have some coffee while you wait.” She watched as he thought for a moment.

“Alright. Thank you kindly,” he replied with a guarded smile.

Hank sat at the kitchen table while Bea made the coffee and hoped the astonishment of him accepting her invitation was not too plainly written on her face. He was silent, but when she placed
his cup in front of him, his lips twitched as if to say something. Instead he took a sip.

“I expect you’ll be slaughtering your hogs soon …” Bea began, only to have Hank jump in suddenly with the topic that had been shadowing his eyes since he arrived.

“You know, I wish I had been a better friend to you Bea …” She took an astonished breath before grimacing to herself.

“Yeah, you’re a terrible friend,” she replied. “All that food you drop round, the way you helped me fix the leak in the roof, and that problem with the stove. None of that helped at all. You’re the worst …” He smiled for a moment before becoming serious again.

“I could see how it was with you and … your husband.” He shifted uneasily in his seat. Bea would have given a lot for him to just close his mouth, but he didn’t seem inclined to stop now that he had found his tongue. “I wanted to help, but … a person such as me, coming round here to visit with a white man’s wife. A man like that. I thought it would go badly … for both of us. So, I steered clear.” Bea sighed. She had never expected Hank to put himself between her and Harry; had counted on him in other ways.

“I don’t blame you Hank,” she said, repaying his seriousness in kind and laying a friendly hand on his arm. “And you’re right. Neither of us would have come out of it well. But you’ve always been a true friend to me and Debbie.”

“I did what little I thought I could … but I feel bad …”

“You helped us. You really did,” she assured him. “And you’re still helping now.”

" … I feel bad that I couldn't have stopped him." He spelled it out. "From hurting you."

"No one could have stopped him. Except me. I should have stopped him years ago." She felt the familiar anger building up inside her at the thought of all the wasted years.

"But you couldn't do it on your own. You needed help and it was Allie who helped you." Bea nodded and gave him a rueful smile.

"I didn't want her to get involved either …"

"But she wouldn't be gainsaid," he told her, his smile showing that he understood how it had been. "I'm glad she came along."

"Yeah," Bea replied. "Me too." She smiled to hear herself utter such an understatement.

“And I hope you don’t think that I’m disregarding you, an old friend of many years’ standing, in favour of Allie …” Bea shook her head and laughed.

“Not at all. I know she’s a lot easier to talk to than I am.”

“About some things,” he mumbled. Was he blushing? Bea had never known him to be awkward like this around her.

“I’m happy that you two get along. Really. She’s the sociable type.” Hank nodded slowly before compressing his lips in a way that let Bea know he was about to say some other difficult thing.

“Liz told me that Debbie had a little trouble at school with the youngest Morris boy. Told me what he said.” Now it was Bea’s turn to colour up. *Queer*. Every time she heard it sounding in her head,
it brought the full weight of society’s disapproval down upon her heart. If people could only know how that felt, surely it would never be uttered again.

“You know his kin?” she asked when she had calmed herself a little.

“Not really. I’ve seen one of their older boys, Robert, I think he’s called, hanging around with Jake Stewart.”

“So that’s it. Jimmy got that nasty word from Robert who got it from Jake … and so it gets around,” she said in frustration, standing up and pacing around the table. “Damn it. Why can’t people mind their own business?” Just then footsteps pounded on the porch steps and Debbie burst in with her usual impetuous manner.

“It is you!” she exclaimed happily. “I told you Allie … I said it would be Hank,” this last to Allie who was following behind more slowly. As ever it was a profound satisfaction for Bea to set eyes upon her, even weary as she was from a day at work. That face, those curving lips and full cheeks. No one else in the world could ever make her feel this joyful excitement. She hurried over to her and, smiling into her brilliant eyes, took her bags out of her hands, while Debbie insinuated herself onto the edge of Hank’s chair. He kissed the crown of her head.

“It’s me,” he confirmed. “I hope you worked hard at school today,” he said with a mock serious frown.

“Of course. I learned about President Lincoln. Did you know he got assassinated?” she asked, her eyes wide.

“I heard something about that,” Hanks replied, his eyes shining.

“And he was really tall, and he loved reading, just like me,” she finished. Hank nodded and reached into his pocket.

“You are really tall,” he deadpanned.

“I mean the reading, silly,” Debbie laughed.

“Well, you were obviously paying attention. Keep it up.” And he held out a coin to her on the flat of his palm.

“A quarter? Thank you!”

“Hank,” Bea protested. “You don’t need to be giving her money …” He just smiled.

“Allie. Could I speak with you?” he asked, ignoring Bea’s exasperated sigh.

“Sure …” Allie replied. Bea thought she looked faintly surprised but, true to her generous nature, not displeased at the notion of delaying her evening.

“Maybe … outside.” He gestured with his head towards the door, and they went out onto the porch.

Bea busied herself with Debbie, asking her about school, making her something to eat, and tried not to wonder what it could all be about. A while later Hank put his head around the door to thank her for the coffee and say goodbye. When Allie came back inside, she had a thoughtful look on her face.

“Well?” Bea asked pointedly, when it became evident that she wasn’t going to volunteer any
information. She smiled mysteriously.

“Later,” she said. “Definitely later,” and she quirked an eyebrow in Debbie’s direction. Bea swallowed her curiosity for the time being.

When Allie came downstairs from reading Debbie a bedtime story Bea was standing impatiently in the kitchen. Allie walked straight into her waiting arms, wrapping her in a close embrace and resting her head on Bea’s shoulder. She sighed contentedly before lifting her head and looking into Bea’s eyes.

“Hi,” she said quietly.

“Hi,” Bea replied, running her hands over Allie’s shoulders and up the back of her neck, anticipating the kiss she had been longing for all day. “You sound tired. Tough day?”

“I had a word with Jimmy about what he said to Debbie. Not a conversation I ever want to have to repeat with a student.” She gave a wry smile. “Plus … I missed you,” Allie told her, her smile turning mischievous. “After this morning ... I had a hard time concentrating.”

“That wasn’t a spectacularly sexy dream, then?” Bea said, blushing and smiling in equal measure, her body flooding with heat at the memory.

“It was a dream come true,” Allie replied sweetly. “It made me so happy that you opened yourself up to me. Held nothing back. Trusted me with your safety.” Bea ducked her head and laughed lightly, but when she looked back at Allie’s face, she was serious, her shining eyes attesting to her sincerity. Bea dropped her smile.

“Of course,” she said fervently. “It’s all for you.” She put a hand on each side of her face and looked into her eyes. “I’m all yours. I love you,” she told her joining their mouths, hoping to prove it with the touch of her lips and the brush of her tongue. “We could have done that sooner. I was just … afraid. With Harry …” She sighed and swallowed, still struggling to spell it out. “It would hurt so bad. And make me feel like nothing. Some part of me still expected that.” She kissed her again, sensation rushing through her blood like it was the first time. Like every time. Time and again. “But not anymore. That’s done with.”

“You were very brave this morning, and open to the idea, but you might not feel that brave another time. So, you must,” Allie told her firmly, “say what you want. And what you don’t want. Each time. Any time. I never want to be the person who touches you in a way you don’t want to be touched.” Allie gave her a long steady look.

“You never could,” Bea told her. "Didn't you notice? This morning … and every other time. I can't resist your touch." Allie grinned and leant forward.

"I may test that theory later," she said into her ear, making a light thrill run through Bea's body. "But for now, I have a very interesting piece of information from Hank." Allie looked her in the eye. "He told me it was okay to tell you, but he looked mortified all the same."

“He was acting so strange earlier. Nervous and jumpy. He told me he wished he’d been a better friend through all the Harry stuff." A terrible thought struck her. "Hold on, he’s not ill, is he?”

“No, nothing like that. Come and sit down. It’s just that it’s something personal, and I think he feels bad that he never told you before.”

“Okay …” Allie led the way over to the couch and they settled down close together at one end, Bea automatically resting one hand on Allie’s thigh.
“And I think he’s only telling us now because he believes it would help us. And, of course, he realises we’ll be fine with it.”

“Just tell me already!” Bea butted in impatiently. Really, Allie seemed to be enjoying this a little too much.

“Alright. So … there’s this place he goes to sometimes, out on the highway. It’s a speakeasy or an inn or something. Anyway, apparently there’s a backroom there where men go when they want to meet other men, if you get my drift.” Allie's eyebrows made some suggestive movements to emphasise her statement. Bea flushed up as the realisation of the truth of Allie's words hit her. How blind she had been.

“Hank? Are you sure?” she asked, although her brain already knew the truth of it, while her mouth was still catching up.

“Yes, I'm sure. Did you really have no clue?” Allie asked her.

“No. It never occurred to me until this moment.”

“A good-looking guy like that, single all these years?”

“I just thought he was shy,” Bea protested weakly.

"Definitely not shy," Allie said with a grin. "The point of this is that one time, we’re talking a year or more ago, he met a handsome man there, and one thing led to another … Anyway, sounds like Hank was really smitten, but the next time they met, the guy initially ignored him and then treated him like crap. Showing off in front of his friends."

"Poor Hank."

"Anyway. Get this. The guy in question was Jake Stewart." Allie just looked at her, awaiting her reaction.

"What? How …"

"I know. Crazy, right? But this is the best bit. Hank has handed us the silver bullet for our problem. Because he has described to me the birthmark on Jake Stewart's ass." She paused for effect. "Shaped like Texas, apparently." Her eyes shone triumphantly, willing Bea to understand.

"So, we tell Jake we know what he's been getting up to, and he'll stop spreading the news about us?" Bea asked. Could it really be that the information they needed to stop these rumours had just fallen into their laps?

"Well, actually," Allie continued with a sly look. "I was thinking that we go one better and tell Vera. She's got a lot to lose if anything gets out about her precious husband. That way she becomes the one keeping him in line, not us." Bea thought for a moment, then shook her head as she realised the problem with all this.

“We can’t do anything with this information. It’s too dangerous for Hank. Jake will know it was him.” Dread sank through her belly at the thought of the kind of revenge he would take.

“I pointed that out to Hank, but he said that there was no reason for Jake to suspect him, particularly. There are quite a few candidates apparently: men and women, white and negro, who've all been seduced and discarded. People that he’s treated badly enough that they might be happy for him to get into trouble.”
“Liz did say something a while back about him behaving like a tomcat. What a hypocrite!” Bea clenched her hands into fists. Why would he rake up their private lives, knowing he was just as susceptible as them to rumours like this? Did he think he was beyond reproach? Or just enjoy living dangerously? And poor Vera. “I’m not sure we should involve Vera …”

“Sounds like an odds-on chance that she already suspects, wouldn’t you think? If Liz has heard about his behaviour, other people must have.” Allie said.

“Yeah, but I doubt anyone thinks he goes with men too. And you should see Vera’s face when she talks about him. She loves him. I don’t want to be the one who adds to her misery.”

“What about our misery?” Allie asked hotly. “What about Debbie?” Bea rubbed her hands over her face, as unwilling to interfere in some other woman's marriage as she would have been to have anyone interfere in hers. “Just think about it,” Allie asked her. Bea nodded mournfully, burrowing into her arms, closing her eyes, wishing she could turn off her thoughts.

“So, Hank, huh?” she said finally, still adapting to the news.

“Yeah. Can’t be easy …”

“You’re gonna laugh when I tell you this,” Bea started. “He was behaving so oddly today. Insisting on speaking to you, all nervous, I was beginning to think he was smitten with you.” Allie started laughing, her chest shaking against Bea’s head where it rested.

“Don’t ever mention that to him. He’d be so embarrassed,” Allie told her. “You know, I did wonder, after he was so sympathetic about the rumours, if he might be … temperamental.” Bea scoffed at the ridiculous euphemism, so inappropriate for Hank.


“Probably. It didn’t take her long to figure out what was going on with us.”

“She could have told me,” Bea complained. Allie shook her head.

“No, she did the right thing keeping it quiet. Hank’s safety might depend on her discretion. Ours too.”

* * * * * * *

“May I speak to Sheriff Burdette?”

“This is he,” Shorty replied, shifting the earpiece from one ear to the other.

“Good morning Sheriff. This is Sergeant Murphy of the New York City Police Department. I just received a request from you regarding some information you asked for on one ... Allie Novak.”

“Yes, that’s right. Have you found something?”

“I have the file right here. I’ll have it sent over to you.”

“Thank you. Can you give me the highlights?”

“Okay, but it’s not a pretty story …”
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone. Thanks for reading this tale and your interesting comments. Here's the next instalment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bea pulled the truck up outside the hotel.

“Probably best if Debbie goes with you,” she told Allie. “Stan wouldn’t be pleased to have a child behind the scenes.”

“Wanna come with me Deb? The girls would love to meet you,” Allie asked her.

