

Prologue

*Sunderland Borough Lunatic Asylum, Ryhope
village, County Durham*

Sunday 16 May 1943

‘Sorry to bother you, Claire.’ Dr Parker stood on the doorstep of Dr Eris’s little cottage in the West Wing of the town’s notorious lunatic asylum. It was almost two in the afternoon, although most people’s body clocks had been thrown out of sync by a particularly heavy air raid during the early hours of the morning.

‘You’re not bothering me at all, John, not at all. Come in. Come in.’ Dr Eris opened the door wide. ‘It seems like it was just two minutes ago that we were saying goodnight to each other.’ The pair had been out for a drink the previous evening, which had ended with John walking Claire back to her hospital accommodation and saying a chaste farewell.

‘It does indeed.’ Dr Parker followed Dr Eris down the hallway. ‘Although the intervening time has been somewhat eventful.’

‘Very true. They’re saying it’s been the worst bombing we’ve had to date.’ Dr Eris led the way into the kitchen. ‘Sit yourself down. Let me make a quick cup of tea. It can be in place of the one you turned down last night.’

Dr Parker felt himself redden. ‘I hope you weren’t offended. I didn’t want the hospital grapevine to go into meltdown. I think the very fact we simply went out for

a drink together will have sent the gossipmongers into a feeding frenzy.'

Dr Eris chuckled as she put the kettle on and placed two cups and saucers and a little jug of milk on the small kitchen table. 'That's the downside of working in a hospital that's in the middle of nowhere – the entertainment tends to be generated in-house. You can't sneeze here without just about every member of staff, and probably all the patients too, knowing about it.'

Dr Eris poured boiling water into the teapot and gave it a feisty stir. *She* had actually been the one to get the gossip going by casually dropping into conversations with her colleagues that she and the eligible Dr Parker were going out for a drink and it was most definitely not for the purpose of talking shop. She'd also made a point of informing Denise and Genevieve, the receptionists at the Ryhope and the asylum, where she was going, and with whom – *just in case there was an emergency, of course.*

'So, tell me, to what do I owe this pleasure?' Dr Eris put the pot on the table and sat down.

'I'm afraid I need to pick your brains about a patient who came in last night,' Dr Parker said.

Dr Eris tried to hide her disappointment; she'd hoped the visit was a social one.

'Tell me more,' she said.

'One old chap suffered a nasty bash on his head – fell over on his way to the shelter. He's quite elderly and a bit unsteady on his feet. He's been patched up, but he still seems very confused and I'm wondering whether his memory loss and lack of clarity are due to a possible concussion – or if it's dementia.

Dr Eris poured their tea and added milk.

'I can certainly take a look at him and give you my opinion,' she said, a smile playing on her lips.

Dr Parker narrowed his eyes. 'What is it you're *not* saying?'

Dr Eris crossed her legs and leant forward a little, her teacup in her hands. 'I was just thinking that much as I'm sure you value my thoughts on the matter, it might be more enlightening if you got the office to track down his next of kin and find out if he seemed confused *before* the bombs dropped.'

'Dear me –' Dr Parker combed his hair back with his fingers – 'I think it might be me with dementia. In fact, now that I'm thinking about it, I'm sure one of the nurses took a call from his son saying he'd be visiting later. I'll speak to him then. You must think I'm thick.'

'I think you're anything but, John. But I do think you've been working round the clock lately. You need a decent night's shut-eye. The effects of sleep deprivation, especially over the long term, can mirror those of dementia, you know?'

Dr Parker let out a bark of laughter. 'Thanks for the reassurance.' He took a sip of his tea. 'So, tell me, how was last night for you?'

'At the pub or during the air raid?' Dr Eris asked, deadpan.

Dr Parker laughed out loud again. 'I meant the air raid, but I have to say that I personally had a thoroughly enjoyable evening at the Albion.'

Dr Eris smiled. 'Me too.'

As they drank their tea, they both exchanged stories about the aftermath of the bombing. Dr Eris's time had been spent checking and medicating those inmates who had become distressed by the disruption, while until the early hours Dr Parker had been in the Isolation Hospital in the West Wing, which had been converted into a makeshift ward for the injured. All the staff had done their bit, and most had gone to bed when they'd normally be getting up.

Having finished his tea, Dr Parker pushed back his chair and stood up.

'Well, I'd best be getting off.' He glanced at his watch. 'Rounds to do.' He looked at Dr Eris. 'And thank you for the belated tea.'

'You're more than welcome,' Dr Eris said, standing up and putting the teacups in the sink. 'And I'll pop in to see your confused elderly gentleman. You've got me curious.'

'Thank you,' Dr Parker said. As he made to go, he suddenly felt a little awkward. It would have been the ideal opportunity to ask Claire out on another date. So why was he hesitating?

'Let me see you out,' Claire said, turning and walking down the hallway.

As she opened the front door, she had to stop herself from slamming it shut again. Helen was walking down the pathway to the Isolation Hospital. Worse still, she'd spotted her and was raising her arm to wave hello.

Dr Eris turned around to face Dr Parker.

'You know,' she said, 'it wasn't just the tea you passed up on last night.'

Dr Parker furrowed his brow in a question as Dr Eris stepped forward, put her arms around his neck and gently pulled him towards her.

