

Prologue

The Havelock Residence, Glen Path, Sunderland

Christmas Day 1919

A huge, beautifully decorated Christmas tree dominated the grand hallway of the Havelock residence. The air was warm and infused with the smells of Yuletide – pine and cinnamon, and a touch of nutmeg. A mouth-watering waft of roasting goose escaped from the kitchen whenever one of the staff answered the pull of the servants' bell. A fire had been lit in just about every room in the house, making the place feel cosy and warm.

Everywhere, that was, apart from the master's study, where the air might have been warm, but the atmosphere was cold. Ice-cold.

'I know what you've done!' Henrietta rounded on Charles. Her cobalt blue eyes were blazing with anger. Her whole being was filled with disgust. She put her hand on her stomach as though she were about to vomit up the knowledge she had just been fed.

Charles Havelock regarded his wife, but didn't say a word. Instead, he walked to his desk and sloshed brandy from the decanter into a cut-crystal tumbler.

Taking a large mouthful, he grimaced as he swallowed. Then he smiled.

A wide, thin-lipped smile, devoid of joy, but full of pure malice.

‘Pray tell me, darling, what am I supposed to have done?’

Henrietta held a lace handkerchief to her mouth, her other hand clutching the side of her long, hooped taffeta skirt, the alabaster white of her skin contrasting with the deep purple-coloured fabric.

‘How stupid I’ve been, not to have realised it before,’ Henrietta said, as she gazed through the large sash window that looked out onto the gravelled driveway. The woman who had just told her of her husband’s evil was crunching through the snow, away from the house. Henrietta watched as the mother of one of her favourite maids wrapped her shawl tightly around herself – as much, Henrietta thought, to combat the after-chill of being under the same roof as the man who had destroyed her young daughter’s life as to keep herself warm.

‘You violated poor little Gracie – ’ Henrietta spat out the words ‘ – and now she’s dead!’ Her stare burrowed into her husband’s black eyes.

‘What do you mean? Dead?’ Mr Havelock asked.

Henrietta was clutching her skirt so tightly that her long, manicured nails were digging into her palms through the thick taffeta. If there had been the slightest hope that what Henrietta had just been told by Gracie’s mother was the fabrication of a grief-stricken mind, the fact that her husband didn’t bat an eyelid after being accused of raping her maid put paid to it.

‘Yes, Charles. Little Gracie is dead because you defiled her in the worst possible way.’

Mr Havelock sighed impatiently. ‘You’re not making any sense.’ Another sigh of irritation. ‘Being *defiled*, as you put it, does not equate to a loss of life.’

Henrietta swallowed, fighting hard not to retch. Not only was he not denying such a heinous act, he clearly saw no wrong in it.

'You impregnated her!' Henrietta managed to push the words out despite her heart hammering and making her breathing sharp and shallow. She looked at the man she had married and for whom she had borne two children and did not think it was possible to hate a person more.

Mr Havelock shook his head as though confused. 'Am I to guess that she died in childbirth?'

Henrietta took a step towards her husband.

'No, the baby – a boy – was given up for adoption.' Henrietta hissed the words. 'A few months later her mother found little Gracie hanging from the bannisters. *Dead.*' Henrietta took another step across the Turkey-red Persian carpet towards her husband. She was so angry. Angry and disgusted with this man now inches from her. Angry with herself for being so blind. So naïve. So caught up in her own world, her books, her drinking and her pill-taking, that she had been oblivious to what had gone on in this very house.

Charles struck Henrietta hard across the face with his open palm. 'Calm down!' He looked at the woman he had married – not for love or for money, but because he knew she would be easy to manipulate. *How dare she challenge him now.*

'Who's dead?' Miriam asked.

They both turned on hearing the door to the office creak open.

'Miriam! Margaret! What are you doing here?' Henrietta looked at her two grown-up daughters, shocked by their sudden appearance. They were not expected until later in the afternoon. They were both holding large, boxed-up presents, beautifully wrapped and tied with gold bows.

'We thought we'd come a little earlier. Give you both your presents before Nanny brings the baby,' Miriam said, looking from her father to her mother.

'Who's dead?' Margaret asked. She could see the red print of her father's hand on her mother's cheek.

'No one's dead, darling. No one you know, anyway,' Henrietta lied. Both her daughters had known Gracie and both had been fond of her.

'Mother, are you all right?' Miriam asked.

'Yes, darling, I'm fine. Your father and I are just talking.'

The two sisters looked anxiously at their parents.

'Why don't you both go into the front parlour? I'll come and see you in a little while,' Henrietta said, putting her cool hand to her burning-hot cheek.

The two sisters didn't move.

'Leave us!' Mr Havelock bellowed.

Startled, the two women quickly turned and left. They had just reached the sitting room when the door to their father's study slammed shut. The whole house shuddered.

That would be the last Christmas they would ever spend with their mother. And one of the last times they would see her for many, many years.

Chapter One

June 1944

When Bobby walked through the main gates of J.L. Thompson & Sons, Shipbuilders, he saluted Davey, the timekeeper. Returning the gesture, the young lad beamed back at the tall, burly riveter who, everyone knew, had once manned ships like those he now helped to build.

Bobby glimpsed a list of vessels, scrawled in large, child-like writing, pinned up on the inside wall of the cabin, and smiled. Each name represented a ship commissioned by the Ministry of War Transport and built in this very yard – the second largest in town. The other day, *Empire Haldane* had been christened and the sense of pride and camaraderie a ship's launch always brought still pervaded.