“Sure,” the girl replied, seemingly as happy to go with Allie as to stay with her mama. Allie gave her hand a glad squeeze. They had decided to spend Saturday afternoon spreading the word about “Imogene” amongst their friends and acquaintances to see if any information about her could be unearthed. Bea was covering the hotel and then would drop by to see Charles, whilst Allie would go to the boarding house and then the hardware store. She hoped that Maxine and her friends at the telephone exchange could listen out for such an unusual name, and she knew that Will Jackson was the source of Maxine’s moonshine and might have some slightly shady contacts that could be useful.

“We might stay awhile and visit with the girls, so if you want to get off home when you’re done, we’ll see you there,” Allie smiled. “You know what they’re like once they get to talking …”

“It’s Maxine and Boomer that can’t stop talking is it?” Bea shot back with a laugh. “Here,” she said handing Allie the keys to the truck. “I’ll get the bus back; you take the truck.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Then I won’t have to worry about you getting back late,” Bea told her with that shy smile that drove her crazy. Allie grinned, basking in Bea’s diligent care.

“Okay. Well … good luck. See you in a bit.” Allie yearned to lean over and kiss her goodbye. Instead, she settled for a look which she hoped sent the same message. Bea’s lips twitched.

Message received.

Arriving at Thomasina Towers Allie and Debbie were engulfed in a wave of affection, installed in the sitting room and lavished with lemonade and apple pie. Debbie settled down happily to talk to Maxine, enjoying the attention. Allie listened to Boomer’s chatter whilst watching Maxine with the little girl. Her face had softened and there was a shine to her eyes that Allie hadn’t seen before. She had never thought about it until now, but Maxine would make a terrific mother. Would Will Jackson be the one to share that experience with her, she wondered? Maxine caught her eye and gave her a bashful smile.

*       *       *       *       *       *       *       *

When Bea stepped off the bus in Broadlea she decided to stop by the store and pick up some more
sugar. Maybe she would have time to bake a cake before Allie and Debbie got home. Her efforts in Charlottesville felt like a waste of time. No one on the staff at the hotel had come across anyone named Imogene, though they had promised to listen out for her. Stan had wanted to know if she was looking to get her old job back, but she had had to disabuse him of that idea: she was out of that job and had no wish to go back. Charles had been pleased to see her, as always. He had sold two more of her pictures and Bea had promised him that she would have some more ready for him to display soon.

Stepping inside the general store Bea had a strong impulse to turn back around and leave. Vera Stewart was standing at the counter with that compact, inflexible stance of hers, a pile of purchases ready, her purse clasped in front of her with both hands. Liz hailed Bea before she had a chance to sidle back out of the door, so she was forced to come inside, gifting them both with a reluctant smile. Vera turned to Bea with her wide, shiny eyes.

“Good afternoon Mrs Smith. How are you?” Bea looked at her intently, trying to decide on her sincerity now that she knew a little more about her and her husband.

“Very well thank you,” she replied politely.

“Where’s your little girl today? Such a pretty little thing …” she said with, as far as Bea could tell, a genuine smile. She caught Liz’s eye. She was watching the interaction between the two of them with interest, apparently sensing Bea’s coolness.

“She’s with Miss Novak this afternoon. Visiting some friends in town,” Bea replied, careful to keep her tone neutral. But Vera’s smile dropped at the mention of Allie’s name. She turned and moved away from the counter, seeming to want to speak to Bea more privately.

“Are you sure that’s wise?” she asked in a low voice. Bea moulded her features into a look of surprise.

“What do you mean?” she asked innocently.

“It’s just that … if I had a lovely child like that …” a shadow passed across her face momentarily, “I wouldn’t allow her to become involved in anything … unseemly.” Bea’s temper began to fray. It was bad enough that she would attempt to sully Allie’s reputation. How dare she bring Debbie into this.

“Respected?” Vera asked with raised eyebrows. “I’m not so sure.” She pursed her lips and looked at her feet for a moment. Apparently deciding to elaborate she continued, “I was speaking to Mrs Pitts the other day. As I’m sure you know, her husband is the chairman of the education committee. She told me that her husband had told her that he has heard some disturbing information about Miss Novak …”

“Oh, really?” Bea interrupted. “Would he have had that information from your husband, by any chance?” she asked sardonically.

“I don’t know what you mean …”

“Your husband should be careful about casting stones. That’s what I mean.” Vera looked at her questioningly, confusion in her eyes. How could she know her own husband so little? Bea wondered.
“Casting stones? My husband …? I think you must be thinking of someone else, Mrs Smith.” Vera spoke with such pitying condescension, as though Bea was the one living under an illusion, that Bea’s ire took another step forward.

“Someone told me about a birthmark of your husband’s,” she hissed in a ferocious whisper. “In the shape of a certain state? On a certain part of the body? The knowledge of which he came upon during what you would call an unseemly encounter. You wouldn’t want that to get around the neighbourhood.” Bea stopped, mortified. She hadn’t meant to go so far and now Vera’s face had turned transparent, her eyes wider than ever, her hands trembling on her purse. Her lips moved uncertainly, as though she would refute Bea’s words, but no sound came out. Bea sighed. “Look. This must be hard for you but … your husband needs to think about what he’s doing. If he keeps this up, it’s not just our happiness that he’s going to destroy, but yours too. None of us will be able to hold our heads up around here …”

“I really don’t …” Vera began faintly. “I must be getting along …” She moved unsteadily towards the door.

“Your groceries …” Liz called after her. Vera just waved one hand in a dismissive way, pulled the door open and stepped outside. “Holy cow! What was that all about?” Liz asked. Bea sighed. She wished she hadn’t said any of that. But really, what choice had Vera given her?

“I had to warn her and Jake off from spreading any more rumours. Shit. It sounds like Jake has been whispering in Hubert’s ear. That could cost Allie her job!” Bea ran her hands through her hair, tugging on it in frustration.

“No, now,” Liz soothed. She stilled Bea’s arms and looked into her face. “Hubert’s no fool. He won’t dismiss her out of hand. Besides, Martha and her mother were in the store just yesterday. Martha was saying how much Allie’s helping her and George with their college applications. They evidently have a high opinion of Allie’s abilities …”

“I’m not sure that’ll count for much if the other parents get ahold of these rumours …”

“Then we’ll just have to make sure they don’t,” Liz said with finality. “What you said to Vera. Will that hold them, do you think?” Bea shrugged, pursing her lips.

“Allie seemed to think it would. She said Vera had a lot to lose if … I won’t say. Our leverage relies upon keeping it quiet. Not that I don’t trust you Liz …”

“It’s fine love,” Liz reassured her. “I know how these things work.”

Bea headed home, still annoyed with herself for allowing her anger to get the better of her. She had meant what she had said to Allie about not involving Vera. She felt bad for her, being shackled to a no-good husband: an experience that Bea herself knew only too well. When Vera told Jake what she had said, what would his reaction be? Would he be angry and seek her out, like Harry would have done? Or would he knuckle under and button his lip? Allie had been so sure it would work, and she had to assume Hank thought the same, otherwise he never would have told them about it.

Once home she set about mixing up a cake batter. The routine of combining the ingredients was soothing and she managed to put her skirmish with Vera out of her mind for a time. Cake in the oven, she went outside to collect the eggs. Usually this was Debbie's task, but who knew when they would be back. Hunched inside the chicken run she could hear the truck approaching. Her heart leapt up in excitement. Back already.
Will looked at her questioningly. Allie felt a little embarrassed to be getting into this with him. After all, she hardly knew him and was relying on his devotion to Maxine to make him want to help.

"So, your friend's husband has gone missing. You think he might have a girlfriend called Imogene, and you think I might know her?" he asked, sounding more than a little confused.

"Not that you might know her. Just that if you asked people you know, someone might know her," Allie clarified.

"I see," he replied, clearly not seeing.

"You are the one who gets the moonshine for Maxine aren't you?" Will laughed.

"Yes but, sorry to disappoint, I'm not connected in any way. I get that stuff from an old fella who comes in here from time to time. Has his own still. When he has no money, he pays in liquor." Allie groaned.

"Sorry. It was stupid of me to assume …"

"It's fine. You're clearly desperate to find this man …"

"Not really. We just want to show that he's alive."

"Now you've really lost me …" Will confessed. Suddenly there came the sound of rapid footfalls from the back of the store.

"Allie! Allie! Come and see the kittens."

"Kittens?" Allie asked her. Will nodded.

"Oh yeah. Boomer discovered a mother cat with a litter living out the back. She's been feeding them on scraps for a couple of weeks," Will explained. Debbie was excitedly pulling on her arm, so Allie excused herself and went with her to where Boomer was squatting by a pile of rags just outside the back entrance of the store. Within that nest of rags lay a black and white cat with a multicoloured jumble of kittens climbing all over her. Debbie reached out a hand towards the nearest kitten.

"Hold on Deb. Maybe the mama cat won't like you touching her babies," Allie cautioned.

"Nah, it's fine," Boomer said. "I've been picking them up and everything."

"Go ahead then," Allie told her. Debbie stroked the nearest kitten gently between the ears, smiling fit to bust. "Look at this grey stripy one," Allie cooed. "She's adorable."

"I like this one best," Debbie whispered, continuing to stroke the kitten she had picked out from the beginning. He was totally black from the tip of his tail to the tops of his ears, save for his new blue eyes and his precious pink nose. After a couple more minutes of steady stroking he clambered unsteadily onto Debbie's knee.

"I think he likes you too Deb," Allie told her, tears pricking at her eyes to see her so happy. "Boomer … can I have a word?"

* * * * * * * *

"Bea."
"Shorty," she replied cautiously. "I'm sorry but my lawyer told me I shouldn't answer any more questions. Not unless he's present at least."

"That's okay. I'm not here to ask you anything, but to tell you something. Would that be alright with your lawyer?" He stood looking at her expectantly, his eyes flinty, his face giving no indication of the friendship they had shared in the past. Bea settled her hands on her hips and regarded him belligerently.

"If you're just here to tell me that you think I killed Harry, don't bother. I got it, Shorty. You think I hit him over the head and buried him in the garden. Well, be my guest!" she gestured at the neat rows of vegetables. "Want me to help you dig?" Shorty sighed and lowered himself onto the porch steps.

"Believe it or not, that's the last thing I want to think," he said sadly. "I know you. Or … I knew you. The Bea I knew might have killed someone in a rage but not with premeditation. And she probably wouldn't have covered it up."

"Well. There you go then," Bea replied, slightly mollified.

"But you've changed a lot. People have noticed. Hell, I've noticed. And it's since around the time of Harry's disappearance."

"He wasn't a good person, Shorty. He did things …"

"I figured."

"So, yes. I have changed since I don't have to be afraid of him anymore," she told him. "Hold on, did you know what he was doing?"

"I wasn't sure. I did hear rumours. But the sheriff's office has an unofficial policy of non-interference in marital disputes."

"Marital disputes?" Of all the euphemisms he could have used those words made her anger leap up. Without thinking she spat out the truth. "He beat me. He raped me. And you had a policy?"

She glared at him until he looked away in shame.

"I'm sorry Bea. There's nothing I could have done anyway. The law doesn't recognise anything that goes on between husband and wife as rape. And as for the beatings … that's just how some men get their wives to obey them."

"Harry beat me because he liked it, not to make me obey him. He raped me because it made him feel good to overpower me and take what he wanted." Bea watched him flinch at those words. His eyes were shining wetly now, like pebbles in a stream bed, his shoulders hunched as if to deflect a blow. Seeing him cowed like that allowed her anger to evaporate as quickly as it had formed. Take away that ridiculous uniform and he was the same boy she had been friends with all those years ago. She sighed, turning away from him, her anger fading. But forgiveness would not be so easy to come by. "Why are you here Shorty?" she asked sadly. "You said you had something to tell me."

She heard him clear his throat.

"I asked around Bea, and there's a rumour about you and Miss Novak." Bea balled her hands into fists, making a sound of annoyance in the back of her throat. Of all the people to catch on to that rumour it would have to be Shorty, wouldn't it? He sighed. "Before you say anything, I'm not interested in whether it's true or not. The point is that, to my mind, it could give the two of you a motive to be rid of Harry …" She whirled around, a refutation on her lips. "Don't say anything Bea.
Your lawyer wouldn't like it. I'm here as a friend. To let you know where we're at. To give you a chance to … cut ties, if you decide that's best. So, just hear me out.

_Cut ties?_ Did he mean with Allie? She folded her arms across her chest and tried to look patient so that he would spit out whatever nonsense this was and leave. "I couldn’t give any credence to the idea that you would premeditatedly murder your husband, but what if you were under some kind of malign influence from someone else? If that someone else had you in their power? Could sway you to do something out of character? So, I decided I’d better look into this Miss Novak." Bea scoffed. Allie a malign influence? If it wasn't so preposterous, she would give him a piece of her mind.