Chapter One

Helen and Bel sat on the wooden bench to the left of the entrance to the asylum. The perfectly manicured lawns of the hospital grounds lay stretched out in front of them. A little earlier, the two women had literally bumped into each other in the corridors after they had ended up there following that night's air raid.

Bel had gone to the asylum with her ma, Pearl Hardwick, to visit her ma's friend and boss, Bill Lawson, licensee of the Tatham Arms. The town's hospitals being full to bursting, he'd been taken there after being nearly buried alive when a bomb had landed on the pub he had gone to for a lock-in.

Helen, on the other hand, had gone to the asylum searching for Dr Parker, having felt compelled to tell him her true feelings. She knew she had missed her chance, though, by a matter of seconds, when she saw him kissing his colleague, Dr Eris.

While Pearl had gone off to visit Bill in one of the wards given over to those injured in the air raid, Bel had taken a distressed Helen outside to talk about why she was so upset – an unusual state for Helen, who was not known for any kind of display of emotion.

After chatting for a while, they had fallen into a comfortable silence, their faces turned heavenward, allowing themselves to bask momentarily in the solace of the afternoon sun. The beauty of their surroundings and balmy tranquillity of this most idyllic of spring days afforded a comfort of sorts.

Opening her eyes, Bel turned her head slightly. Helen still looked stunning, despite the smudged mascara and slight puffiness around her eyes. 'Just because you saw him coming out of Dr Eris's accommodation doesn't mean he spent the night there, you know.'

Helen gave Bel a sideways glance. Within the space of a few days, Bel had gone from being simply one of her staff to a family member. A blood relative. Her aunty. Her mother's sister. *Her grandfather's illegitimate daughter.*

'Oh, Bel, that's nice of you to say, but if you'd seen the way they kissed ...' Helen's voice trailed off.

'It mightn't have been what it looked like,' Bel argued. 'Dr Parker might have just popped in there for a cuppa. The kiss could have been innocent.' She glanced down at her watch. 'Anyway, it's a bit late for two people to be *getting up*.'

'This is *exactly* the time they would be getting up.' Helen felt the hurt in her heart as she spoke. 'Whenever there's an air raid, John – and all the rest of the doctors and nurses – work through the night, making sure any casualties are tended to, treated, operated on ...' She stared back up at the sky and closed her eyes. 'I feel such a fool.' She shook her head, annoyed at herself. 'To think that John would want me.'

Bel looked at Helen in surprise. 'I don't see why that would be such a foolish thing to think. I can't see any man *not* wanting you.'

'I don't mean *want* as in simply to desire.' Helen sighed heavily. 'I mean *want* as in want me as his sweetheart. His fiancée.' She turned her face away from the sun and looked at Bel. 'As the woman he wants to spend the rest of his life with.'

It was only then that Bel understood not just that Helen was in love with Dr Parker, but how strong and deep her love for him was. This wasn't simply about some other woman snaring the man she wanted for herself, but Helen

losing the man she was desperate to be with – for ever. And Bel knew better than most that love like that rarely came along twice. She had been one of the lucky ones.

‘Well, I don’t think you should give up until you know the whole story. All the facts. You don’t know for certain he stayed over at her place. It might have looked like a kiss between two lovers, but that could have just been your imagination.’

‘Mmm,’ Helen mused. ‘I’m not convinced.’ She gave Bel a sad smile. ‘But I think you’re right in that I do need to make sure I haven’t got the wrong end of the stick.’ She sighed again. Her thoughts fell back to the last traumatic twenty-four hours – the shocking bombshell about her grandfather, followed by the worst air raid thus far. The pervasiveness of all the death and destruction meted out to the town had driven her determination to tell John that she loved him. That she didn’t just want to be his friend, but his lover – his lifelong soulmate.

‘Oh, there you are!’

Helen and Bel turned round simultaneously.

An attractive, smartly dressed woman in a brown tailored skirt suit, her shiny, tawny-coloured hair twisted up into a French knot, was walking down the stone steps of the asylum. She had her eyes trained on Helen and a wide smile on her face.

‘Oh *no*,’ Helen whispered under her breath.

Bel stared at the tall, slim woman now striding purposefully towards them. She reminded her a little of Katharine Hepburn. Amazing cheekbones, flawless skin with just a dusting of freckles.

Helen stood up and Bel followed suit.

‘Helen, I’m so glad I caught you before you left.’ Dr Eris glanced at Bel and smiled before returning her attention to Helen. ‘That *was* you I saw in the West Wing, wasn’t it?’

Helen hesitated for a moment. She thought about denying it but realised there was no point.

‘Yes, your eyes weren’t playing tricks. That was indeed me,’ Helen said, trying her hardest to sound upbeat and hoping to God it wasn’t obvious that she’d been crying.

‘Ah, that’s good. Not going mad then.’ Claire grimaced a little. ‘I worry sometimes about making the crossover.’ She cocked her head towards the Gothic, red-brick frontage of the asylum. ‘They say it’s never a good idea to live and work in a hospital of this kind. One might get confused. Doctor or patient? Patient or doctor?’ She laughed lightly. ‘I didn’t see your friend with you, though?’ She looked at Bel.

‘No, no, you didn’t.’ Helen didn’t elaborate, but instead turned to Bel. ‘Bel, this is Claire – or rather, *Dr Eris*.’ Helen pulled her mouth into a mock grimace. ‘That is, providing she doesn’t “make the crossover”.’