As he stepped over the threshold into the yard, Bobby automatically did what was fast becoming a habit as he walked into his workplace – he sought out the woman he loved. The woman he had fallen for, hook, line and sinker, the moment he'd clapped eyes on her. The woman who loved him back with equal fervour – only she hadn't realised it yet. Or if she had, she wouldn't admit it.

Dodging an unmanned crane, then jogging past a huge mound of metal sheets waiting to be taken over to a cargo vessel taking shape in the dry dock, Bobby headed over to the quayside. This was where his squad of riveters would be, and where the women welders would be eating their packed lunches – where the woman he was determined

to make his wife would be sitting. Dorothy. Dorothy Williams. Hopefully, one day, Dorothy Armstrong.

‘Afternoon, all!’ he shouted out.

Rosie, head of the women welders, his mam, Gloria, and the rest of the workers, Polly, Martha, Angie and Hannah, all turned their heads and smiled. All except Dorothy, who kept her focus firmly on the grey-green waters of the Wear.

‘Hey, Rosie!’ Bobby said as he approached the women, all sitting on randomly stacked wooden pallets.

‘Hi, Bobby, what’s up?’ Rosie asked.

‘I think one of your squad might need to go for a check-up.’ He cocked his head in the direction of Dorothy, who was still staring out at the congested waters.

‘Why’s that?’ Rosie asked, taking a bite of her sandwich.

Bobby chuckled. ‘She seems to be having problems with her hearing.’

The women looked at Dorothy, who slowly turned her head to look at Bobby, a dark scowl on her face.

‘It’s called selective hearing,’ she said, tucking her long dark hair behind her ears. ‘Something *you* know all about.’

Bobby pulled a puzzled face and touched his ear. ‘Pardon?’

The women all laughed. Bobby had lost the hearing in his left ear during the Battle of the North Cape. His partial deafness was something he liked to play on.

Dorothy rolled her eyes.

Bobby smiled and winked at her, before heading over to his own squad.

‘Come on, Dor,’ Hannah said. ‘Tell us what’s really going on with you and Bobby.’

‘And Toby,’ Polly chipped in. ‘Why are you suddenly not sure about marrying him?’

‘Yeah,’ said Martha, the group’s gentle giant. ‘For months now you’ve been wanting Toby to propose, and then when

he does, you say you need time to think it over. Why the sudden change of heart?’

Dorothy’s stomach tightened on recalling Toby’s crest-fallen face when she’d told him that she needed time before committing herself to marriage. He’d tried hard to hide the fact that he was totally gutted and had tentatively said he’d thought she loved him as much as he loved her. She’d told him that she *did* love him – which was true – but she was undecided about the whole idea of marriage – which wasn’t entirely true. She’d only become undecided after Bobby had kissed her – and she’d kissed him right back.

‘Something’s obviously happened that you haven’t told us,’ Hannah said gently. The slight inflection in her accent due to her Czech roots was now barely noticeable.

‘Which means it must be really serious, because you always tell us everything, even if we don’t want to hear it,’ Polly said, yawning. Her son Artie might be almost ten months old now, but he was still a bad sleeper.

Rosie smiled at her gang. She hadn’t really stopped smiling this past week since she had been reunited with her husband, Peter Miller, after his return from France, where he had been working alongside the French Resistance as part of Churchill’s Special Operations Executive. Her happiness had soared higher still when Peter and her sister, Charlotte, who had just turned sixteen, hit it off straight away.

Dorothy looked at her workmates. *She* was not smiling. She had not been smiling much this past week since she had let down her guard and kissed Bobby and then, within hours, had been proposed to by Toby. Her dashing officer and gentleman. The man she loved, or thought she loved.

Gloria and Angie glanced at each other.

It was a look Martha caught. ‘What is it you two know that we don’t?’

'It's time yer spilled the beans, Dor,' Angie said, staring at her best friend.

'Agreed,' the women chorused.

Dorothy shuffled herself around so that she was sitting cross-legged, facing the women.

'There's no beans to be spilled,' she said.

'Oh, fer heaven's sake, Dor!' Angie said, exasperated. 'Of course there are! If yer dinnit say anything, I will.'

'About what?' Dorothy faked ignorance.

Angie looked daggers at Dorothy.

'I saw yer!'

Dorothy pretended to be confused, but she was blushing.

'I saw yer,' Angie repeated. She looked around at the women. She paused for a moment, shoving a stray strand of strawberry-blonde hair back under her headscarf, before declaring: *'I saw Dorothy and Bobby kissing!'*

There was a collective intake of air.

'Really?' Hannah said, shocked. 'But I thought you loved Toby?'

'I do,' Dorothy said in exasperation.

'Yeah, and I thought you hated Bobby?' Martha said, genuinely confused.

'I do,' Dorothy repeated through clenched teeth.

Polly was staring at Dorothy. 'Blimey, I've never seen you go so red, Dor. Did you really kiss him?'

'She did!' Angie said, eyes wide. 'I came back from the shops the day Rosie found out that Peter was alive, and when I walked into the flat, yer could've knocked me out with a feather – there were Dor 'n Bobby, *kissing.*' Angie's eyes widened even more as she looked at all the women. 'They were kissing so much they didn't even hear me come into the flat – or my jaw hit the floor in shock.'