"Well, I got in contact with the New York police. Turns out she has a history. They have a file on her from when she was involved in some unpleasant business last year. I’m talking prostitution. Procuring. A suspicious death." Bea's mind spun like a flywheel, trying to latch on to any one of those words as a concept that might relate to Allie: her beautiful, gentle, loving girl. She shook her head, perplexed.

"But you’ve met Allie …" No one who met Allie could possibly think anything bad of her, could they?

"I have. Appearances can be deceiving, believe me." Shorty spoke with what sounded like hard won experience.

"You know she's a schoolteacher. She wouldn’t be involved in anything like that. She’s a kind and gentle soul. There must be some kind of mistake," Bea pleaded.

“I brought you the file. See for yourself.” He offered her a manila file folder, his gaze steady on her face. Bea had dismissed everything he had said, and nothing could have made her consider there was any truth in it until she recognised the pity in his eyes. She fought the impulse to bolt into the house in the face of his certainty. Her hand recoiled from the proffered folder as though it were a snake. It looked blandly innocent, but Bea had a terrible premonition of the poison it might contain. Shorty waggled the folder impatiently.

Reluctantly, she took the file from his hand and flipped open the cover. She read the first line. _Novak, Alicja Elzbeita_. She almost closed it right then. _It's a mistake. It's not Allie_, she thought in relief. Curiosity made her examine the blurry mugshot pasted below. It was a terrible photograph. She looked closer and her heart took a precipitous dive. She closed her eyes, but there was no way that she could deny what she had seen. It was Allie.

An inky pit of fear and doubt opened up beneath her feet and she plummeted into it.

Chapter End Notes

Oh no!
I've been battling earache all week, so this is posted under sleep deprivation and under the influence of pain killers. Hope it makes sense.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Thank you, everyone, for your comments and for reading the previous chapters. Here is the next chapter. I hope you enjoy it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Allie pulled up in front of the house, her heart light with happiness. Maybe she hadn’t made any progress with the Imogene situation, but she had sorted out a couple of other things. She grabbed the parcel from the seat next to her and climbed out of the truck, Debbie slithering out after her. She swung the little girl’s hand in her free one as they climbed the porch steps and opened the door. Bea was in the kitchen.

“Hi, we’re home,” she sang out, but even as she spoke, she could see that something was amiss. On the kitchen table stood the burned ruin of a cake; the air tainted with its charred smell. And the way Bea was holding herself was all wrong. Her shoulders were down, her elbows in, as though the struts that usually supported her had collapsed in upon themselves. And her face ... it was ravaged, stripped back to the bone. Allie's guts tumbled in panic. Something terrible must have happened.

“What is it?” she asked, her voice strangely high-pitched in her ears. Bea looked at her, but it was like no look she had ever received from her before. Allie rocked back on her heels as though blasted by the heat of her wretchedness.

“Go up to your room please, Debbie,” Bea told her daughter, her voice as fragile as ash. “I need to talk to Allie.” Debbie’s eyes grew very large in her face, but she obeyed her mother unquestioningly.

“What is it? What’s happened?” Allie asked her. Ordinarily she would have had her in her arms by now. But Bea's aggrieved expression was making her hesitate.

"Shorty came round," she said, her voice a shadow; volume and timbre both extinguished by whatever had happened. Allie swallowed down a wave of nausea, suddenly certain of what Shorty had said.

"They found Harry's body then?” she said with alarm. "He didn't arrest you or charge you, though ...?” Bea was shaking her head and ... struggling not to cry? Allie went to her then, unable to do otherwise. But Bea held her hands up to ward her off, emotion coming off her in waves that scorched Allie's nerves. "Bea, sweetheart, what is it?" She loathed the wheeling tone of her own voice. Tears swelled against her lower lids. "Talk to me. You're scaring me." Bea just tapped her fingers against the kitchen table.

"This ...” she said hoarsely and turned away. Allie looked at the tabletop. On it lay a plain cardboard file.

"What is it?" she asked.

“It’s …” Bea scoffed bitterly. “It’s the answers to all the questions I should have asked you.” Allie’s head snapped up in surprise. This is about me? She closed her eyes, wishing this moment of reckoning would pass harmlessly by. This wasn’t about Harry, or about Jake Stewart and his
gossip. This was about Allie’s past and the things she had avoided telling Bea. She cursed herself for her fatal procrastination. Gathering all of her courage she flipped open the cover and her own face stared back at her. “Alicja Elżbieta Novak.” Bea pronounced the name slowly: it tolled balefully in Allie’s ears. Bea was looking at her now, but Allie almost wished she wouldn’t. The anger and hurt in her eyes scorched Allie's skin so that she wished she could tear it off. “Who even is this person?” Bea asked, finally finding her voice, incandescent with rage. “I don’t recognise her at all. Not her name, not the things she did …”

“Have you read this?” Allie asked through a high-pitched ringing in her ears.

“Some …” Bea’s voice faded out.

“Bea …” If she could only have the chance to explain.

“I trusted you!” Bea ground out, her voice crumbling. “I defended you for Christ’s sake … to Vera fucking Stewart!” she spat out, eyes sparking angrily, lips twisted by a word that Allie might almost have thought Bea wasn’t capable of uttering.

“I should have told you; I know …” Allie was bathed in shame. Bea's tone and righteous anger drew it out of her in a way that no other had ever managed. Not the police. Not even her mother.

“I laughed in Shorty’s face when he tried to tell me. You should have seen the look he gave me! He thinks I’m some kind of patsy …”

“You’re not a patsy! Everything I told you was true …”

“But there was a hell of a lot you didn’t tell me …”

“I know. I was scared.” Allie looked at her feet, at the file, at the lumpen cake, anywhere but at Bea. She had ruined everything, when all she had wanted was Bea’s love. “I was scared that if I told you, it would change the way you looked at me. And it has.” She raised her head and looked, for what might be the final time, into Bea’s brown eyes, blackened with loss. The tears spilled freely down her face. “I’m so sorry Bea,” she choked. “I’ll pack my things and go.” Bea was silent as Allie made her way to her room and managed to close the door behind her before sobs completely took over her body.

*   *   *   *   *   *   *   *

Bea slumped into a chair, saddened beyond tears. How could so much have changed in such a short time? Only a few hours ago she had been deliriously happy: she and Allie, hearts and souls entwined, each the other’s ideal companion and lover. Now everything was ruined. Their family and home might as well have burnt to the ground. She looked at the singed cake, neglected in the oven while Shorty had imparted his incendiary information. Her anger flared up. What a waste! In a sudden pulse of white hot rage, she threw it as hard as she could against the wall.

She stared at the mess of crumbs and the ashy smear on the wall. If only Allie had told her! The contents of the file, the parts she had managed to read, were incomprehensible to Bea, knowing Allie as she did, but what had really destroyed her was that Allie had kept it secret. That Bea had trusted her with all her secrets, had allowed her to help her, had opened herself up while Allie had kept part of herself closed off. The perfect union she thought that they had achieved was all on one side.

But maybe she was partly to blame. She had taken Allie's sunny disposition at face value, but no one was like that all the time, everyone had shade as well as light. And she hadn't asked Allie.
There had been hints. Hints about a previous romance; the mysterious money she had offered to pay Harry off. Hints that Bea had allowed to lie unexplored, so caught up was she in other troubles.

Bea stared at her hands, thinking, the haze beginning to clear from her mind. She was angry and upset, justifiably so, she felt, but wasn't it within her own power to decide how she would react to this situation? She could be the old Bea: rage, throw Allie out of the house, punish her. But that would be a punishment for them all, not just Allie. She tamped down her anger at the betrayal. Time to think clearly.

Maybe Allie deserved the chance to explain. And if she did, maybe Bea could find a way to accept it, without feeling like she had been duped and played for a fool. She almost felt the moment when her heart overruled her head: it was like an audible snap as everything slotted into place. She remembered all the times when she had lashed out at Allie or fled from her in rage or panic and Allie had waited her out or brought her back with her patience and understanding, with her willingness to listen. Before she could out-think it, she was at Allie’s door, her hands and her ear pressed against the wood. She could hear no sounds of packing, only Allie’s agonised sobbing. Her heart wrenched at the sound.

"Allie." No reply. "Allie." A little louder. The sobbing quietened. "I'm going to make Debbie's supper and put her to bed." Only the occasional sob now and the odd sniffle. "Please don't leave. At least … not until we've had a chance to talk about this." There was a silence, then a rustle of movement, and then Allie's voice.

"Alright."

She sounded very close. Bea pictured her just the other side of the door, maybe pressed against it exactly as Bea was. Her right index finger stroked the grain of the wood a single time and her heart allowed a solitary bright frond to unfurl from its blackened wreck.

*       *       *       *       *       *       *       *

They sat at opposite ends of the couch, Bea leaning forward with her elbows on her knees, twisting her hands together, looking at the wall. Allie could see that she had no interest in sitting any closer to her at the moment. Would it be easier to do this if she could wrap Bea in her arms? Could she transmit her sincerity through her touch? No. However she looked at it, this was going to be amongst the hardest conversations of her life. Taking a deep breath, Allie knew that this was her chance to explain everything to Bea, and her intestines writhed with anxiety. Everything counted on what she said now and how Bea took it. Bea had already surprised her by asking her not to leave without explaining, so she had some little hope that Bea was open to what she had to say. Of course, Bea didn’t know what she had done yet. The information in the file … it looked bad, but it was all wrong. Her real crime was the one she could never forgive herself for.

“I warned you once, a long time ago, about my faults. That I could be weak and dishonest. That I care too much about what other people think of me. Obviously, that goes double for you. But I’m going to tell you everything now Bea. I won’t leave anything out and … some of it makes me look pretty bad.” She looked over at Bea, hoping for some sign that she was going to be receptive to her story, but Bea just frowned, her lips turning down.

“Do it,” she said unflinchingly, as if she were a patient demanding to be put out of her misery: yank out the rotten tooth, reset the bone. I’m ready for the worst. Allie took a grip of herself as best she could, opened her mouth, and began.

“When I got my first teaching post it was at a large school not too far from home. I was living with
my parents over the store then,” Allie began. “I had completed my degree. I was a qualified teacher, but I was a long way from knowing what I was doing. Those first few weeks were terrifying. Everything that could go wrong went wrong: the lessons I planned were too short or too long, too easy or too hard. And then the students. I had no experience of how to deal with disruptive elements. Anyway, after a while one of the older, more experienced teachers came to my rescue.” Allie sneaked a look at Bea. Her head had dropped, and her hair curtained her face so that Allie had no idea of her thoughts or feelings. She swallowed heavily and continued.

“Her name was Marie Winter. She mentored me for the whole of that first year. Gradually, I found my feet and teaching began to feel like the vocation I had hoped it would be when I originally qualified, rather than the ordeal it had seemed at first. Marie was an enormous help. She always found the time to answer my questions and point out my mistakes … and eventually it became obvious to me that I had developed feelings for her.” She glanced at Bea. Would she be hurt by her feelings for Marie? She wouldn’t hold it against her, surely, it all having happened before they even met. “That realisation threw me,” she continued. “It was not part of any of my life plans that I become romantically involved with someone at work. A school is a conservative place and principals are always so concerned with student's morals. Teachers with dubious morals are not tolerated, so a workplace romance had always been out of the question for me. Anyway, I did my best to bury my feelings.” She paused for a moment, wondering if Bea would say something but it seemed as though she was going to allow her to get through her story without interruption.

“I thought I had succeeded, and my second year of teaching rolled around. I was now out of my probationary period: a fully-fledged teacher at last. It was around this time that Marie asked me if I would like to visit her at her apartment one night after work. She said she would cook for me and we could get to know each other a little outside of school. Of course, as soon as the invitation was uttered my buried feelings rushed to the surface. I longed for her all over again and could not have refused her invitation if I had tried.” Allie remembered her anticipation over what that evening might bring. At the time it was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to her, but those feelings paled in comparison with that she had experienced with Bea. Just as everything would pale without her in the future, unless she could convince Bea to give her another chance.

“Well. That was the start of it. Marie began a very effective campaign of seduction. Not that she had to try very hard,” Allie admitted. “I had always longed for affection my whole life, never seeming to get enough. My mother always saw to my needs in terms of clothing and food. And, of course, education. She was always insistent that I should get a college education. And although she wasn’t cruel or particularly distant, I always craved her love and attention in a way that was never satisfied.” Allie saw Bea shift uneasily. Perhaps she thought that she was trying to stir up her pity. But it wasn’t that. It was just the unvarnished truth, which is what Bea deserved. “So, when Marie offered her affection so abundantly my half-starved heart was opening its mouth and greedily swallowing it almost before either of us knew what was happening.”