Dr Eris laughed and stretched out her arm. ‘Pleased to meet you, Bel.’

Bel returned the handshake and gave a polite smile.

‘I wonder,’ Dr Eris said, focusing her attention back on Helen, ‘if I could perhaps have a quick word with you?’

‘Of course, fire ahead,’ Helen said, showing that the ‘quick word’ would have to be said in front of Bel.

Dr Eris hesitated before carrying on. ‘I just wanted to say ...’ her eyes flicked to Bel before she fixed her gaze on Helen ‘... that, obviously, as you will have guessed from seeing John and me just now –’

Helen felt her heart race.

‘– in a rather amorous embrace –’

No room for doubt now.

‘– that as we are clearly more than simply colleagues, and because I know John and you are close friends, that just because we are “together” as such, well, this doesn’t

mean you two can't continue to be friends.' Another smile. 'I'm not one of these women who demand their beaux don't fraternise with any other person of the opposite sex.'

Helen continued to stand and listen. She had a feeling Dr Eris hadn't quite finished what she had come here to say.

She was right.

'But you'll have to forgive him if he isn't able to see you as much as he has been.' Dr Eris gave a self-satisfied smile. 'You know what it's like at the start? You just want to be with each other every minute of every day, don't you?'

Helen laughed a little too loudly. 'I do indeed, Claire. I do indeed.' She looked into Dr Eris's hazel eyes. 'I guess the real teller is when you still want to be with each other every minute of every day once the shine's worn off.'

There was a moment's awkward silence.

'Anyway,' Dr Eris said, 'when I saw you back there, you seemed in rather a rush. Was there something you wanted? I'm guessing it was John you were looking for?' She forced a smile.

Helen gave an equally false smile. 'Yes, it was, but it's not important. It can wait.'

Dr Eris glanced down at her watch. 'Oh my goodness, where does the time go?'

She looked directly at Bel.

'Well, lovely to meet you.' Dr Eris smiled.

Bel thought she had the most perfect teeth she'd ever seen.

'And,' Dr Eris turned to Helen, 'I'm glad we've managed to have this little chat ... Anyway, best get a shimmy on. *Minds to mend* and all that.'

And with that Dr Eris turned and quickly walked back to the main entrance, hurried up the stone steps and disappeared through the wooden swing doors.

Helen looked at Bel. 'Well, I guess that answers that question.'

Bel opened her mouth to offer words of reassurance, but none came out. If there had been any doubt that Helen might have misread the scene, it had been wiped clean away.

'I think that is called staking your claim,' Helen said.

Bel nodded but didn't say anything. She didn't know Helen well enough to offer her any words of comfort, not that she could think of any even if she had. Poor Helen. She looked bereft.

'Are you going to be all right?'

'Yes, of course,' Helen said as convincingly as possible. 'Best get back to work. *Denewood* took a battering last night.' The dry cargo vessel was the yard's most recent launch.

'Really?' Bel was shocked. She'd heard that J.L. Thompson & Sons had been hit during last night's air raid, but not any details. 'Badly?' She knew everyone would be gutted. The whole yard had worked flat out to get *Denewood* down the ways on time.

'She was taking in water this morning, but they've managed to keep her afloat.' Helen straightened her shoulders. 'Honestly, here's me moaning on about some bloke and the whole town's been bombed to smithereens.'

'That might be,' Bel said, 'but Dr Parker isn't just "some bloke", is he?'

'No,' Helen acquiesced, 'but he's going to have to be from now on.'

They were quiet for a moment.

Helen looked at Bel and was again hit by the family resemblance: her mother and Bel had the same blonde hair and blue eyes, the same nose and lips.

'Gosh, you must think I'm so incredibly shallow. I haven't even mentioned the ...' Helen stopped. 'The ... God,

I can't even think of a word to describe the abominable thing my grandfather did.' Helen's shoulders suddenly drooped as she thought of how her grandfather, the revered Mr Charles Havelock, had raped Pearl, then a fifteen-year-old scullery maid – and how that heinous act of violence had led to Pearl becoming pregnant with Bel.

'I'm so sorry, Bel. I still don't know what to say. I don't think it's really sunk in, to be honest.'

'Don't worry about that now,' Bel said. 'A conversation for another time?'

'Yes, definitely,' Helen agreed. 'Yesterday and today have been tumultuous, to say the least.' She looked over at her grandfather's black Jaguar. 'Are you sure I can't give you and your mother a lift home?'

'No, honestly, we'll be fine. Knowing my ma, she'll want some hair of the dog.' Bel rolled her eyes. 'She had a few too many last night. She mentioned nipping into the village afterwards, which means an hour in the Railway Inn before we get on the train.'

Helen felt a sudden jolt of sadness. The Railway Inn had been her and John's favourite meeting place.

'Oh.' Helen let out a bitter laugh. 'Tell her to have one for me.'

Bel's laughter was just as bitter.

'I will. Not that she'll need any encouragement.'

Chapter Two

'Oh, I didn't realise Miss Girling had any visitors.'

Pearl swivelled round on her chair to see a rather rotund nurse blocking the doorway, hands on hips, strands of curly ginger hair escaping her cap.

Pearl was confused, even more than she had already been.