Everyone chuckled.

‘Why didn’t you tell me you’d seen us?’ Dorothy said. ‘It’s been almost a week and you’ve not said a dicky bird.’

‘I was waiting fer yer to tell me, but yer never. Every day, yer’ve just been gannin on as if nowt’s the matter.’ Angie looked at the women. ‘My shock at seeing yer both kissing was actually surpassed by yer not telling *me* – *yer best mate*.’

‘I’ll bet you blabbed to Quentin?’ Dorothy demanded. Quentin Foxton-Clarke was Angie’s sweetheart.

Angie’s guilty look answered her question. The two spoke regularly on the phone as Quentin worked in London for the War Office.

‘Honestly, what about *friends for ever* and keeping each other’s secrets – friends first, boyfriends second?’

‘Exactly!’ Angie gasped. ‘Friends for ever tell each other everything. And you didn’t say owt about Bobby. Yer should have told me. If yer had, I wouldn’t have needed to confide in Quentin.’

‘Well, at least it’s now all out in the open,’ Gloria said, trying to defuse the situation.

Dorothy looked at Gloria. ‘Did *you* know? Did Bobby tell you?’

‘He did,’ Gloria admitted. She had talked a lot to her son this past week since they’d sorted out their differences.

Dorothy made a gasping, strangled sound.

‘So, what are you going to do about Toby?’ Polly asked.

Dorothy let out a long, weary sigh.

‘I don’t know. I don’t know what I think or feel or want to do any more.’

She looked round at her friends’ faces.

‘I seem to have got myself into a bit of a pickle, if I’m honest.’

Her words were punctuated by the klaxon proclaiming the end of the lunch hour. The sound of the shipyard

starting up ended the chance of any more chatter. It would have to wait until going-home time.

As Dorothy dusted crumbs off her overalls and packed up her haversack, she couldn't help glancing over to Bobby. He was chatting to Jimmy, the head riveter, and rubbing his hand over the top of his buzz cut. She looked away, but not quickly enough.

Bobby caught her looking and his heart soared.

Chapter Two

Mr Havelock was sitting alone in the large dining room of his very grandiose home in Glen Path, a wide, tree-lined avenue in one of the most affluent parts of the town. His mood had plummeted after he'd perused the headlines over breakfast. There was no denying the success of the Normandy landings and the opening up of the Second Front. You didn't need to have a crystal ball to see that an Allied victory was on the horizon – it was just a matter of when. The photographs and illustrations in the *Sunday Pictorial* said it all. **WE'RE SQUEEZING IN – NOTHING CAN SAVE HITLER NOW!** screamed the banner at the top of the page in bold, black ink.

Reading the piece, Mr Havelock's appetite left him, and he pushed his plate of bacon and egg away. Lighting up a Woodbine, he alternately smoked and drank his tea, flicking ash onto his untouched food before stubbing out the half-smoked cigarette in the middle of the perfectly fried egg. He knew it would hurt his housekeeper, Agatha, to see food spoiled and wasted during these times of rationing. It gave him a smidgen of sadistic joy.

Scraping back his chair, he made his way across the large oak-panelled room, banging his walking stick on the polished parquet flooring as he headed out of the door, making a beeline for his study. Stepping into the room, its size condensed by the walls lined with shelves stacked with books, Mr Havelock slammed the door shut and went straight to the safe situated behind his mahogany desk. Unlocking it

and letting the small, heavy door swing back, he started foraging around. Finally, under the thick parchment of his Last Will and Testament and other important wax-sealed documents, he found what he was looking for – his membership of Oswald Mosley’s now defunct political party, the British Union of Fascists. He had kept it in the hope that Hitler would win the war. It would have been proof of his political leanings and alliances. Had the Nazis successfully invaded the British Isles, Mosley would have been installed as head, albeit a puppet head, of a pro-German government.

Mr Havelock muttered blasphemies under his breath as he took the souvenir of a future that would never be over to the fireplace. Pulling out a silver lighter from his trouser pocket, he clicked it open and held the flame under the thick card, on which the letters B.U.F. had been heavily embossed in black. It slowly caught light. Leaning one hand on the mantelpiece, he watched the card burn, letting go of it only at the last minute.

He had to accept that there really was no chance of Hitler making any kind of a comeback. Why the British were so against the man, he did not know. His policies made good sense. His own people had certainly thought so, otherwise why would they have voted him in?

Mr Havelock turned and sat down at his desk. His mind wandered, as it often tended to of late, to his wife, Henrietta. A wife who, on paper, had died of a terrible tropical disease in India, but who, in reality, was very much alive and well. If only she really had died, he would not be in his current predicament.

For Henrietta was the only one who could legitimately bear witness to his past misdeeds – the only one who could speak with any credibility about his past life. Without her, Pearl and her daughter – *his* daughter – Bel Elliot had

nothing on him. Nothing that would stand up in a court of law, anyway. If it wasn't for Henrietta, he would be able to do exactly what he wanted – starting with showing Pearl, Bel and that mishmash of women welders that Charles Havelock was not someone to be crossed.

But he couldn't, could he? Because of Henrietta. Without knowing it, she had control of him. And *no one* had ever controlled him in his entire life.

Mr Havelock sat forward, his elbows pressing into the embossed leather top of his desk, his hands clasped as though in prayer. He thought again about Mosley. And Hitler. And the hoped-for future that now had no chance of becoming a reality.