“It was a passionate affair. I was in love with her and I thought I had met the person I would spend the rest of my life with. She was just as ardent and the necessity for secrecy was the only blot on our happiness. I don’t know how it happened, but rumours started to circulate, linking the two of us together. We were terrified and took steps not to be seen together in public, even in the corridor or the teacher’s lounge. But even in the privacy of Marie’s apartment there was a new kind of caution between us, pushing us apart.” Allie sighed. She was getting to the part she most dreaded, but it was imperative that she not falter now. She went on before she had a moment to change her mind.

“Eventually the whole thing blew up. After school one day we were summoned into the principal’s office. He asked us outright if there was any truth to the rumours. Before I could deny it, Marie jumped in and told him that it was true. Her opinion was that once rumours like this started there was no getting away from them, no matter what you said. She told him that she would go without
making a fuss in exchange for my being immune from discipline. She told him that I was not a lesbian, just a young woman whom she had led astray. That was a lie, obviously, but one she told because she loved me and wanted to protect me. But the principal couldn’t stand to have me around his students. They bartered for a while and the eventual outcome was that we would both be dismissed. Marie was to have no letter of recommendation, but I was to have as many glowing recommendations as I needed. She argued that she had led me into our disastrous liaison and that I was an innocent who should not have her promising career ruined at such an early stage. And I … I was silent. I let her do it and said nothing.” The memory of what Marie had sacrificed for her sake came back to Allie as though it had just happened, and fresh tears fell into her lap. If Marie hadn’t made that bargain, where would she be now? Not teaching at Broadlea. Not teaching anywhere. And without Broadlea she never would have met Bea. Allie wiped her face and continued as best she could, her voice thick with tears.

“Marie was an inspiring teacher and she'd devoted many years to the craft, but now she could never teach again. She had made an enormous sacrifice for my sake … but I’m afraid that was the beginning of the end for us. I could never repay her for what she had done and I loathed myself for having been too much of a coward,” her voice broke on the word, “to admit that I had been an equal and willing partner in our relationship.” She looked at Bea to see if she hated her yet, but her face was still hidden behind that curtain of hair. “I found work at another school and rented an apartment nearby, but Marie could find no work of any kind. We continued to see each other but it was never the same and we began to lose our connection. She had to move out of her apartment to a cheaper one in a worse part of town. Over the next few months I dropped by sometimes with groceries and we would talk, though she would never tell me what she was doing to pay the rent.”

"One time I visited with no warning. She was almost unconscious on the couch, a pipe in her lap. She had taken to using opium. I stayed with her until she was herself again. She told me to keep away, that she was on a road that I couldn't travel. I ignored her and came by every week, bringing her food, as she rarely seemed to think to feed herself. I would find men and girls, prostitutes, coming and going and it eventually dawned, even on me, how Marie was making her money. I was repulsed by what she was doing but was in no position to lecture her about it. It was my fault, after all." "Despite the opium she was an effective madam and soon moved to a house with several bedrooms where her business flourished. Marie herself was in a bad state, though: maudlin, emaciated, alcoholic, opium addicted and filled with self-loathing." As Allie gazed at her hands lying in her lap, she bitterly recriminated herself once again for not finding a way to help Marie out of that world. In a voice thick with emotion she forced herself to finish telling Bea the whole story.

"One evening last winter I made my usual visit with a bag of groceries. I let myself in and started up the stairs to Marie's private sitting room. Before I even opened the door, I heard feet drumming up the stairs behind me. Uniformed police officers swarmed around me and into every room. Marie must have known the raid was coming … because ... I found her … her body, still warm, on the couch.” Allie’s eyes were blurred with tears. She willed Bea to look at her, to accept the horror of that moment. Bea was totally still and silent. Then she startled Allie by coming suddenly to her feet and walking around the back of the couch where Allie could no longer see her. Allie wondered if she could no longer bear even to share the couch with her. Heart breaking, she knew she had to finish her story. “Everyone in the building was taken to the station house and questioned. The police found a document that named me as Marie’s partner and the beneficiary of her will. Immediately they assumed that I was her business partner in the … in the brothel and that also made me a suspect in her death. Eventually it was all cleared up, but not before I spent a night in the cells and had to explain, first to the police, and then to my parents everything that had happened between us. After that I couldn't bear to stay in the city. I used one of those glowing letters of recommendation to get the first job I could find that took me away from New York. And that job
brought me to Broadlea … and to you,” she concluded, turning to Bea, waiting with pounding heart for her to condemn her.

Bea still said nothing. Allie waited until her skin crawled with the silence and she had to break it. “I know I should have told you …”

“No, of course not. I wasn’t arrested or charged with anything. What’s in that file … it must be just the original report, before they got my statement and the statements of some of Marie’s girls.” Bea strode over to the kitchen table and opened the report, flipping to the end.

“No charges to be brought. It says so on the last page. I … I didn’t read that far,” Bea said in a regretful tone. She sat down beside Allie and took her hand, finally looking at her, her eyes still pained.

“Then … I don’t understand. Why didn’t you tell me about all this? You didn’t do anything …” she asked earnestly.

“Allie asked incredulously. “I ruined Marie’s life. I loved her,” Allie looked away, not wanting to rub that in, but willing Bea to understand. “I loved her and yet I was too much of a coward to share her fate. I should have ended up the same way as her, but I let her get dragged down and carried on with my life as though nothing had happened.” And now the tears started and wouldn’t be stopped. Bea put her arm around her.

“What good would that have done? She obviously loved you very much Allie. She protected you. She wouldn’t have wanted you to end up like that,” Bea told her. It sounded so reasonable when she put it that way. “What would have been the point in you both being ruined? So, tell me again. Why didn’t you tell me?” Allie sobbed anew. When she could speak again, she spat it out. “I was so ashamed!”

Bea held her whilst she cried. When, eventually, she was quiet again Bea tried to understand. “You didn’t tell me because you were ashamed that … your former lover died … and you didn’t manage to help her?” Allie nodded.

“And because I wanted you to know you could rely on me. I wouldn’t let anything happen to you or Deb, Bea, honest. But back then I was weak … and a coward. I didn’t want you to know I could be like that.” Bea scoffed.

“That’s ridiculous Allie. I could never see you like that. You stood up to Harry and you were strong enough not to get dragged down into Marie’s way of life. I know you did everything you could to help her.” Allie looked at her, hardly daring to believe what she was hearing.

“So … you don’t hate me?” she asked. A faint hope brushed against her heart.

“Of course not.”

“And you aren’t mad that … I had another love … before …”

“No Allie. I knew it. How could you, of all people, not have been loved before? And I don’t expect you to have no regrets about losing Marie. I just wish you had told me all this sooner.” She paused to smooth Allie’s tear streaked cheek; her expression serious. “I love you so much. But you broke my trust by not telling me. It’s going to take a while for us to get back to where we were. But I want us to … if you do.” Allie choked out a teary laugh.
“Yes. Please …”

“And I want to hear it all, Allie. There’s nothing you need to hide from me.” Allie nodded.

"Of course," she said firmly. She took a deep breath and could swear she felt the unsaid things begin to rise, untethered at last from all the knotted anxiety she had carried with her these past months.

"So, Alicja …"

Allie groaned. "Don't call me that. Only my mama calls me that."

"Tell me about her."

Chapter End Notes

Hope you don't object too strongly to the liberties I have taken in making Marie more sympathetic.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

It's 26th December. Happy birthday Bea!

Chapter Notes

If there was ever going to be such a thing as the "Time and Again" Christmas Special, then this must be it. I hope you enjoy it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bea had said that all she wanted for her birthday was a bright, sunny day, and looking at the brilliance of the light penetrating the curtains, Allie thought she might have gotten her wish. And it was chilly too. Allie snuggled in closer to Bea’s sleeping body, lifting her limp arm and draping it over her for warmth. Bea stirred and pressed against her, murmuring sleepily. Allie’s breath hitched as Bea’s bare breasts and thighs connected with her own. She felt her heart jump gladly remembering last night.

Allie’s only wish had been to give Bea the most pleasurable Christmas night she could. But it had become clear that Bea wanted to show her that the wounds that secrecy had dealt their relationship were completely healed at last. In bed, Allie had always avoided putting her full weight on Bea, thinking that it might trigger her fear. And it had been only a couple of weeks since Bea had finally described to her everything that Harry had put her through. Having said that word, rape, to Shorty in anger, she had at last been able to say it to Allie in sorrow. Since then Allie's touch had turned more tentative. She couldn't help it. The pulse of anger that she felt every time she thought about Harry was transfigured into tenderness towards Bea, even when she ordinarily would have responded with passion.

Last night Bea had purged that anger. She had stripped herself naked with only the barest trace of shyness and pulled Allie on top of her, between her legs, with no fear in sight. More open and pliant than ever before, Bea had encouraged Allie to explore her body and its responses to the fullest. Light-headed from the memory, Allie recalled the satisfaction she had felt from Bea’s eagerly parted legs and her generous mouth which had welcomed Allie’s tongue deep inside. Something about the way Bea surrendered all control drove Allie wild, so that tenderness was forgotten for a time. And when they had exhausted themselves and fallen asleep it had, of course, been without any nightclothes, something that Allie was regretting now. She shivered beneath the covers.

“You’re cold,” Bea murmured, pulling her closer still, her eyes fluttering open.

“Mm,” Allie agreed, pressing her cold nose into Bea’s warm neck, making her hiss in protest. “Good morning,” Allie told her with a brief kiss. “And happy birthday, sweetheart,” with another kiss, not so brief. Bea gasped into her mouth, her hands already seeking out Allie’s breasts and hips. But warming up nicely.
“Sit there and don’t lift a finger,” Allie told Bea. “I’m going to make you a birthday breakfast fit for a queen.” Bea rolled her eyes at Debbie but took her seat obediently. “I’m making my famous cinnamon pancakes. A special Novak Christmas tradition. Want some Deb? … Okay, silly question.”

Ever since Allie had told her about the events that had led her to leave New York, Bea had noticed that Allie did her best to give her a little extra piece of her history every day. Sometimes it was about her family, sometimes about Marie; about students she had known or favourite customers in her parent’s store. It was only on hearing the stories that made up the experiences of the younger Allie that Bea realised how much she had been missing out on. She cursed herself each day for her selfishness. She had been so preoccupied with her own feelings and difficulties that she had allowed that blank space to pass unchallenged. But it was such a gift to hear it all and to receive the full measure of Allie’s history now. How much she had held back from Bea out of fear. It was all given so freely now and Bea fell harder and deeper in love with her every time Allie told her some new detail.

Like on Christmas Eve. The three of them had set off, wrapped warmly in scarves and hats, Bea with the axe over her shoulder, Allie and Debbie pulling the sled. It had been snowing on and off for several days and it wasn’t the best day to venture out. But Christmas Eve was the day the Smiths always brought home a tree, and Christmas traditions are important, particularly to children.

They took their time shaking the snow off every tree that looked like it would fit through the front door before finding the perfect one: not too big, not too small and picture-book perfect in shape. As Bea prepared to swing the axe and make the first blow, Allie commented that it seemed a shame to cut it down. She told them how, one year, her father had been too busy in the store to fetch them a tree, so he had sent Allie and her brother to fetch one. It was a walk across the neighbourhood to the lot where the trees were sold but Allie and Lukas went eagerly, looking in all the store windows at the festive displays. They chose a magnificent tree. Allie, as the older sibling, paid and they began to carry it home. But they had not figured on how heavy it would become as they went along. Lukas began to complain that his arms ached, that his fingers were cold, and finally he dropped his end of the tree to the sidewalk and cried. Allie lost patience with him, bawling him out in the middle of the street. In the end she had to drag the tree the whole way, Lukas trailing behind, sniffing. When they got the tree home it was a bedraggled looking thing with hardly a needle left. Set up in the sitting room Allie had looked at it and wanted to cry. It was such a sorry sight that she could only think how much better off it would have been if it was still growing somewhere in the countryside.

Bea looked at her pink cheeks and nose; her eyes bright with remembered sadness; the plumes of steam issuing from her mouth and could easily see that disappointed child. Her heart ached and she wished she could travel back in time and comfort the young Allie. “I promise you that this tree is not going to look like that one,” she told her. “We’ll bring it home on the sled and it’ll be perfect. Wait until you see it with the ribbons and candles …”

“I’m gonna make it some paper chains,” Debbie told her. “It’ll be glad to be our Christmas tree because it’ll be the prettiest one.” Allie smiled at her and nodded.

“You’re right Deb. Better chop it down then woodcutter,” she told Bea with an admiring look that set Bea’s heart fluttering. Really, a flirtatious Allie and sharp objects were not a good combination.

Sitting at the kitchen table, Bea took in the tree. It really did look wonderful, hung with all the decorations that she and Debbie had made over the years, scented with clove studded oranges and
lit up with a dozen white candles. And now it also sported brightly decorated eggshells: a new tradition adopted from Allie’s childhood. They were at permanent risk of being destroyed by Debbie's black kitten, Merry, who had taken to darting manically around the house and up the tree, perching in the uppermost branches until someone lifted him down. Bea hadn't been sure about Allie's suggestion of getting Debbie a kitten for her birthday but had to admit that she enjoyed him, in his quieter moments.