Miss Girling? Who the bloody hell is she talking about? Pearl felt like kicking herself. Why oh why had she got so bladdered last night? Had the bootleg whisky she'd been necking back made her doolally? She shouldn't be here! She should be with Bill, having a laugh about him ending up in the local loony bin and telling him it served him right for going off for a lock-in.

'Miss *who?*' Pearl asked, her voice croaky. She felt the need for a cigarette.

This was all Isabelle's fault. She'd never have ended up here – never have got lost – if Isabelle had come with her.

The nurse narrowed her eyes. 'Well, you're obviously neither friend nor family if you don't know the name of the woman yer sat here yammering away to.' She bustled over to Henrietta, who was sitting, perched like a little bird, on the stool next to the mahogany dressing table, her back to the three-way mirror, her hands clasped together on her lap.

'You all right there, pet?' The nurse towered over her diminutive charge.

'This is my Little Match Girl. *Den Lille Pige med Svoovstikkerne!*' Henrietta explained.

Pearl felt herself stiffen. 'Little Match Girl' had been her nickname. Given to her by Henrietta. Mrs Henrietta Have-lock. So why was this daft mare calling her *Miss Girling*?

'Course she's your Little Match Girl, pet.'

Pearl was speechless; she couldn't believe anyone had the audacity to call the mistress 'pet'. She watched in disbelief as the nurse gave Henrietta a patronising smile before swinging her girth round to face the scrawny, middle-aged, mutton-dressed-as-lamb intruder.

Glowering down at Pearl, the nurse jerked her head towards the door.

'Hop it!'

Pearl stood up, but as she did so Henrietta leant forward and grabbed hold of her arm.

'You'll come back, won't you?' she pleaded, her face upturned, her eyes desperate.

'Come on then, chop-chop!' The nurse was making no attempt to hide her ire at finding a stranger in her patient's room. Taking hold of Pearl's arm, she gripped it tightly and forced her towards the open doorway.

'You'll come back, won't you, Little Match Girl?' Henrietta's high-pitched, sing-song voice followed Pearl as she left the room.

Once they were out in the corridor, the nurse looked Pearl up and down. 'Yer've not pilfered owt, have yer?'

Pearl didn't give her a mouthful as she would normally have done; she was barely aware of the busybody nurse uttering accusations. Instead, her attention was fixed solely on Henrietta, whose pupils were so large, her eyes looked almost black.

'Cat got your tongue?' The nurse took Pearl's handbag and looked inside. It was empty save for a packet of cigarettes, a lighter and a small leather purse.

Pearl continued to stare at Henrietta, spellbound.

‘Blimey, yer smell like a brewery.’ The nurse pushed the bag back at Pearl and pointed down the corridor.

‘Walk to the end and turn right. Then follow the signs to reception. And don’t let me see hide nor hair of you again.’

Pearl took one last look at Henrietta, her former employer, still sitting with her back to the dressing table, still staring at her ‘Little Match Girl’. Her eyes still imploring her to return.

As Pearl staggered down the corridor, her mind seemed to have got stuck back in time. She was a young girl again, her only clothes the rags on her back, her few possessions stuffed into a cloth bag, knocking on the doors of the big houses. Desperate for a job. Desperate for a roof over her head and food in her belly. There had been many times since then she’d wished she *had* been turned away – that she had gone to the park across the road, put her head down and died of cold and hunger. Just like the real Little Match Girl. But she hadn’t. A Russian-doll woman with garish make-up, outlandish hair and wearing clothes that looked from another era, had waved her in, given her a job and, a few months later, brought her to the attention of the master of the house – her husband, Mr Charles Havelock.

As Dr Eris walked down the corridor, she had to allow herself a self-satisfied smile. After a rather disappointing end to the evening last night, with John politely refusing her offer to come in for a cup of tea and giving her a rather brotherly kiss on the cheek, the tables had been well and truly turned. She felt herself blush as she recalled their earlier kiss. It had been rather wonderful – and long enough for Helen to have seen it. Long enough for her to have turned back and returned to where she’d come from. For good, hopefully.

After starting at the asylum in the New Year, Dr Eris had spent the past few months getting to know Dr Parker, chatting to him, making him laugh – making him feel at ease with her. She knew John liked her and found her attractive, but she suspected that Helen might be a potential spanner in the works – that his feelings for his ‘friend’ were not purely platonic.

When she’d finally met Helen in the canteen the other day, her heart had sunk. The woman was a stunner. Glossy black hair, hourglass figure – and the most amazing emerald eyes. A fool would know that John, or any other red-blooded male for that matter, would want to be much more than just friends. But what had perturbed her most was that it was obvious Helen was mad about him. Thank goodness John clearly had no idea. She just had to make sure that didn’t change. After the meeting in the canteen, she knew the clock was ticking. She had competition. Serious competition. She had to act fast before John wised up and realised what was on offer – or worse still, before Helen decided to make the first move. Which was why, when she had seen John yesterday afternoon and he’d told her his scheduled surgery had been put back, she’d taken a gamble and suggested they go for a drink in the Albion.

‘Watch where yer gannin!’

Turning the corner towards the East Wing, Dr Eris suddenly came face to face with a rather bedraggled-looking woman with badly dyed blonde hair who was wearing clothes that were more suited to someone half her age.