He thought of Hitler's policies. He thought about Henrietta. Insane. Or at least she was deemed to be on paper. He thought of the controversial T4 euthanasia programme adopted by the Führer at the start of the war, sanctioning the killing of the incurably ill, the elderly, the physically disabled – and the mentally ill.

The mentally ill.

Those housed in lunatic asylums.

Like the one in Ryhope.

Mr Havelock turned and looked out of the large sash window of his study, still covered in anti-blast tape even though there hadn't been a single air raid in well over a year. He sat quite still and thought. And thought some more. And slowly the skeleton of an idea started to take shape in his head. It took a while as he put flesh on its bones, but once he had, he knew what he had to do.

It was as clear as the day outside.

And with that knowledge came a sudden wave of impatience.

Sitting up in his chair, he snatched up the receiver of his black Bakelite phone and dialled a familiar number.

‘Good morning, the Campbell residence.’ His eldest daughter’s soft voice sounded down the line.

‘Margaret!’ Mr Havelock shouted.

‘Well, hello there, Father.’ The tone was no longer soft. ‘You do realise that most people start their telephone conversations with “Hello, how are you?” rather than simply bawling their name down the line?’

Mr Havelock ignored the reprimand. ‘When’s Miriam coming back?’

‘She’s not,’ Margaret said simply.

There was silence down the phone.

‘Again, I have to inform you, Father, that it is customary in civilised society to ask how someone is if they have been unwell. Especially if that person is your daughter.’

‘In my book, being a drunk does not constitute being unwell ... Lacking in willpower, more like!’ Mr Havelock sniped.

He waited for a reply, but instead heard his daughter sigh with irritation down the phone.

‘For God’s sake, Margaret.’ Mr Havelock forced the words out. ‘How’s she doing?’

‘She’s doing just fine, Father.’ Margaret tried hard to remain civil.

‘Well, if she’s doing *just fine*, then why hasn’t she been discharged from that sanatorium she’s been holed up in for God knows how long? She should be here – back home, where she belongs. She’s got a divorce to sort out if nothing else!’

‘Miriam’s on the mend, but she’s not well enough to return home just yet,’ Margaret said. She would have liked to ask why it was her father wanted his daughter home, but knew it was unlikely she’d get either a straight or an honest answer. Her father, she had learnt over the years, was a pathological liar.

'Bloody hell, how long does it take to squeeze someone dry?' Mr Havelock yelled down the phone in exasperation. *He needed her home. And sooner rather than later.*

There was a click as his daughter hung up. Then dead air. He banged down the receiver, fighting the urge to pick it up again and smash it back onto the cradle. Repeatedly. Even as a child, Margaret had always defied him. She was only eighteen months older than Miriam, but the pair were like chalk and cheese. Miriam had always been desperate to be a 'Daddy's girl'. Not Margaret, though. She was as stubborn as a mule. Always answering back. Never doing what he wanted. It had been a relief when he'd got shot of her and she'd moved over the border to marry that husband of hers.

'Eddy!' Mr Havelock bellowed. It felt good to shout. Flicking open his box of cigars, he took one out, clipped the end and lit it impatiently, puffing on it so hard he was soon surrounded by a fog of smoke.

'Yes, Mr Havelock!' Eddy's voice could be heard before he appeared through the half-opened doorway.

'I need a drink – and quick!'

Eddy gave a curt nod, disappearing as quickly as he had arrived, and returned a few minutes later with a silver tray on which there was a bottle of his master's favourite brandy and a large balloon glass.

Seeing the bottle, Mr Havelock started to calm down. Shooing Eddy away, he took the Rémy and poured himself a good measure. He'd just have to be patient, remind himself of one of his long-held beliefs.

Slowly, slowly, catchy monkey.

He'd have to hold his horses until Miriam got back.

Then he could put into play his plan of action.

Chapter Three

July

Heading up the long driveway to the Sunderland Borough Lunatic Asylum, Helen sighed to herself. It had been over a fortnight since her 'chat' with Dr Claire Eris, when she'd told Helen to stay clear of Dr Parker or else she'd let the cat out of the bag about Henrietta, about her real identity and how she'd been incarcerated under false pretences.

Helen wished she'd been able to tell Claire to go ahead and do it. She would revel in seeing her grandfather brought to some kind of justice. But of course, she couldn't. Claire had no idea that should she tell the world the truth about Henrietta, it would not be just Helen's grandfather who would suffer, but others too. For Charles Havelock would make sure he wreaked his revenge before he went down with the sinking ship. He would expose all the women welders' secrets: Dorothy's mother's bigamy, Angie's mam's adultery, and the truth about who Martha's birth mother was – a child killer whose crimes were folklore in these parts. He would destroy the lives of all those he perceived to have done him an injustice, starting with his former scullery maid Pearl Hardwick, now Mrs Pearl Lawson, joint licensee of the Tatham Arms, and her daughters, Bel and Maisie. He had already threatened to expose Maisie as a working girl, along with the bordello where she worked.

Pulling up on the gravelled driveway, Helen didn't bother checking herself in her little compact as she would normally. There didn't seem much point. She wasn't seeing John. Wasn't sure when she would see him again. Wasn't sure what she was going to do about John. Every day, she woke up hoping that an answer would come to her. But it hadn't.