“Tah dah!” Allie announced, placing a plate in front of her. Bea raised an eyebrow.

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“Tah dah!” Allie announced, placing a plate in front of her. Bea raised an eyebrow.

“Any reason why they're such a funny shape?” she asked. Allie pouted and revolved the plate a little.

“That one’s a star, that one’s a Christmas tree, and that one … went a bit wrong.”

“It’s a turkey,” Debbie piped up. “Look, that’s its beak, its tail …”

“Yes.” Allie seized on the idea. “It’s a turkey.”

“If you say so.” Bea took a bite and nodded. “Mm. Turkey,” earning her an elbow in the ribs.

*       *       *       *       *       *       *       *       *

A little later Allie tapped on Bea’s bedroom door and went in to find Bea staring into her wardrobe in frustration. “I don’t know what to wear. If you hadn’t sprung this on me, I could’ve been more prepared …”

“I sprung it on you because I didn’t want you to be prepared,” Allie explained. “It’s your birthday. Your only job is to enjoy yourself. Everything else is taken care of. Your guests are kindly contributing food and drink, Deb is mixing up some gingerbread, and I … if you will allow it, will dress you.” Allie watched her eyes darken and smiled. “Dress you, not undress you … Here,” and she took Bea’s grey pants out of the wardrobe. “These …” Bea’s lips corrugated.

“Won’t I be a little chilly in that?” Bea asked.

“Not when I add your birthday present,” Allie told her with a smirk.

“I thought I already had my present … first thing this morning,” Bea said, reaching out and pulling Allie against her. Suddenly short of breath, Allie wove her fingers into Bea’s hair and pulled her mouth onto hers for a lingering kiss.

“I would happily kiss you all day … but I had better get you dressed before your guests arrive. I’ll be back in a minute.” Disentangling herself, Allie ran down to her room, checked on Debbie and the gingerbread then ran upstairs again with her packages. She placed them on the bed and stood back, looking at Bea with a breathless smile.

“This is too much,” Bea protested. “You gave me that beautiful leather portfolio …”
“That was your Christmas present. These are for your birthday. It’s not my fault they’re on consecutive days … Well open it!”

“That which one?” When Allie shrugged Bea opened a rectangular box to find the pair of shoes that Allie had chosen to replace those ruined old Keds that Be always wore with her grey pants. They were mocassin style, deeply burnished, dark chestnut in colour and decorated with a band over the front. As soon as Allie had seen them, she had known they were perfect for Be.

“The sales assistant called them loafers,” Allie volunteered into Be’s silence. “I think they’ll fit. I drew around your old shoes and used that as a guide …” Be was still silent, and Allie was starting to worry that she didn’t like them. “Why don’t you open the other two …” she began until Be interrupted her by taking her in her arms and whispering her thanks into her ear. When Allie drew back to look at her face, her expression was almost identical to Debbie’s on Christmas morning on finding her stocking filled. Allie laughed with relief. “Open the others … it all goes togerher.”

The smaller package contained the narrow brass-buckled leather belt that Allie had matched to the shoes. The final, bulkier, package was the jacket that had first caught Allie’s eye just as the leaves had begun to change in the fall. It was a perfect autumn leaf colour, a shade between brown and red. It was corduroy, hip length, but nipped in at the waist, with a tiny buckle in the small of the back. It was finished in luxurious detail, featured multiple pockets, and was completed with a satin lining the same shade as antique bronze.

"It's gorgeous," Be told her with shining eyes.

"You're going to look gorgeous in it," Allie asserted, slipping Be's robe off her shoulders and picking up her underwear.

"Allie, I can put on my own drawers," Be protested.

"I'm your dresser, remember. Let me.” Be rolled her eyes but allowed Allie to ceremoniously add each item of clothing in turn: the drawers, the bra, the blouse, the pants. Allie could feel her pulse pounding enthusiastically in her throat, almost deafening her as she looked at Be's naked body gradually disappearing under the layers of clothing. Allie wished she could take advantage of this moment to take advantage of Be, but really, they didn’t have the time. She watched Be biting her lip with her eyes fixed on the ceiling as Allie tucked the blouse in for her. Allie was suffering just as badly. It would be tricky to keep her hands to herself until they were alone again, but it would be worth it. Later, she told herself sternly, picking up the belt. She wove it through the loops on Be's pants, her arms circling her waist. She could feel Be's eyes on her and her breath against her cheek. She swallowed with difficulty, refusing to meet Be's gaze, knowing that if she did all would be lost. Fastening the buckle with trembling fingers she stood back a little to study the effect.

She only just prevented herself from stripping Be off again. That narrow band around her neat waist did unspeakable things to Allie's insides. And when Be slid her hands into her pockets, the action shifting her hips forward, Allie almost lost all restraint. Christ. She had created a rod for her own back with this outfit. This was going to be torture. She looked up to find Be watching her from beneath her lashes, a knowing smile curving her lips up at the corners. Allie hung her head and gave a rueful chuckle.

"Caught out." She knelt down, partly to hide her flushed face, and eased each of Be's narrow feet into the new shoes. Then came the jacket. She held it out and Be slipped her arms into the sleeves and shrugged it onto her shoulders. When she turned around Allie got her first look at the full effect and it was as if the image of Be that she had behind her eyes whilst she purchased those clothes had stepped out of her mind and into the bedroom.

She smiled full into Be's face. "Happy birthday! You look like … a queen. Queen Be. I hope you enjoy wearing them. You look beautiful and … so very … you." Be looked at herself as best she
could in the mirror on her dresser. She smiled shyly.

"Thanks Allie cat," she mumbled. "I love it all, but you shouldn't have spent so much. And I will enjoy wearing them, but possibly not quite as much as you seem to enjoy looking at them," she laughed.

"I'm not looking at the clothes, I'm looking at you," Allie corrected her.

"I'll just make one adjustment, I think," Bea said. And looking Allie straight in the eye she undid another of her blouse buttons, revealing the swell at the top of her breasts. Allie groaned as Bea sauntered past her, giving her a satisfied smile as she left the room.

*       *       *       *       *       *       *       *

Allie and Debbie had done a wonderful job. While waiting for them to get changed she admired the birthday banner that Debbie had made and strung across a beam. The fire was lit, the tree glowed, the air smelled temptingly of gingerbread. Even the kitten was co-operating, curled up by the fire. She had had doubts when Allie had explained that she had invited a few people over to celebrate her birthday. Allie had looked so worried when she told her but, for once, Bea understood the importance of a social gathering, a celebration in fact. It was only in the last couple of weeks that all of their troubles had finally been resolved and, although Bea understood that there would doubtless be new ones in the future, this Christmas and birthday were undeniably a turning point.

The first resolution had come one Sunday at church. Bea had spotted Hubert Pitts arriving with his family and had not hesitated to approach him. She knew Hubert fairly well. He had been kind and sympathetic to her when she had gone to him to make the arrangements for her grandma's casket and burial. As a funeral director that was, of course, his job, but Bea knew it was more than that. He saw how young she was and how devastated to have lost her final blood relative. Ever since then she had always felt a kindly regard from him. She knew from Vera that he had heard the rumours about Allie and herself and she wanted to know if he was going to act upon them.

“Good morning Mr Pitts,” she said with a nod.

“Beatrice,” he said with a smile, taking her hand. She nodded her hellos to the rest of his family, but Hubert seemed to have deduced that she wanted to speak to him, and they drew apart from the others.

“I gather that you may have heard something that could make you reconsider Allie Novak’s employment here in Broadlea,” she began. His face clouded over and he looked troubled.

“Someone did mention something that was potentially defamatory,” he said. “It concerned me because, as chairman of the Education Board, I would be held responsible if a teacher was judged to be a bad example to her students,” he said, looking at her sideways. “But …

“I gather Allie has been very helpful to George and Martha in their college preparations,” Bea said, her heart thudding. Hubert gave a humourless laugh.

“That’s true. And I appreciate that you think that by reminding me of it I might be more likely to regard Miss Novak in a positive light,” he said with a piercing look. Bea returned it, refusing to be shamed by her obvious attempt to influence him. “But it’s unnecessary.” He took her elbow and steered her further away from the other congregants. “I think you’re too young to remember my Aunt Matilda?” Bea shook her head. She couldn’t think who he might mean, or why it might be relevant. “She lived for many years just outside Greenborough … with her companion … Miss Martha Shackleford.” He waited a moment for Bea to register his meaning. “My daughter is named
after Miss Martha. She was a wonderfully kind woman … and the two of them had a happy life
together.” He paused again, then took her hand. “Be reassured that, so long as I am able, I will do
my best to keep Miss Novak in employment. She's a talented young woman and very deserving of
her position. All the two of you need to do is keep these rumours from reaching the ears of the
parents.” Bea nodded.

“Thank you, Mr Pitts,” Bea told him, breathing a little easier.

He patted her hand. “You’re welcome.”

Then, only a few days ago, Bea had seen the Stewarts. They appeared to have been avoiding her
ever since Bea had warned Vera about Jake, but as soon as Bea walked into the store Vera had
captured her eye and smiled at her. She came over and baffled Bea by starting a banal conversation
about the weather. But as she spoke, she laid her hand on her stomach in a way that could mean
only one thing. Once she saw the light of understanding reach Bea’s eyes she smiled.

“Yes, Jake and I have some good news to share. We’re going to have a baby.” Bea stammered out
her congratulations. There was no doubt that Vera was truly delighted by this change in her
circumstances. When Bea looked at Jake she noticed at once that his usually spiffy clothes had
been replaced by a suit that Vera probably thought was more appropriate for a father to be, and that
his curls had been combed and slicked into a more respectable style. He glared at Bea for a
moment before flinching and glancing away to the side. It seemed that the roving tomcat had been
tamed in the name of fatherhood. Had Vera shamed him with what Bea had told her? Or was it that
he cared about his reputation now that it might reflect upon his child? Would Vera be able to keep
him in line now that he was to be a father? Only time would tell, but Bea felt reassured that the
balance of power in that household had shifted.

The most vital piece of good news had arrived two weeks ago in the unlikely form of Shorty
Burdette. Bea had not seen or spoken to him since the day she had stopped by his office to return
that police file. She had flung it onto his desk and berated him for passing on such a work of
fiction, demanded that he destroy it and told him to do his job properly in future. So, she was
shocked when he drew up in front of the house. Standing on the porch she hollered out to him that
he had better have come to apologise, or else he should turn right around and leave. And apologise
he did.

“I’m so sorry Bea. I got carried away. I had a theory about Allie, and I didn’t let the truth stand in
my way.” He had the grace to look ashamed of himself. ”And I want to apologise for not
intervening with Harry. Maybe a word from the law might have made a difference to how he
treated you. Maybe not. But I should have tried.” He stared at his shoes while Bea tried to decide if
she still hated him for what he had so nearly done to her and Allie. “But … I’m finally here with
some good news. I had Donald Scott come to see me yesterday.” Bea’s eyes had widened in
surprise. “Your brother-in-law, I understand. He had intercepted a letter to his wife. Recognised the
handwriting as being Harry’s.” A wave of dizziness swept up Bea’s body from her feet to her head.
She swiped at her face with a trembling hand, her heart pounding painfully.

“So, he’s alive?” she croaked. Shorty nodded.

“Very much so. Working the port in Baltimore. I had a conversation with your sister-in-law, and
she confessed that she knew he was there, living with a second cousin. She gave me the other
letters he had written to her and from them it’s clear that he staged his disappearance in an attempt
to implicate you and Allie in his apparent murder. Local law enforcement will be dealing with him,
I assure you. He’ll do some prison time I should think. And I’ll be having a tough conversation with
your sister-in-law about wasting my time.” Bea crumpled onto the porch steps; knees weakened
with shock.

When Allie and Debbie had arrived home from school, Bea was sitting in the identical attitude as when Shorty had left. Sending Debbie inside to change her clothes she had quickly related the news to Allie. It had been hard to tell in those first minutes which emotion was uppermost: anger at Harry's calculating plan or relief that their ordeal was finally over. By bedtime relief had won out and both Bea and Allie were giddy with it, giggling at almost everything before falling into bed and each other's arms and sleeping a blessed sleep.

The anger came and went in the following days. How could he have hated them so much that his greed for the money that Allie had offered, that he had seemed to want so badly, had been overridden by his desire to punish them? How could he? His actions could have led Bea to the electric chair. Bea had watched Allie struggle with the knowledge that they had come so close to disaster. That the danger had now passed them by seemed to allow her to experience the anger that had previously been held at bay by fear. It was only on the previous night that Bea had finally seen the way out of the rut Allie had gouged for herself. By showing Allie that her fear was all gone, that Harry no longer had any hold over her, she had allowed her to abandon her anger and return to her usual sweet self.