‘So sorry, I didn’t see you there,’ Dr Eris said, moving to the side.

‘How do I gerra out of here?’ the woman asked, scrambling around in her handbag.

‘Just keep going straight down this corridor, turn left and you’ll end up at reception.’

The woman huffed and walked off.

Dr Eris watched as she stopped and lit up a cigarette before disappearing round the corner in a cloud of grey smoke. She wondered whether she should go after the strange woman and check she wasn't a patient but decided against it. The chances were that she was a visitor. They were always getting lost, which was no surprise; the place really was like a maze. If she'd got it wrong and the woman was an inmate, then Genevieve would know; she'd worked here long enough, and although she was getting on, her mind was still as sharp as a pin. She'd call the orderlies and they'd bring the woman back.

As she continued on her way, her mind snapped back to John. And, moreover, their kiss. When she'd opened her front door and seen Helen – or rather, seen the determined look on her face, combined with the fact that she was done up to the nines – well, it didn't take a degree in psychology to know she had come for John.

Helen's unexpected appearance at the asylum made sense after last night's bombing. She'd seen similar impulsive behaviour after air raids. All those thoughts of life and death followed by a sudden compulsion to live for the day.

Some might say her own behaviour had been motivated by such side effects of war, but, of course, it hadn't. Her actions this afternoon had been driven by one thing, and one thing alone: her fear that John might be snatched from right under her nose.

'Ah, Nurse Pattinson,' Dr Eris said, walking into the room of one of her more challenging patients. 'How's Miss Girling doing today?'

'She's been letting strangers into her room,' the nurse said as she smoothed down the divan on the bed. She loved the feel of embroidered silk. 'Some tramp of a townie,' she

said, taking the pillows and fluffing them up. 'Reckon she'd either got lost or was looking at what she could pilfer.'

'I think I just bumped into her,' Dr Eris said, pulling up the chair Pearl had just vacated. She took hold of Henrietta's hand and felt her pulse.

'Dear me, Miss Girling. Feels like you've had a quick sprint around the grounds.'

Henrietta looked at the young doctor sitting opposite her, then down at her hands, which were soft and cold. They were milky white. The colour of an opal ...

'Pearl!' Her eyes widened in glee. She had been trying and trying to bring the name to the forefront of her mind, but it felt as though it had got stuck in treacle.

'Who's Pearl?' Dr Eris asked as she let go of Henrietta's hand and tipped her head slightly back. She pulled out a small, pen-shaped torch from the top pocket of her jacket and shone it briefly into both eyes.

'The Little Match Girl.' Henrietta blinked but kept her face still.

Dr Eris got up and unhooked the chart at the bottom of Henrietta's bed. She looked across at Nurse Pattinson, who arched an eyebrow.

'Pearl from *The Scarlet Letter*,' Henrietta explained.

'By Nathaniel Hawthorne?' Dr Eris looked up.

Henrietta nodded.

'Miss Girling, you are quite an anomaly, aren't you? And certainly the most well-read patient I've ever had.'

Henrietta smiled at the compliment.

'Nurse Pattinson, I'm making some alterations to Miss Girling's medication.' She started writing on Henrietta's chart.

'I want to try and bring her dosage down, which means I need you to keep an extra-close eye on her. If you see any

changes, good or bad, I'd like you to report them to me, please.'

Dr Eris smiled her thanks; she knew who really ran the asylum, and it wasn't the doctors. Nurse Pattinson had been there nearly her entire working life and she ruled with an iron rod. Dr Eris had met nurses like her before and made the mistake of getting on their bad side.

Walking back to her office further down the corridor, Dr Eris opened the door and went straight over to the battered wooden filing cabinet that looked as old as the building itself. She pulled out the top drawer and rifled through the alphabet.

'Here we are,' she mumbled to herself, heaving out the two-inch-thick file. 'Miss Henrietta Girling.' She plonked the case file on her desk and sat down in her chair.

Rereading the medical notes that spanned more than two decades, Dr Eris started to jot down her observations, but all the while her mind kept skipping back to John. They were going out on a date this evening. A proper date! After their kiss, he'd asked if he could take her out for dinner.

Dr Eris made a mental note to be spontaneous more often.

It had certainly paid dividends for her today.

Chapter Three

'Isabelle!'

Bel and Helen turned round to see Pearl stomping down the steps of the main entrance.

Helen had been about to walk over to the car but stopped.

'Talk of the devil,' Bel said.

'She looks as white as a sheet. Or is she always like that?' Helen spoke out of the side of her mouth. She'd met Pearl a few times before but always in the pub, and invariably through a haze of cigarette smoke.

'She's never exactly the picture of health,' Bel said distractedly, watching her ma make her way over to them. 'God, I hope it's not Bill.'

'The landlord from the Tatham?' Helen asked, thinking of the rather portly but jovial proprietor of Bel's local.

Bel nodded. 'He was brought here last night. He was in the Welcome Tavern on Barrack Street when it got hit.'

'I'm so sorry. I was so wrapped up in my own drama, I didn't even ask why you were here,' Helen said. 'Why was Bill at the Welcome?'

'Lock-in,' Bel explained. 'Getting plastered because Ma got slaughtered and went off with Ronald, our neighbour.'

'Bloody Nora, I thought I'd never get out of there!' Pearl said as she reached them.