Henrietta, though, was a different matter. Helen knew exactly what she wanted for her grandmother. So much so that she had devised a plan. And it was a plan she was going to start putting into action today.

Getting out of her beloved green sports car, Helen slung her handbag over her shoulder and grabbed a copy of *The Times* she'd brought with her. Walking up the stone steps of the Gothic red-brick building and through the main front doors, she spotted the elderly receptionist, Genevieve. Helen wondered if she ever left the asylum. John had told her that Genevieve not only worked at the town's mental institution, she lived there as well. There were staff quarters towards the back of the hospital. The entire place was more or less self-sufficient, with its own bakery, kitchens and two large farms. John had described it as being more of a hamlet than a hospital.

God, she missed him. It might only have been a couple of weeks since she'd last seen him – not so unusual, as their work schedules often meant they went without seeing each other for weeks at a time – but the knowledge that she could not love him in the way she knew they could love each other made their time apart seem so much longer. So much more painful.

Helen smiled at Genevieve, sitting behind the large receptionist's desk, and followed the now familiar

route to her grandmother's room. The place had felt like a maze when she'd first started coming here seven months ago, but now she could probably find her way blindfold.

Knocking on the heavy oak door, which had been left ajar, Helen heard the familiar tinkle of her grandmother's voice, alongside a song playing on the wireless.

'Come in, come in!' Henrietta trilled.

'Hello, Grandmama.' Helen stepped into the room and smiled on seeing Henrietta. She guessed she'd been bored today as she had piled on her make-up. Blue eyeshadow, rouged cheeks, white-powdered face, thickly drawn eyebrows, and a deep crimson on her lips. Her hair looked a slightly darker red than normal.

'You look like you're ready to hit the town, Grandmama?' Helen smiled, giving her a gentle hug. She was always careful not to squeeze her too hard for fear she might break. Henrietta reminded her of a china doll. Very beautiful, very colourful, but also very fragile.

'Do I really?' Henrietta put her hands on her ankle-length silk skirt, under which there was layer upon layer of tulle. She turned slowly, like the little ballerina figurine in a musical box.

'Any reason why you are looking so splendid today?' Helen asked as she sat down at the round table in the middle of the high-ceilinged room.

'I have just taken receipt of some new make-up,' Henrietta said, bringing the jug of water over and pouring them both a glass of what they pretended was Russian vodka.

'Well, aren't you the lucky one,' Helen said. 'I know some women would give their right arm for some new make-up. Any make-up, come to think of it.'

Henrietta looked confused. Helen had tried to tell her grandmother about rationing and what was happening in the world outside the asylum, but she didn't think she really understood.

'And I've had my hair dyed with henna,' Henrietta informed her.

'Well, it looks lovely,' said Helen.

'So, tell me ...' Henrietta took a sip of water and grimaced a little as if it really was neat vodka '... why do you not have that sparkle about you today?' She put up her hand to stop Helen speaking. 'No, let me guess ... No rendezvous with your doctor friend?'

Helen sighed. 'Grandmama, you are very perceptive ... You're right. I haven't seen John today.' She paused, unsure how much to say. 'Actually, I probably won't be seeing much of him at all from now on.'

'Oh, my dear.' Henrietta put her hand on top of Helen's. 'Why ever not? Have you two had a lovers' tiff?'

Helen gave a sad smile. Her grandmother was of the belief that Helen and John were courting, or at least having some kind of illicit romantic affair. *If only.*

'Tell me, tell me everything,' Henrietta coaxed. 'We have an entire hour. I want to hear.'

The song playing on the wireless changed and the unmistakable voice of Bing Crosby filled the room.

The sad, forlorn vocals swirled from the wireless and over the barriers she had tried to erect around her heart. It was as though the lyrics had been written for her.

The voice and the beautiful orchestral music caused a well of tears.

'Darling!' Henrietta reached up and wiped away a tear that had escaped and was starting to make its way down her granddaughter's cheek. 'Tell me what has happened.'

Helen blinked back more tears, took a deep breath and told her grandmother of her heartbreak: how she and John had been good friends, how he had helped her through some bad times, and they had become close. But she had not thought that John's feelings for her went beyond the brotherly kind and had learnt too late that she'd been wrong.

'But there's nothing I can do about it now,' Helen said. 'He's in a relationship with another woman.' She purposely left out that the other woman was Dr Eris, Henrietta's psychologist.

'But I don't understand why you can't still tell John that you love him. If he's not engaged or married to this other woman?' Henrietta asked.

Helen smiled. 'That's where it all gets a little complicated, Grandmama. You see, John's sweetheart has something on me – something that's stopping me from telling John how I feel.'

'Oh, dear me,' Henrietta said, taking another sip of her drink and putting it back on the coaster. 'It sounds as if you've been boxed into a corner.'

Helen nodded. 'I have. And worst of all, if I let John know how I feel, it won't be me that gets hurt, but others. Innocent people who don't deserve it.'

'Well, we must do something!' Henrietta said, alarmed. She shifted around on her seat, as though getting ready to take action. 'What is it this woman has on you?'

Helen took her grandmother's pale, sinewy hand. She could never know the truth that it was she who was being used to blackmail Helen.

'There's nothing we can do. There's certainly nothing *you* can do.' Helen smiled sadly. 'But what you *have* done and what *has* helped me – *a lot* – is that you've *listened* to me,

and I've been able to confide in you.' Again, Helen felt the sting of tears. She looked at her grandmother and thought how different things might have been had Henrietta been a part of her life growing up.