"Bea," Allie's voice intruded on her thoughts. She turned to find Allie standing just outside her bedroom door, her freshly brushed hair glowing, and her cheeks faintly flushed with self-consciousness. She was wearing the blue dress that Bea had made for her, the colour reflecting in her eyes. Bea swallowed the lump in her throat. Although she had made that dress for Allie to wear to work, she had so far refused to do so, claiming that it was too fine for that. So, this was the first opportunity Bea had had to see her in it since that final fitting. Somehow, she looked even lovelier in it than Bea had remembered.

She had barely taken one step towards her, unable to resist the idea of putting her arms around her and burying her face in her sweet-smelling hair, when she heard Debbie clattering down the stairs.

"Sophie and Liz are here! I just saw them from the window." You would think that, rather than having spent the whole day with Sophie yesterday, Debbie hadn't seen her friend for a month, she was so excited. Disappointed not to have a moment alone with Allie before the visitors arrived, Bea settled for standing close beside her.

"You look wonderful," she told her in a low voice, sneaking a look at her full lips, now curving into a pleased smile. "If we were alone …"

"Happy birthday Bea!" Liz interrupted, and she was showered with smiles and hugs, a parcel pressed into her hands. Allie sprang into action, grabbing the basket of food that Liz was juggling, and Bea found herself at the centre of the chatter, bustle and laughter that ensued.

Next to arrive were Hank and his family. "You know my brother, Nate. This is his wife Doreen and their children Joshua and Katie." Hank made the introductions.

"Hi everyone," Bea said, shaking hands all round.

"And this is Allie Novak. Allie, my brother …" The introductions continued but Bea was distracted. Hank was wearing a tie. His pants were pressed. His two-toned shoes shone like mirrors. When he had finished speaking and everyone dispersed, Doreen and Allie to the kitchen, the children being taken in hand by Debbie and Sophie, Bea shook her head at him in shock.

"What happened to you? I barely recognise you …"
"I can look smart," he replied sharply. Bea held her hands up in surrender.

"I didn't mean anything by it …" Hank laughed.

"I know … Hey, we brought fried chicken. My mama's recipe. You're going to love it. And some honey roast ham."

"That wild Turkey you gave us for Christmas turned out great."

"Good, good. Oh, happy birthday by the way," he added, slapping her on the arm in a comradely way, his eyes conveying screeds of meaning that his words did not.

"Thanks Hank."

Just then the front door was stormed by Boomer, hands filled with a crate of beer bottles. She was closely followed by Maxine, looking incredible in a dramatic dark red dress, and Will, burdened with more beer, and followed by a dark-haired woman Bea didn't recognise. A new boarder? The volume rose again as she was congratulated on her birthday by multiple voices at once. Usually this level of noise and this number of people would drive her to distraction but today it just made her smile and blush. Perhaps that was because Harry was out of their lives forever. Perhaps it was knowing that if she glanced in Allie’s direction, over in the kitchen supervising the deployment of the food and drink, she would in all likelihood find her looking her way and smiling a proud smile, happy to see her fêted on her birthday, no doubt thinking she deserved it.

“So, Bea,” Boomer shouted in her ear, making her wince, trailing Maxine in her wake. “I hope you don’t mind that I brought my cousin Franky. She’s here visiting for the holidays … and I couldn’t really leave her on her own.”

“Of course not, Boomer. The more the merrier,” Bea replied. The more the merrier? Bea wondered if anyone who knew her would ever have predicted that phrase emerging from her lips.

“And, Boomer,” Maxine prompted.

“Oh, and happy birthday. These are for you,” and she thrust a tin of cookies into her hands.

“Thank you,” she said to Boomer’s retreating back as she headed towards the kitchen table.


“Thanks. All courtesy of Allie,” she told her. Maxine nodded.

“The girl has good taste,” she replied with meaning, making Bea blush. Just then Will loomed up behind Maxine, circling one arm around her waist and thrusting a bottle of beer into Bea’s hand.

“For the birthday girl,” he announced with a smile.

“Cheers!”

* * * * * * * * *

Allie looked around the room, checking that everyone had food and drink and someone to talk to. Bea was talking to Maxine and Will, a bottle of beer in her hand. Allie smiled to herself wondering what Bea would be like with a few more of those under her belt. The children were over by the Christmas tree. They were now engaged in a game of Chinese checkers. At first, they had been playing with Merry, but it had all got a bit too much for him and he had gone off to hide.
When she had told Bea about the kittens at Will’s store and how Debbie had taken to the little black one, Bea had hesitated only a moment before agreeing that he would be the perfect birthday present for Debbie, and hopefully a good mouser too. Always, still, Bea’s first thought was if they could afford to feed another mouth. Of course, their financial situation had improved dramatically since Bea’s art had begun to sell, but Allie suspected that her cautious impulse would forever remain. Bea had been out sketching when Allie and Debbie had returned from Charlottesville with the kitten, now named Merriweather in honour of the imaginary cat in Debbie’s long-ago composition. They were settling him into his new surroundings when Bea came in the front door lugging all her equipment. Immediately he ran right at her, scampered up her body as if she were a tree and perched on her shoulder. The look on her face was priceless, and now, every time, this was the way he greeted her. Allie thought Bea was secretly pleased to have been singled out for this special treatment.

The sound of a car drew Allie’s attention back to the present. Walking over to the door she was happy to see that Charles had arrived. He had, as she had suggested, brought a guest with him, but it wasn’t anyone that Allie had expected. She opened the door and invited them in. Charles was transformed by a smart grey suit, a snowy white shirt and a bright bowtie. His hair was slicked sharply, and he was freshly shaven and smelled of cologne. His companion was a petite woman with a piercing gaze a few years older than he.

“Sorry we’re late,” Charles gasped thrusting a bottle of wine into her hand.

“Not at all,” Allie smiled. “We’re just getting started.”

“Allow me to introduce my dear friend Bridget Westfall,” he said, indicating the woman at his side. “Bridget, this is Allie Novak.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Allie replied, puzzled. To say that Bridget was not the kind of person she had expected Charles to bring would be an understatement.

“Bridget is a local artist, like Bea. I thought they would have a lot to talk about,” Charles explained, perhaps having noticed Allie's perplexity.

Allie smiled. “Of course! Bridget, please let me introduce you to Bea. I’m sure she’d love to hear your thoughts. Charles, help yourself to a drink and then I’ll introduce you around.”

An hour or two later Allie broke free from a conversation with Boomer and Franky in order to tidy the mess in the kitchen a little. From the relative peace of the kitchen table she was able to survey the scene before her with pleasure. She had been worried about how Bea would react to a birthday party, but it really had turned out splendidly. Liz had already drawn her to one side to thank her. She had never seen Bea this way, she said, and credited Allie with unearthing a side of her that she hadn’t even suspected existed. Allie brushed off the compliment, claiming that perhaps the beer had more to do with Bea’s relaxed state than anything she had done, but she couldn’t help feeling pleased.

Bea and Bridget were still deep in conversation. She would have to break that up soon, give other people a chance to talk to the birthday girl. Still, it was enjoyable to watch Bea when her attention was elsewhere. Her cheeks were flushed, and her brows were drawn down attentively as she listened to something that Bridget was saying. Allie glanced around the room. Will and Maxine were seated cosily on the couch; Liz and Doreen were laughing at some story that Boomer was now relating with accompanying hand gestures; Franky had taken up a conversation with Hank’s brother Nate, but seemed to be casting regular glances in Bea and Bridget’s direction. Speaking of
Hank, where was he?

After a minute or two she noticed some movement out on the porch. Shifting over to get a closer look she saw Hank and Charles sharing the porch seat where she and Bea often liked to sit. Charles was lighting a cigarette for Hank and as she saw their light and dark heads bent together like that, she couldn’t withhold the excited, “Yes,” that escaped her lips. Feeling a hand lightly brush the small of her back she was suddenly aware of Bea’s presence.

“What’s got you all excited?” Bea asked her. Allie gestured to the porch with a nod of her head.

“Look,” she said. “I think they’d be perfect for each other.” Bea blinked.

“Charles and Hank?” she asked incredulously. Allie rolled her eyes at her. “Allie … you haven’t been playing matchmaker, have you?” She sounded a little disapproving.

“Nope. Nothing to do with me,” she denied. “Although I was very surprised when Charles turned up with Bridget. Seems they’re just friends though. You like her?”

“Very much. She knows a lot about art and … has a good way of explaining things. Of helping you to see things from another angle.” Bea hesitated. “You don’t mind, do you?” Allie laughed.

“Of course not. I trust you, remember?” Allie smiled at her. “Had a good birthday?”

“The best ever,” Bea told her. Allie took her in. She really was glowing from head to foot. “Thank you for thinking of this Allie cat. I never would have thought I could enjoy something like this.”

“It’s not over yet,” she whispered. “Just wait until later.” Bea’s lips twitched and the hand with which she was holding her bottle shook with a tiny tremor. She took a swallow of beer and changed the subject.

“How about you? How was your first Christmas in Broadlea?”

“Divine,” Allie told her sincerely. She thought back to yesterday: the three of them having breakfast and opening gifts together; and then Liz and Sophie arriving and the five of them around the table for a turkey dinner, lit by candles, each of them sporting a paper crown made by Debbie; charades by the fire, some of which went so hilariously awry that they laughed until they cried. “It was perfect, and I never want to have Christmas anywhere else.”

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At last all the guests had left and Debbie had been persuaded, urged and, finally, physically escorted to bed, overtired but still very much excited. Bea surveyed the mess and began to pile the plates next to the sink. She was just collecting up the beer bottles when Allie came down the stairs.

“I slipped a hot water bottle in there with her. Don’t want her to get cold during the night.” She gave a huge gust of a sigh. "That daughter of yours has some stamina," she commented.

"Ours," Bea corrected her. Allie's face flushed up.

"Really?" she said in a small voice. "I love her so much, but I don't want to presume …"

"Allie, we're a family. She needs you just as much as she needs me," Bea told her matter-of-factly. "Besides, I have a feeling I'm going to need all the help I can get," she said with a grin.
“You’re not really going to clear all this up now, are you?” Allie asked in disbelief.

“I just thought we wouldn’t want to wake up to this mess tomorrow,” she explained. Bea continued clearing up and Allie was quiet for a short while.

“Bea …” she said eventually. Something in the tone of her voice made Bea's heart speed up. It sounded like a plea.

“Um?” Bea turned to look at her.

“Please … Don’t make me wait any longer. This whole afternoon …” Bea saw the look in her eyes and knew exactly what she meant, because she had been feeling it too. Pulse drubbing insistently, she stepped slowly over to her, stopping just short of touching her. Allie swayed towards her, her eyes already beginning to close. Bea placed her hands, just so, on Allie's waist. She breathed hard, remembering that this action was the one she had always wanted to perform from almost the first moment she had met Allie. She pulled her close until their hips joined, then touched her mouth to Allie's, tasting her. Parting her lips she drank her in. Her head swarmed with the sensation and there it was, that delicious combination of excitement and homecoming that was Allie.

Chapter End Notes

There's a lot in this chapter. I hope it ticked all your boxes. The final chapter should be up next week. It'll be something of an epilogue and a way for us to say goodbye. (sob) Hope all of you who celebrated Christmas had a great one.
Dear Dr Rosenthal,

I saw an article in “The Daily Progress” describing the inaugural meeting of your project and thought I would write to you with my memories of my mother and her life partner, or rather, soul mate, before I either die or lose my marbles. I’m an old lady now and, of course, it won’t be long before all of us who lived through the 1930s and 40s are gone, and our memories with us. This was a tough time for what we would now call gay people and I think it’s important that we all remember their struggle and celebrate the progress that has been made.

My mama was Beatrice Smith. You may recognize her name as, in the fifties, she became a celebrated local artist. As a small child I lived with her and my father in a rural community not far from Charlottesville, but in the mid-30s, I reckon it must have been 1935, our lives changed forever when she met our new school teacher, Alicja “Allie” Novak. My father wasn’t around much when I was little, but when he was it was clear, even to my juvenile understanding, that he made Mama
very unhappy. I asked her about him once when I was a teenager, but she really didn’t want to talk about him, perhaps not wishing to speak ill of the dead. I suspect that he was abusive towards her, but that generation tended not to speak of such things.

When Mama met Allie, it must have been a whirlwind romance because, as far as I remember, it wasn’t long before she had moved in with us. Of course, I don’t mean that in the way it sounds to a modern ear: she came to live with us as our lodger and as a young child I had no notion that there was anything else to it. I should say a few words about Allie. A second generation Polish American from Brooklyn, she was the kindest, sunniest person you could ever wish to meet, despite the blows that life had dealt her. At first, she was my teacher, then she became my parent, and later on, my ally and confidant. But when we first met her, she was a long way from home and estranged from her family. At the time I didn’t understand why, but later it became clear that it was because of her sexuality.