'You all right, Ma?' Bel asked, scrutinising her mother. She was puffing away on a fag as though her life depended on it.

'Is Bill all right?' Bel crossed her fingers. They'd been led to believe that those with relatively minor injuries had

been brought here – the more serious having been taken to the town's Royal.

Pearl looked at Bel as though she was talking gobbledygook.

'Bill?'

'Yes, Ma. *Bill*. You know, the man we've been looking for all day? Your friend? The one you've been worried sick about?' They had been searching for Bill all over town; had gone to the bomb site where they'd feared he might well have died, then to the Monkwearmouth Hospital over on the north side of the river, before being told he'd been taken to the asylum.

'Aye ... course ... Bill,' Pearl muttered, shaking her head and taking another drag. 'I got bloody lost. I've not seen him.'

Bel was relieved that her mother's slightly bizarre behaviour was not down to Bill's demise, but at the same time she was also a little worried as to why she seemed so dazed and confused.

'Ma, are you all right? You look like you've seen a ghost.'

'I *have!*' Pearl spluttered.

Bel and Helen exchanged worried looks. Pearl's hands were shaking – in fact, her whole body was trembling.

'Perhaps I should get you both home?' Helen asked, concerned.

'I think that might be a good idea ...' Bel nodded. 'Ma, why don't we go back with Helen?'

Pearl stared at the glossy black Jaguar she knew belonged to Charles Havelock – Helen's grandfather. 'Wild horses won't get me in that thing!'

Bel looked at Helen. 'You get yourself off. We'll be all right. Probably do us good to have a walk.'

'If you're sure?' Helen looked at Bel and then at Pearl.

Bel nodded.

Helen headed over to the car and got in. Taking a deep breath, she turned the ignition. She was still very much a novice behind the wheel, but she managed to pull away with just the slightest of judders.

As she drove towards the main gates, she looked in her rear-view mirror at Bel and Pearl.

And she thought she had drawn the short straw when it came to mothers.

‘So come on, Ma, tell me what’s happened. You went off to find Bill in a relatively normal state, and you’ve come back here a gibbering wreck. If you don’t start making sense, I’ll be forced to take you back inside and get them to check you out.’

‘Over my dead body!’ She watched for a moment as the Jaguar made its way down the driveway, before walking over to the bench by the entrance. Seeing the brass plaque dedicated to *Mr Charles Havelock, philanthropist and entrepreneur*, Pearl’s lip curled in disgust.

‘Is there no escaping that man?’ she spat out before turning her back on it and plonking herself down. She looked up at her daughter. ‘Will yer gan ’n make sure Bill’s all reet? Or at least leave a message with the auld cow on the front desk – ask her to tell Bill I came to see him ’n that I hope he’s out of here soon.’

Bel was observing her mother. Was it fear she could see on her face? She wasn’t sure. But whatever it was, it was obvious that nothing was going to make her go back inside.

‘All right, Ma. I’ll do as you ask, but I want you to reassure me that when I come back you’ll still be sat there – and that you’ll tell me what on earth is going on?’

'Aye, I will ... promise,' Pearl said, lighting up another cigarette from the one she was smoking. Her hands were still shaking.

Forty minutes later, Pearl's hands had stopped shaking, mainly due to the double whisky she was drinking, coupled with having put a good distance between herself and the asylum.

'So, Bill's definitely all reet?' Pearl asked for the umpteenth time.

'Yes, Ma, he's fine. Like I said, he's got a big gash on his head and quite a few cuts and bruises, but other than that, he's fine. Lucky to be alive. And he knows it. He was sat up in his bed looking full of the joys.'

'So why are they keeping him in?' Pearl took a sip of her whisky. 'If he's all reet, you'd think they'd want shot of him.'

'He said it was to "err on the side of caution", with it being a head injury. It did look like he'd taken quite a whack.'

'Ha! That'll teach him. Going to a lock-in at the Welcome, of all places.'

'That's exactly what he said you would say.' Bel gave her ma a probing look. 'I suppose you two must have got to know each other quite well – working day in, day out behind that bar. How long have you been there now? Must be coming up to a couple of years?'

'Not far off,' Pearl said.

'Well, Bill obviously trusts you.' Bel started rummaging round in her pocket. 'Because he's given me the keys to the Tatham and asked you to open up and be "acting landlord" for the evening. He said Geraldine will be able to help out. That she's always up for a shift.'

'Always up for a bit of dosh 'n some free drinks, more like,' Pearl huffed.

Bel laughed. 'Talk about the pot calling the kettle black.'
Pearl took the keys and put them in her handbag.

'Bill also seemed even more chipper when he'd heard you'd gone looking for him, although he was a little puzzled as to why you wouldn't come in and see him, especially after coming all this way.'

'Aye, well, he'll have to wonder, won't he.' Pearl took another drink of her whisky.

'So,' Bel asked, 'what happened after you left me and Helen?'

'I got bloody lost, that's what,' Pearl said, taking another gulp. 'It was like being in one of them nightmares where yer just turning around corners 'n hitting brick walls.'

'So, where did you end up?' Bel asked.

'I heard this voice. Followed it to a room.'

'And?'

'It was like a proper room, in a proper house. A posh house 'n all.'

'In what way?'

Pearl took another drag. 'The way it was decorated. The furniture.'