'No more about my wretched love life,' Helen said determinedly, sitting up straight and putting a smile on her face. 'I thought it might be a good idea for us to swap our book-reading for a browse of the newspapers.' Helen looked at her grandmother, who was eyeing up the paper as though it were the enemy. She wondered if she'd been purposely shielded from life beyond the asylum.

'I've been thinking I need to know more about what's happening in the world,' Helen went on. This was a white lie. Every day, she had a quick glance at *The Times* and the *Sunderland Echo*, and in the evening she tried to catch the news on the BBC Home Service.

'All right,' Henrietta agreed. 'If it'll help you.'

Helen moved their glasses and the jug off the table so as to be able to spread out the paper. They looked at the main headlines about the V-1s, Hitler's jet-powered flying bombs, which were presently decimating parts of London as well as other areas of the south-east.

When they started reading an article about Minsk being liberated by Soviet forces, Henrietta's eyes glazed over a little, although she perked up when they flicked through the rest of the paper and came across a feature on new Make Do and Mend tips and Utility fashions.

As they continued to chat, Helen's mind kept wandering to thoughts of her mother, Miriam. She wondered when she would be back. She'd have thought she'd want to return to sort out her divorce.

As Helen watched her grandmother read out an article that had taken her interest, she thought how strange it was that Henrietta was Miriam's mother. You couldn't get two more different women.

Miriam was most definitely her father's daughter.

Chapter Four

The women welders had been doing touch-up work all day over in the Manor Quay at the far end of the North Sands yard. It was where most of the fitting out and the repair work was done. They'd been set to work on *Empire Dynasty*, which they had seen go down the ways in May and which was due to leave soon on her maiden voyage. It had been a long day and they were tired, but they were determined not to renege on their arranged get-together at the Admiral after work. They'd all agreed it was well overdue. They had not been out en masse for an age.

Hurrying across the yard to the main gates, they got caught in the bottleneck of workers all lining up to hand in their time boards.

'Helen not coming?' Rosie asked Gloria as they shuffled forwards.

'She said she was leaving work early – ' Gloria dropped her voice ' – to go 'n see her *relative* over in Ryhope. She said she probably wouldn't be back in time.'

The crush of workers inched forwards.

'Actually, there's something I need to tell everyone about Helen and Dr Parker.' Gloria glanced round at her work-mates, who were squashed up next to her. 'And Dr Eris.'

'Sounds intriguing,' said Dorothy.

'What is it?' Polly asked, letting her long chestnut hair free from the confines of her headscarf.

'Well, in a nutshell, Dr Eris knows about Henrietta,' Gloria said with a grim face.

'She *knows*?' Dorothy hissed.

'How come?' Martha asked.

Gloria took a deep breath. 'To cut a long story short, Helen was gonna tell Dr Parker how she felt about him the day Rosie found out that Peter wasn't dead. She drove to the Ryhope after ringing to tell him she wanted to see him 'n that it was urgent.'

'Sounds romantic,' Dorothy said.

'Yes,' Gloria agreed, 'and it would've been if Dr Eris hadn't beaten her to it 'n told her to stay away from Dr Parker otherwise she'd blow the whistle on Henrietta – about her being *you-know-who's* wife.'

'So, she's found out?' Hannah said sadly.

'She has,' Gloria said.

They all inched forward.

'Obviously, she just thinks Helen's worried about the Havelock name – she doesn't know about *everything else*.'

The women huddled nearer as Gloria lowered her voice.

'So, Helen agreed?' Angie said, getting out her clocking-off card, ready to hand it over.

'She did,' Gloria said. 'She didn't really have any choice.'

'We'd have been done for if she hadn't,' Dorothy said, digging around in her haversack.

'Poor Helen,' said Hannah. Her feelings for Helen had grown considerably, as had all the women's, after Helen had put her life on the line and saved Gloria and her daughter, Hope, on the day of the Tatham Street bombing

'Yeah, 'n poor Dr Parker – being with such a horrible, conniving cow,' said Angie.

They had now reached the timekeeper's cabin and took it in turns to hand their white boards over to Davey.

'That makes me so angry,' Dorothy said through pursed lips.

'Me too,' said Polly. She had a particular soft spot for Dr Parker and Helen after they had helped to deliver Artie; it was why she had asked them both to be godparents.

The rest of the women muttered that they, too, felt the same as they made a beeline for the Admiral, the yard's main watering hole.

'Is there anything we can do?' Rosie asked.

Gloria shook her head. She had thought long and hard about a possible solution.

'I really don't think there is.'

Pulling open the door, they were hit by the overriding smell of spilled beer and wafts of cigarette smoke. Hannah suppressed a cough.

'There's a seat!' Dorothy said, pointing over to the table by the window.

'I'll grab it,' said Hannah. As the smallest in their group, she was the best at weaving her way quickly through a thick sea of overall-clad shipyard workers.

'I'll get the first round in,' Dorothy said. She didn't need to ask what they all wanted.

'Give us a shout if yer need a hand,' said Angie, before following the rest of the women over to the table that Hannah had just commandeered.

Dorothy eased her way to the bar, which was full to heaving.

Feeling someone nudge up behind her, she looked round. It was Bobby.