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1st September 1939

“Mama, Allie …” Debbie called breathlessly, running up the porch steps waving a newspaper. “Liz just gave me this. She thought you’d want to know …” Bea and Allie had been sitting in their favourite spot, enjoying a moment of peace, having sent Debbie to the store for baking powder, which she had apparently forgotten to buy after all. Bea sat forward and took the newspaper out of her hand.

“German army attacks Poland,” she read, glancing at Allie who was suddenly looking alarmed. “Cities bombed; port blockaded. Danzig is accepted into Reich.” She quickly handed it to Allie whose eyes had grown very wide. “Got any family in Danzig, Allie cat?” she asked, worried. Allie nodded.

“My aunt and uncle and cousins.” She continued to read the article, her hand shaking slightly. “I guess we knew this could happen, but still … Let’s put the radio on. Perhaps there’s more news now.”

The radio news was full of it, but after a while there was nothing new to be told. Despite this, Allie sat by the radio and listened as though she expected to learn something that would relieve her anxiety. As the afternoon wore on Bea came and sat by her and took her hand.

“Are you close to them? Your family in Danzig?”

“I’ve never met them, actually, but when I was a child my mother would tell me all about her sister. And she always read out her letters, showed me the photographs … so I feel like I know them.” Bea nodded.

“Don’t you think you should call them? Your parents I mean. Perhaps they will have heard something from them direct …” Allie scoffed.

“My parents don’t want anything to do with me. They made that very clear five years ago and, obviously, I haven’t changed. I’m still the same per …” Allie stopped herself from uttering the word just in time, noticing Debbie was within earshot.

“You’ve not changed,” Bea told her. “But maybe they have. They must miss you. I think they’d be glad to hear from you, especially on a day like today.” Allie’s eyes filled with tears and Bea pulled her into a hug.
"But what if they still hate me?" she asked tearfully.

"They don't hate you sweetheart," Bea whispered in her ear, holding her fiercely. "They love you. They just don't understand."

"But how can I make them understand?" she asked in a small voice.

"I don't know. But maybe making contact would be a good first step. Put yourself in their place. How would you feel if you hadn't heard from Debbie in several years? Wouldn't you think about her every day? Wouldn't you worry if she was alright?" Allie looked horrified at the notion.

"That would never happen!"

"Of course not, but why don't you go down to the store and telephone them. Perhaps they've already heard from your aunt." Allie drew back to look at her. Bea wiped the tears from her face. "I could come with you if you like." Allie gave a sodden smile.

"Thanks, but I think this is something I have to do myself."

When Allie returned Bea was waiting for her by the door having struggled to concentrate on making the supper. "Well?" she asked impatiently, taking in Allie's fatigue and pallor. Allie shrugged.

"No news from Aunty Lena. Apparently, they still don't have a telephone, so it might not mean anything."

"But you spoke to … who? Your mama?"

"Yes. She wasn't exactly overjoyed to hear from me. But she didn't hang up, either. She asked about you." Bea's heart leapt in alarm.

"Me? How does she know about me?"

"Well … she just knew there must be someone. Who's the woman you've taken up with now? Is what she asked. I nearly hung up then, but I wanted a chance to speak to Lukas, so I just told her about you and Debbie and that we'd been together for four years."

"What did she say?"

"Not much. She obviously still disapproves. But she seemed interested that you're an artist. And she asked what Debbie was like, how she's doing at school." Allie shrugged. "I don't know what to make of it."

"Did you speak to your brother?" Bea asked. Allie beamed.

"Yes. He's got a sweetheart. My baby brother! She must be a saint," she said with a laugh. Bea sighed with relief. Allie's family were still out there, unlike her own. And now the door to reconciliation was open, if only a crack.

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Over time, Allie's parents eased up on her and, whilst I don't think relations were ever what you might call normal, they would write her letters and she would call them on the telephone. Uncle Lukas was a different proposition. Perhaps because he was a different generation, or because he was born here in America or maybe just because he missed his sister, Allie's brother accepted his
sister's sexuality with relative ease. He was serving overseas during the war, but once the war was over and he was back in New York he and Allie met up from time to time. And when he married, I got a new aunt and two new cousins.

I remember the day when I revealed to Allie that I was old enough that she and my mama didn't need to keep their relationship a secret from me anymore. I can still see the look of surprise on her face. I felt so grown up, but really, I would have had to have been blind or stupid not to see what was going on. When they were together everything about them was lighter and more joyful. Every look and touch told the story of their abundant love for each other and as I grew, I intercepted those looks and began to understand.

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12th October 1940

“Must you?” Allie gave Debbie a glare loaded with, mostly feigned, annoyance.

“Sorry,” she said, dropping her straw back into her glass, her contrition equally contrived. The milkshake was all gone now anyway. Mama was off somewhere with Charles today, something to do with work, and Allie had brought her into Charlottesville as a treat and they were sitting in their favourite malt shop enjoying a milkshake.

“I was wondering if, for your mama’s birthday, we could go to a studio and get a portrait done of you. I think she would really like that. Would you enjoy that? Having your photograph taken?” Allie asked, looking excited at the thought.

“Well …” Debbie began, deciding now was a good time to make it apparent that she wasn’t a little child anymore. “I think she’d rather have a photograph of you, to be honest.”

“Why on earth would you say that?” Allie asked, fiddling with a spoon and trying not to look at her. Debbie had seen the patient look that Allie often gave her mama and was able to replicate it now. Allie’s eyes widened and her cheeks pinked up.

“How long have you known?” she asked with a slightly embarrassed, tentative smile.

“A while,” Debbie replied laconically. “Were you ever planning on telling me?” she asked in frustration.

“Your mama and I discussed it … a while back. We agreed to wait until you were older, but … I guess you are older, and we missed that perfect moment.” Allie sighed. “You’re growing up so quickly, Deb.” She met Debbie’s eyes. “But what I really need to know is what you think about it. Are you okay with it? I never want to come between you and your mama …”

“Of course I’m okay with it. Nothing has changed,” she replied, her face heating up, trying not to think about what they might be doing when they were alone. “I think you make Mama happy. I know you do, and the three of us go well together.” Allie gave her a blinding smile that made her grin in return. “Don’t think I don’t see and appreciate all the things you do for me,” Even to herself she suddenly sounded a lot older than her thirteen years. “I’ve got as much of you in me now as I have Mama …”

Allie reached across the table to her then; stroked her hair, cupped her cheek. Debbie noticed the tears in her eyes. “Thank you, Debbie. It means a lot to hear you say that. Years ago, your mama generously agreed to allow me to help raise you and I’ve loved every moment of it …”

“Even when I was being naughty? Even when I broke the window playing baseball in the house?”
she asked with a cheeky grin.

“Even then,” Allie agreed, speaking with unusual sentimenality and no trace of a smile. “And, you know, the world isn’t always kind to people like me and your mama. We try to keep it quiet because of that, but some of that unkindness might be directed at you … because of us. I would hate that to happen …”

“Like that time with Jimmy. When he called Mama … that word.”

“You remember that?”

“Of course,” she replied. “I didn’t understand at the time. I just knew I was mad at him, but … I don’t think he meant it.”

“No, probably not.” Allie hesitated. What now? Debbie wondered. “So … you should probably have this conversation with your mama.” Debbie pulled a face.

“Ugh. Do I have to? Can’t you do it? It would be so embarrassing,” Debbie said, covering her face with her hands. Allie looked unsure. “Please …” Allie puffed out her cheeks and Debbie knew she would do it, as Allie rarely resisted such a plea.

“Alright.”

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Things didn’t change immediately once I told my parents I knew about their relationship, but gradually they began to feel comfortable showing more affection in front of me: cuddling up on the couch, kissing and holding hands in front of me. And then one morning when I burst into my mama's bedroom, there they both were, sitting up in bed, drinking coffee, Allie reading a book, Mama with the cat curled up on her chest, pretending like Allie had never slept anywhere else. I was momentarily shocked, but I don't think they noticed. I just crawled up the bed and squeezed in between them and that became the new normal. Mama stopped her early morning creeping up the stairs from Allie's bedroom and ever afterwards my enduring image of them through the years is of them propped up in bed, reading or chatting, with any one of a long succession of cats reclining amongst the blankets. Even as a young adult I would slip in with them when I came home during the vacations.

People occasionally ask me what it was like having two mothers, and I don't know how to answer as I barely remember life any other way. I think people assume that one mother would be just like another, but of course Mama and Allie were different people and fulfilled different roles in my life. Mama was very loving, but all about the practicalities. Her life was entirely manual: it was about what she could touch, what she could do with her hands: fixing things, making a meal, planting a garden, sewing a garment. Making art, of course. Whereas Allie had a more philosophical bent. She was full of ideas and loved to share them with me. She read to me every day, helped me to make sense of what we read, discussed the news with me. So, yes, I had two mothers, but really, I just had two parents, like lots of other kids.

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24th June 1944

"I don't think I know a Jimmy … apart from … no, you can't mean Jimmy Morris." Bea didn’t think she'd seen Allie look so horrified since she'd stared at Harry lying, out cold, on the floor all those years ago.
"He's changed since you last taught him," Debbie told her reasonably. "He's tall and handsome and a good dancer …"

"But inside he's still that ornery urchin with the runny nose and the spitballs …" Allie's voice had climbed half an octave and now Debbie's face was adopting that mulish set that Bea dreaded.

"People change …" Debbie told her.

"Not Jimmy Morris. I know what boys like him are like!" And now the volume was rising. Bea winced. Was she going to have to intervene?

"He's a perfectly nice boy. And his sister has offered to drive us …"

"So that he can put his hands all over you in the back seat, no doubt! No. I absolutely forbid it," Allie declared with finality. Bea sighed inwardly.

"Allie. A word," she said in a low voice, leading her into the room that used to be Allie's. She closed the door behind them.

"You can't really be thinking of allowing this," Allie began. Bea stepped close and put her arms around Allie's waist.

"Sweetheart. I love that you're so protective of her. But, she's sixteen, it's her first grown up dance. We have to let her go. We have to trust her."

"It's not Debbie that I don't trust …" Allie spluttered.

"We have to trust that she knows what she's doing," Bea said, catching her eye. "Do you remember being sixteen?" Bea asked her. Allie's cheeks became rosy and her head dropped onto Bea's shoulder.

"Maybe," she said, quietly, her stance softening. Bea ran her hands over her back.

"If we say she can't see this boy it'll only make her more determined."

"But Jimmy Morris … He's the one who called you queer …"

"I know. And we both agree that he didn't know what he was saying. Besides, it's just a dance. She's not marrying him. She's not even going steady with him." Bea placed her cheek against Allie's and felt her soften further. "She'll choose the right person … but not yet."

"So … we let her go?"

"Yes. I'll iron her dress. You see what you can do about her hair. And when Jimmy picks her up we make sure he knows to have her home by ten." She felt Allie nod against her. "Use that teacher voice on him. It's very effective." Allie huffed a laugh.

"You're right, of course," Allie said, lifting her head and looking at her. "When did you get so reasonable?"

"Hm. Let me think. About nine years ago? When a certain someone drilled some sense into me?" Bea responded, beginning to smile. But before she knew it Allie's mouth was on hers in a loving kiss and Bea's thoughts scattered.

* * * * * * *
Allie was definitely the one who took charge of my education. By which I mean my academic life. My mama taught me so much, but it was because of Allie that I got accepted into Columbia University. And not only that, she covered the cost. When I protested, she would only say that the money was a legacy from when she was much younger and that the person who left it to her would have been pleased to see it used in this way. I've often wondered over the years who that mysterious benefactor could have been. Whoever they were changed the course of my life: I went to New York; I majored in History; I met a young man named Isaac who later became my husband and the father of my children.

* * * * * * * *

14th September 1946

The house was so quiet. Allie felt it keenly, Debbie's absence, and she knew Bea felt it too. This was the beginning of a new phase of their lives. Sure, Debbie would be back, but never again would this be her permanent home. And that was as it should be. She was a young woman now and her life was out there waiting for her.

Bea was in a blue mood. Allie wished there was something she could do to help but time was probably the best remedy. They would get used to Debbie being away, and now they had the telephone she could call and speak to them anytime. As for Bea, maybe she would suggest a hike up to the glade. That usually helped to cheer her up.

Coming down the stairs Allie was arrested by the sight of Bea kneading bread dough. Her back was to Allie but that didn't stop her from appreciating her beauty, and the grace of her movements. She was wearing an old, faded, cotton dress, an apron tied around her waist; her legs and feet were bare - it was only September after all; her hair was caught back loosely at the base of her skull allowing Allie a view of her elegant neck and angular jaw. Allie watched her body rock as she kneaded, her arms strong, her hands deft, and Allie's body reacted without warning to something primal in that motion.