Bel was watching her ma intently.

'There was this red Chinese cabinet. I recognised it. And there was a woman with her back to me, sitting at a dressing table. I thought she was talking to someone else in the room, but there was no one there. She was just sat there, talking to her own reflection.'

Bel could feel the hairs on the back of her neck start to tingle.

'Then she turned around. Realised someone else was in the room.'

Pearl stubbed out her cigarette.

'And that's when I saw who it was. When I realised why everything felt so familiar.'

'Who was it?' Bel asked.

Pearl looked at her daughter.

'It was the mistress ... *Mistress Henrietta.*'

'Really?' Bel said. 'I just presumed she was dead when you told me about her that day.' *That unforgettable day when they had stood outside the Havelock house, when her ma had told her it was there she had worked as a maid, there she had been raped, and there where Bel had been conceived.*

'Aye, I did 'n all,' Pearl said, sparking up another cigarette. 'Just presumed she'd met her Maker.

'Are you sure it was Henrietta?' Bel asked.

'Oh, aye.' Pearl let out a burst of dark laughter followed by a hacking cough. 'You dinnit get many like her.' She took a drink of whisky. 'The thing is ...' she gave an involuntary shiver '... she looked the same – same red hair all piled up high.' Pearl lifted her arms and waggled her hands about. As she did so, ash fell from her cigarette, just missing her own hair. 'All raggedly-taggedly. Same big skirt. Yer knar, the ones with tiny waists 'n the hoops inside them. Face thick with make-up, red cheeks 'n lips, blue all round her eyes.' She sucked on her cigarette and more ash dropped to the floor. 'It was like I'd been dragged back in time.'

Bel realised why her ma looked like she'd seen a ghost. She *had* seen a ghost. A ghost from her past. And one, she guessed, her ma had no desire to be reacquainted with.

'You must have got a real shock?' Bel asked.

'I did, Isabelle, I did that,' she said, her face deathly serious. 'What I dinnit understand, though –' Pearl finished off her drink '– was that the nurse that come in 'n chased us out called her by a different name.'

'Really?'

'She called her "Miss" for starters.' Pearl looked down at her empty glass. 'And what was it she called her? ... Something "Girl" ... That's it – she called her *Miss Girling.*'

‘Well, that *is* strange,’ Bel agreed. ‘Very strange. Very mysterious.’

‘Course, if yer mate Helen hadn’t turned up, whining on about some bloke, you’d have been with me, I wouldn’t have got lost ’n I wouldn’t have seen Henrietta. All I’d be suffering from now would be a hangover from hell – not traumatised after having a sit-down with the walking dead.’

At the mention of Helen, it suddenly occurred to Bel that Henrietta was not just her ma’s former employee – the wife of the man who had raped her – she was also Miriam’s mother and, therefore, Helen’s grandmother. Did *they* know she was here?

Bel watched as Pearl picked up her empty glass and knew there’d be no arguing. They were staying for another whether she liked it or not.

‘So, Ma, tell me a bit more about Henrietta – when you worked for her.’ Bel looked across at her mother, who was now almost back to her normal self.

Pearl lit another cigarette. ‘She must have been in her mid-thirties – up ’n down like a bloody yo-yo, she was. I’d never met anyone like her. Still haven’t. She lived off steak ’n caviar ’n a load of pills ’n potions, all necked down with her “special Russian water” – that’s vodka to you ’n me. She called Eddy the butler “Heathcliff”, and Agatha, the housekeeper, “Maid Marion”.’

‘Characters from books?’ Bel asked, intrigued.

‘Aye, that’s right. I never knew which books, but apparently there was a “Pearl” in some book she’d read, so I was lucky ’n got to keep my own name.’

Pearl took a drag.

‘Most of the time she either had her nose in a book or else she’d be flying round the house, full of energy ’n ideas

about this 'n that. She'd go on huge spending sprees in town 'n then there'd be delivery after delivery arriving at the house.'

'And what was she like with Mr Havelock?' Bel kept her voice low; she didn't want anyone in the pub overhearing their conversation.

'Yer never really saw the two o' them together. I only worked there for about seven months 'n most of the time he was abroad. He only came back during the holidays.'

Pearl took a sip of her drink.

'The only time I can recall seeing the pair of them together was when he came back for Christmas 'n Henrietta lined us all up 'n introduced us to him as her "household cavalry". I can still see him now – Pearl shuddered involuntarily – standing in his jodhpurs 'n his leather riding boots. I'd been told he liked to give his filly a good thrashing round Backhouse Park when he came back after a spell away.' Pearl took another drag on her cigarette. 'When we'd been dismissed, I went to see Jonny, the young stable lad. He was giving the horse a washdown. I asked why the water was red. Stupid I was then. Young and stupid.'

'He'd whipped the horse so badly it was bleeding?' Bel asked, shocked.

'Aye,' Pearl said, taking a drink of whisky. 'Given it a thrashing in the true sense of the word.'

Bel heard the bitterness in her ma's tone.

'Henrietta must have been quite young when she had Miriam and – what was the other daughter called?'

'Margaret,' Pearl said, looking at the pub's stained-glass window as she recalled the past. 'Miriam and Margaret. Stuck-up little madams they were.'

'They must have been about the same age as you when you worked there?' Bel said.