'I just wanted to grab a quick word,' he said.

Seeing Pat, the barman, heading towards her, Dorothy shouted out her order.

Turning her attention back to Bobby, she glared at him. 'You've got until the drinks arrive.'

Suddenly, there was a burst of raucous laughter behind her. A group of platers were well on their way and getting rowdier by the minute. One of them staggered back, pushing Dorothy against Bobby. For a moment their bodies were pressed together. Dorothy could feel herself wanting just to melt into his arms and stay there. She watched as Bobby put his arm over her shoulder. For a moment she thought he was going to pull her close and kiss her.

But he didn't.

'Watch yourself, mate!' Bobby shouted out, giving the bloke who had pushed Dorothy a quick, sharp shove. The man turned round. His expression instantly snapped from lairy to angry.

'There's ladies present!' Bobby looked at Dorothy to prove the point.

'Pfft! Ladies!' The man looked Dorothy up and down, taking in her dirty overalls, her hair still tied up in a faded green headscarf, her face smeared with dirt, and guffawed.

'Call that a lady?' The man laughed loudly.

Bobby's face had gone like thunder. He gave the plater another robust shove, causing him to stagger back.

'Enough!' Dorothy said, grabbing Bobby's arm.

Bobby looked at Dorothy's worried expression and took a deep breath.

'Apologise!' Bobby glared at the bloke, who was now rubbing his shoulder.

'Sorry, mate, I didn't knar she was yer bit.' He looked at Dorothy and gave her a sheepish smile. 'Sorry, pet, didn't mean to offend.'

'Apology accepted,' Dorothy said, holding back from informing him that she was not Bobby's, or anyone else's, *bit*.

Looking back at Bobby, she saw he was still glaring at the man.

‘Leave it,’ she said. ‘He’s said he’s sorry.’ She tugged his arm so that his focus was back on her. Just then the drinks arrived. She handed over the money.

‘I’ll take them,’ Bobby said, picking up the tray.

The women had seen the exchange between the two men and were watching as Dorothy and Bobby weaved their way through the crowded pub and arrived at their table.

‘Everything all right?’ Rosie asked, looking over at the gang of platers now singing some kind of football song.

‘Aye, beer in, wits out,’ said Bobby, putting the tray down.

‘Thanks,’ Dorothy said. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the women forcing themselves to turn away and start making conversation amongst themselves. ‘For bringing the drinks over – and for defending my honour.’

Bobby laughed out loud.

‘Aren’t I meant to be the one living in the “Dark Ages”?’ he said, quoting Dorothy. He smiled at the woman who he was crazy about – who had been driving him crazy in more ways than one since his medical discharge four months ago.

Dorothy allowed herself a slight chuckle. ‘You’re right. It does sound like I’m endorsing some medieval code of chivalry.’ She looked up and held his gaze. ‘Anyway, forgetting that – you said you wanted a quick word?’

Bobby took a deep breath.

‘I did.’ He paused. ‘I wanted to say that I understand you’re in an awkward position after what happened the other week.’

Dorothy felt herself blush just thinking about it. She hoped it wasn’t obvious.

‘I know you’ve been courting Toby—’ Bobby started to say.

‘And am *still* courting Toby. Present tense,’ Dorothy said, her angry words pushing back her guilt. She’d only spoken

to Toby on the phone once since the day of the proposal. She'd tried to sound normal, like her usual self, but it was obvious something was up. *Not jumping up and down with excitement when he'd popped the question was a bit of a giveaway.*

'OK, are still courting Toby,' said Bobby. He hesitated. Talking about his feelings was not his forte.

Dorothy widened her eyes to encourage him.

'I guess,' Bobby said, 'what I want to say to you is that you'd be making a big mistake if you said yes to Toby.'

Dorothy had guessed Gloria would have told Bobby that Toby had asked for her hand in marriage.

'So much for keeping secrets,' she said, glancing over at Gloria.

'She *is* my mam. Blood thicker than water and all that.' He let out a burst of incredulous laughter. 'Anyway, it was you who was on at us to talk. *You* who pummelled me into submission.' It was actually something for which he wanted to thank Dorothy. So far, though, he'd not had the chance. Since they'd kissed that day, Dorothy had been avoiding him like the plague.

Dorothy was at a loss for words. She tried to feel angry but couldn't. All she really wanted to do was lean into Bobby and kiss him and have a repeat of their two minutes of passion standing in the middle of her kitchen.

'Why would saying yes to Toby be such a mistake?' she asked, forcing herself back into combative mode. She saw Bobby turn his head slightly to the left and knew he was struggling to hear her. She spoke into his good ear. 'Why would marrying Toby be a mistake? It's not as if you really know me or Toby.'

'Perhaps not.' Although he did feel as though he and Dorothy had got to know each other these past few months. 'But I do think it'd be a mistake, marrying someone else

after what happened between us.’ Bobby paused. ‘Even if you didn’t want to marry me.’

‘What?’ Dorothy let out a mock gasp. ‘Am I hearing my second proposal in a matter of weeks?’

Bobby ran his hand over his head self-consciously, aware that Dorothy’s squad were near and would undoubtedly be straining to hear what was being said. ‘You know what I’m meaning, Dorothy.’

He looked down at her with serious eyes.

Dorothy allowed herself to return his look.

He touched her arm gently. ‘You know I want you.’

Dorothy looked into his eyes. He was making no effort to hide his desire.