Before she knew it, she was standing right up close to Bea's back. She placed her hands on her hips.

"Hello, stranger," she murmured hoarsely into her hair, and she felt a tremor run through Bea at those words, felt her raise her head so that it almost rested on Allie's shoulder, felt her lean back into her, craving what those words promised. With Bea's weight resting needily against her, Allie felt her urgency increase. She slipped her fingers over Bea's hip bones and stroked the smooth dips that lay to each side of her belly, feeling Bea's muscles writhe beneath her fingers. Running her hands upwards, she held her ribcage in her two hands feeling Bea's breath hasten and her body arch. She thrummed with tension in anticipation of what was to come, but Allie held her firmly; taut as a bow in an archer's hands.

Skimming her hands upwards she covered Bea's breasts, squeezing lightly and tracing her thumbs over her nipples, hardening beneath the cotton. She attached her lips to Bea's throat, feeling the pulse of her blood jumping fiercely there. Scraping gently with her teeth, Bea's body gave a sudden jerk and she let out a hissing breath, attempting to turn in Allie's arms.

"My hands …" she said helplessly, holding up her hands, covered with dough and flour.

"It's okay. I've got you," Allie told her. Still pressed against her back, she took her forearms and placed her hands so that she could brace herself on the rim of the large mixing bowl in front of her on the table, hearing the clack of her ring against the stoneware. Shifting their weight forward so that the front of Bea's thighs pressed against the edge of the table, she hastily untied Bea's apron and unbuttoned the front of her dress whilst continuing to kiss and suck her neck and throat. Finally
freeing her breasts, Bea took a noisy breath as Allie's hands caressed her soft flesh and tightened nipples. Allie shuddered out a breath against Bea's jaw. "God, Bea," she murmured unsteadily, "I want you so badly."

Bea bent her head back and to the side, her lips parting, the expression on her face leaving Allie in no doubt that she wanted the same thing. Their mouths met, lips and tongues performing a dance that was familiar but never stale. Allie slipped her hands down Bea's body as far as she could, grasped handfuls of her dress and lifted it up to her waist. Too far gone to take her time, she slid one hand down the front of Bea's drawers and cupped her mound. Instantly her fingers were drawn to the slick parting there. Bea gave a loud gasp and gripped the edge of the bowl more tightly, throwing her head back.

"Allie …" sounding almost pained. Allie stroked through the moisture slowly, not teasing, just wanting to enjoy the sensation; the knowledge of what they still did to each other after all this time. Bea was quivering in her grasp. "Please …" Allie's heart pounded harder. She stuck out her right leg and hooked a nearby chair with her foot. Dragging it over, she placed her hand beneath Bea's thigh and lifted her leg so that she could rest her foot on the edge of the seat. With the extra space this created she was able to insinuate her other hand up the leg of Bea's drawers. Slipping easily inside her with the fingers of that hand she could continue to stroke her with the other. Bea cried out at the dual sensation, moving restlessly until Allie steadied her against the edge of the table with the weight of her body.

Allie increased the pace of her movements as Bea's body shook, then tightened. Allie kissed up her throat to her jaw, rocking against her, feeling that her own excitement wasn't far from peaking. Curling her fingers just so, Allie heard Bea's breath stop, felt her clench hard on her fingers and then convulse again and again as her climax overtook her. Allie pressed herself against Bea and tipped over the edge soon after.

When their breath returned, Bea turned in her arms, holding her messy hands away from Allie. She was still half gone to that place that Allie had taken her; stars still sparking in her eyes. Allie watched them coalesce into the warm brown hints she knew so well. Bea kissed her hard, laughing into her mouth.

"What?" Allie asked against her lips, still trembling a little.

"I think we just found the silver lining," Bea said. Her voice was laughing, but her eyes were clouded now, stars blotted out.

"Hm?"

"To having the house to ourselves." Bea rested her forehead against Allie's, sighing. Allie held her gently, wanting her to feel safe and reassured.

"She'll be back. And … I'm not going anywhere." She kissed her with everything she'd got, smiling when Bea made that happy sound in the back of her throat.

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In my younger years Mama and Allie were occasionally the subject of local rumours. Teenagers can be mean. Which is why, when I was thirteen, Allie quit her job at my local school and took a position at a larger school in Charlottesville. This protected me from snide comments from my classmates and also allowed Allie to keep her private life largely under wraps at her new job. Over the years the rumours gradually decreased. As Mama and Allie got older people seemed to care less about what their relationship might be. Newcomers maybe assumed they were both widows, or
didn't even consider they might be in a sexual relationship as they aged. Or maybe times were changing.

When I had my three, Mama and Allie became Grandma and Gran Gran. When Mama saw Allie cradling my eldest soon after he was born, I thought her heart might break. But neither of them would harbor a regret: they knew how lucky they were, and they would often say so. If possible, they loved their grandchildren even more than they did me, and when my youngest son came out, it was to them that he first spoke. It was the seventies by then. He still had a hard time of it, but the example of their enduring relationship must have lent him hope for his own life.

In eighty-nine Allie got sick. Whilst Mama was busy, driving her to her hospital appointments, bringing her carefully prepared morsels of food, and eventually nursing her through to the end, she seemed fine. It was in the quiet moments that she came unraveled: the hospital waiting room; or when Allie was taking one of her increasingly frequent naps. Although Mama was getting on in age, ordinarily she seemed no different from at any time in the last twenty years. But in those quiet moments, she seemed suddenly diminished: her back less rigid, her eyes containing a furtive panic. It was hard to witness. Mama had always been the lynchpin of the family: untiring and uncomplaining.

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9th May 1989

Debbie grabbed her keys. Might as well go to the grocery store. She had looked forward to retirement from UVA, relishing the opportunity to finally sit down and write that book about Jonathan Edwards that she had always meant to. But some days the silence of the house got to her. And when the words wouldn’t come, it was best to just take a break. So deep in thought was she about Edwards and his ill-founded faith in early vaccinations that she didn’t notice that instead of driving to the store, she had driven to the old house. This had happened before. Although it was many years since she had lived here, sometimes muscle memory took over and brought her home, unannounced.

Mama was out front washing the truck. It was a job she had always loathed, so, true to her nature she was doing a spectacularly thorough job. Allie was sitting on the porch in a patch of sunshine with a blanket over her legs, watching her. Debbie was glad to see a spark of amusement in her eyes as she watched Mama energetically buffing the fender. Debbie sketched a wave to Mama, knowing better than to interrupt her, and joined Allie on the porch, kissing her on the cheek.

"Every so often I tell her that she's missed a bit, just to see the furious look on her face," Allie told her with a cheeky smile. Debbie examined her closely. She looked good today: a little colour in her cheeks, no frown of pain. Too thin, though. Debbie took her hand, paper thin skin, swollen knuckles and all. "I always liked to watch her at work," Allie added, with a faraway look.

"Yeah, I know. Poetry in motion, right?" Debbie filled in, having heard this many times.

"Yep." Allie's eyes welled up. Debbie knew she was wondering how many more times there would be. How many more times would she watch Mama wash the truck? Sharpen her pencils? Sweep the floor? Everything must feel like almost the last time now. But they did well for two old ladies. Had had a long, independent life together. They had given up on the vegetable garden and the chickens a few years back. And it was only now that Mama was caring for Allie full time that the house was beginning to look a little shabby.

"Becky was here Sunday." Allie interrupted Debbie’s thoughts, giving her a penetrating look. Rebecca, her middle child, and the only one who ever gave her any trouble.
"Really? I spoke to her last night on the phone. She didn't mention it," Debbie replied. Why did she have to be so secretive?

"She was upset. I was having a bad day … pain wise." Debbie nodded. Was her daughter protecting her now? Just the possibility made her feel old. Becky loved her grandmothers. Any time during her childhood and adolescence, when Debbie and Becky got mad with each other, she would want to come to Broadlea and stay with them. That Becky was clearly Mama's favourite grandchild angered Debbie: it wasn't fair on the boys. And she spoilt her terribly. Allie had explained once that it was because having Becky around was the next best thing to having Debbie home.

Debbie startled as Betsy jumped into her lap. A pretty tabby with a snowy bib, she was the most recent of Mama and Allie's feline companions. She was named for Betsy Trotwood, a favourite character from a favourite book, but luckily she lacked that lady's imperious nature. Debbie stroked her fur absentmindedly as she purred and chirruped with happiness, remembering that old copy of David Copperfield with the tatty yellow dust jacket, and the hours Allie had spent reading it aloud.

"How's Isaac?"

"He's fine."

"Still working all hours? When is he going to retire and take you on that trip to Europe you've always wanted?"

"A couple more years. He says he has a responsibility to his patients." A bone of contention.

"Just don't leave it too late."

Mama climbed up the porch steps with her bucket and rag.

"Hi, Deb. Staying for lunch? I made some soup." For Allie. That part was unspoken, but at this point it was all for Allie.

"Sure. If there's enough." There might not be too many more days like this.

Debbie went inside to help her mama heat the soup, but Bea was all over it. Stirring, slicing the bread, warming the bowls. Debbie noticed a slight tremor in her hands. Fatigue.

"Sit down, Mama. I can do this," she urged her, a trace of irritation in her voice that she instantly regretted. Bea shook her head.

"I got it." Boy she was stubborn.

"I know, but you should rest when you can. What if Allie has a bad night?"

"Then I'll help her. I can't stop, Deb," she said, and her voice had a tremble to it. "If I stop, I have to think. And that … is not an option right now." Debbie's eyes filled. As her mama crossed in front of her to fetch Allie a tray, Debbie grabbed her and gave her a tight hug. But Bea was stiff in her arms. Probably if she relaxed for even a moment, she would fall apart. Bea patted her mechanically on the back seeming impervious to any comfort she could offer. Debbie released her. Only Allie would know how to comfort her.

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Mama was a mess for a while after Allie left us. I had anticipated it, but still hated to see it. Isaac
and I tried to persuade her to come and stay with us, but she wanted to be at the house. I could understand it. From any spot in the house, garden and surrounding countryside she could abandon the present and retreat into some memory or other. And although she shrank and aged rapidly after that, she could still paint in that final year of her life.

I have enclosed two photographs which I hope will be useful to the project. The first was taken in the mid-forties. Mama's friend Charles had just bought himself a camera and he stopped by to show it to us. I was on my way out to a dance and all dressed up. So, here we are posing on the porch. Far left is Jimmy Morris, my date, then me, then Mama and, on the right, Allie. It's a good one of Mama: she looks pretty much how I remember her; upright, determined, her smile more in her eyes than on her lips. It's not such a good one of Allie. Sure, you can see what a looker she was, but in real life she was nearly always cheerful and had that spark in her eyes that people like to see. In this photo she looks strangely annoyed, but I can't think why.

So, the second photo is of the portrait I have hanging on my wall right now. It's the last thing Mama painted, and her masterpiece, as far as I'm concerned. It is, of course, of Allie, and I think I can just about remember the day that it commemorates. It would have been that summer of 1935, the year that Mama and Allie met. We had gone to this great picnic spot that Mama knew of. I don't know what the occasion was. I just remember baseball and hide and seek and climbing a really tall tree. It was such a happy day.

Mama obviously thought so too. The painting shows Allie running headlong out of the canvas, right at the viewer. Her head is partly turned to the side, her hair streaming out. Her cheeks are full and flushed, her blue eyes sparking. She is laughing, her mouth wide and curving up. She wears a pale yellow summer dress that I remember well. She is mid step. You can see her bare legs and one of her bare feet. It is stained green by the grass. This is how Mama remembered her. A beautiful girl.

Yours sincerely,

Deborah Caplan (née Smith)

Chapter End Notes

So, that's all folks. Just a little housekeeping. Thanks ...
1. To all you who have written Ballie fiction on here. I probably wouldn't have tried it without your fine examples.
2. To all of you who sent kudos and comments. Especially comments ... you know who you are.
3. To Danielle and Kate. For their excellent acting and great on screen chemistry. Without them the story would have been meh.
4. Weirdly, to the writers who killed off Bea. It was hateful, but it is the reason we are still here years later trying to give Bea and Allie the happy ending they deserve.

A note on influences. To be fair I have to credit the following for being in my brain and influencing this story:
1. Wentworth (obviously)
2. The Waltons
3. Fried Green Tomatoes (book and film)
4. Carol (book and film)
5. Solitaire and Brahms by Sarah Dreher (set in the 50s not the 30s, very psychological, and a film is central to this one too "The children's hour". If you've not heard of this one it's worth reading.)
6. Thirty-nine steps (film not book)
7. Desert hearts (film not book)

I've loved writing this and I hope you have enjoyed reading it. I have loved meeting you all. You don't know me, but now you do a little bit because there is a lot of me in this: Allie's optimism, Bea's emotional constipation, but most of all how it feels to be a member of a three person family who got lucky.

End Notes

Thanks for reading! All comments gratefully received.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!