‘I do,’ Dorothy said with a sharp laugh. ‘You want me for one thing.’

Bobby was just about to say something when Jimmy came over.

‘Yer gonna gerrus that round in, mate? We’re all dying of thirst over there.’ He looked over to the far corner where the riveters had been waiting for Bobby to return from the bar.

Bobby looked at Dorothy.

‘Just think about it,’ he said, before turning away and heading back to the bar with Jimmy.

‘Look, the ferry’s in!’ Dorothy shouted out as the women bustled out of the Admiral.

They all hurried down to the landing and piled on, paying Stan, the ferry master, the penny fare.

‘So, come on, Dor, spit it out,’ Angie said as they reached the bow of the old paddle steamer.

‘Yeah, we couldn’t hear a thing in the pub,’ Martha chuckled.

‘Try as you might!’ Dorothy jibed back.

Dorothy looked at Rosie, Gloria, Polly, Martha, Hannah and Angie. Their faces were expectant. It had been too loud

in the pub to talk and they were all aware they could be overheard.

‘Well, we did hear Bobby say something like “*You know I want you*”,’ Hannah said, dropping her voice as a couple of shipyard workers started chatting and smoking next to them.

‘Yeah,’ Dorothy laughed a little bitterly. ‘He wants *one thing*. And I think we all know what that is.’ She looked at Gloria. ‘Sorry, no offence, Glor, but I think we all know what Bobby really wants.’

Polly looked at Dorothy. ‘Actually,’ she said in earnest, ‘I think Bobby wants *you*. You know – Dorothy. The person.’ Since Bobby had started lodging at the Elliots’, Polly had got to know him well. He was brilliant with Artie and he was always keen to chat about Tommy, who he clearly saw as a brother in arms, them both being in the navy.

‘Yes, I agree with Polly,’ Hannah said. ‘I think Bobby wants Dorothy the person.’

‘I agree too,’ Rosie said. She was leaning against the metal railing, enjoying the feel of the evening sun on her face. ‘There’s no doubting Bobby’s a red-blooded male, but I don’t think that’s the only reason he wants you.’

‘You all think he wants to court me properly?’ Dorothy looked askance at the women.

‘*Of course* he wants to court yer properly, yer daft narna,’ Gloria said in exasperation. She wanted to add that her son was completely besotted with her, but didn’t.

‘Why wouldn’t he want to court you properly?’ Hannah asked, genuinely perplexed.

‘Cos she’s as nutty as a fruitcake,’ Martha chortled.

Dorothy looked at Martha.

‘Many a true word’s said in jest,’ she said with a heavy sigh. ‘Martha’s got a point. Toby loves me, the whole of me – the nutty me as well as the packaging.’ She looked down at her dirty overalls and suddenly felt deflated.

She and Toby had been an item since he had turned up at the bordello and mistaken her for one of Lily's girls. They'd been attracted to each other from the off. She had invited him to Polly and Tommy's wedding and they'd been an item ever since. They might not have seen each other as much as a couple would in normal times, but whenever Toby was given leave, he'd jump into his little grey Austin and drive up north to see her. She loved him. Had wanted nothing more than to be his wife. Everything had been clear-cut – *until Bobby had come on the scene.*

Angie elbowed her best friend. 'What's wrong, Dor? You've got a face like a slapped backside. Yer should be cock-a-hoop yer've got two blokes after yer.'

'But that's just it,' Dorothy said, as the ferry bumped into the landing and they all made their way off. 'I was quite happy with just the one – Toby – and then Bobby came and put a great big spanner in the works.'

They all started the walk up the embankment to High Street East.

'I know Toby wants me – all of me – wants me as his wife. For life,' Dorothy said, thinking of his soft brown eyes, so soulful, so sincere whenever he spoke of his love for her.

'Whereas Bobby definitely wants me,' she added, thinking of his mischievous eyes, dancing as he enjoyed their verbal sparring, 'but for what, and for how long, I'm not so sure.'

They all walked on in silence.

Seeing her bus, Rosie waved it down.

'Perhaps *you* should decide who it is you want. And *what* it is you really want,' she said, hurrying off.

Chapter Five

Stepping out of the first-class carriage of the train, Miriam put a gloved hand out to the young boy dressed in an oversized porter's uniform. Gripping his skinny arm tightly, more tightly than necessary, she stepped out of the brown-and-cream-painted wooden carriage and onto the busy platform. As steam hissed from under the train's metal belly, she curled her nose, the smell of soot and the dry, dusty air making her cough. She'd got used to the clean air of the Scottish Highlands. Releasing her talon-like grip, Miriam cast a look back through the open carriage door to where a leather suitcase waited to be claimed.

'Is that yours?' the young lad asked, unsure of himself. Unsure of the job he'd just started that very same day.

'Of course it's mine!' Miriam snapped. 'I can't see anyone else it might belong to, can you?' She looked around to prove her point. She had been the only person from the first-class compartment to alight.

'Sorry, miss.' The boy hitched up his trousers and climbed on board.

Miriam watched with disdain as he struggled to lift the case, its weight nearly taking him with it as he lowered it onto the platform.

Tutting loudly as a naval officer jostled past her to reach the train just as the stationmaster blew the whistle, Miriam started to make her way towards the stairs that led up to the exit. The throng of fellow travellers and those who had come to meet them caused her progress