'Aye, they were. I was a bit younger – looked a bit like them both 'n all. Fair hair. Blue eyes. I was pretty back then, believe it or not. I thought that might have been why Henrietta took me in.'

'Because you reminded her of her daughters, and she felt sorry for you?'

'Aye, that's what I thought,' Pearl said, although as time had gone by, she wasn't quite so sure.

'So, you didn't see much of them?' Bel asked.

'They'd been sent to a "finishing school", whatever that's meant to be,' Pearl said, trying to shake the pull of the past.

'I think that's where young girls go to learn how to be ladies,' Bel said.

Pearl laughed and then started coughing.

'Well, from what I've heard about that Miriam, they didn't do a very good job, did they?'

This time they both laughed and Pearl stubbed out her cigarette.

Bel knew her time as inquisitor was up.

'I think we'll keep this to ourselves for now, eh?' Pearl said, standing.

'You mean you don't want me to tell Helen, with her being a Havelock?' Bel said.

'Aye, that's exactly what I mean.'

Chapter Four

Driving back from Ryhope, Helen allowed herself to wallow in self-pity for a short while. Pulling over in a lay-by near Hendon beach, she looked out to sea, viewing it through a blur of tears, mourning the loss of what could have been. Getting back into the car, she checked herself in the mirror, rubbed the smudges of mascara from under her eyes and applied a fresh layer of her trademark Victory Red lipstick. She had to face the fact that 'happy ever after' just wasn't for her. She should have learnt that she was destined to be on her own after Tommy had chosen Polly, after the debacle of Theodore, after losing her baby ... And now, she had lost John. Not that he had ever been hers to lose.

Pulling back onto the main road, Helen was over the north side of the Wear within five minutes. After parking her car by the Admiral pub, she walked across to the huge metal gates that heralded the entrance to Thompson's.

'Afternoon, Miss Crawford!' The young lad who was manning the timekeeper's cabin shouted down from the counter, tipping his oversized flat cap as he'd seen his elders do.

Carrying on into the yard, Helen was hit by the glare of sunshine reflecting off the hull of a half-built ship that was slowly being brought to life at the far end of the yard. She shielded her eyes and squinted at this urban jungle, this mass of concrete and steel. Looking over at the cathedral-sized doors of the platers' shed, which were open, she

saw a crane trundling out, a huge metal sheet dangling from its pinched beak.

'Helen!'

She was unable to see the person who had called her name, but she recognised the voice. Moving out of the blinding sunlight, she saw Rosie waving over at her. Her welder's helmet had been pushed right back so that she looked like some modern-day Janus. She was giving Mickey, the little teaboy, some coppers in exchange for a steaming hot can of tea. Behind her was Martha, the group's 'gentle giant'. She was raising her hand and offering a gap-toothed smile in greeting.

As little Mickey trundled off with his jangling pole, Helen saw that Dorothy and Angie were sitting next to Martha on a stack of wooden pallets. They, too, were waving, signalling for her to come over. To their left, she saw Gloria chatting to Jimmy, the head riveter.

'What are your lot doing here?' Helen walked over to Rosie, who was taking a sip of her tea.

'Probably the same as you,' Rosie laughed. 'Getting *Denewood* back on her feet.'

Helen smiled. 'Well, it's certainly going to put us back on schedule if you can. I came in this morning with Harold, but we didn't expect to get much done, other than make sure she'd been plugged up properly so that we didn't find her bedded down on the bottom of the Wear tomorrow.'

'Jimmy and I've had a good look. There's quite a bit shrapnel damage. And it seems her hull's been used for target practice, judging by the number of bullet holes we've chalked around, but they're no bigger than eight inches, so it shouldn't be too hard to get her patched up. With any luck she could be good to go by the end of next week.'

'That'll be brilliant if you can.' Helen looked over at Rosie's squad.

'Hi, Helen!' Dorothy and Angie chorused.

Martha offered her a ginger biscuit, which Helen refused with a smile and a shake of her head.

'You all right?' Gloria asked. She had become like a replacement mother to Helen this past year and, like most mothers, could sense when there was something amiss.

'Yes, yes,' Helen said. She gave a smile that she hoped looked convincing.

She looked at the women in their oil-stained overalls.

'Thank you for coming in today.'

'Well, we're not gonna let Jerry get the better of us, are we?' Angie declared, pushing strands of strawberry-blonde hair back into the confines of her headscarf.

'And when we heard *Denewood* had been damaged, we were livid, weren't we, Ange?' Dorothy looked at her friend, who nodded, her face solemn.

'I don't think Martha's mam was too chuffed, though, was she?' Angie looked back at her workmate.

Seeing the question on Helen's face, Martha explained, 'She reckoned I broke a promise.'

'The promise being?' Helen asked. She knew Martha's ARP work and her job at the yard caused her parents untold worry.

'Mam said I could go and help with looking for survivors, if I was careful and didn't do anything daft.'

'Like walk into a collapsing building,' Angie hooted.

Everyone looked at Helen. She and Martha had done just that when they'd rescued Gloria and her little girl, Hope, during the Tatham Street bombing last October.

'Mam said I could go, but that I had to take the next day off work.'

'Which Martha readily agreed to as she wasn't meant to be working anyway,' Dorothy said, tying her dark brown hair up into a ponytail.

‘So, when we tipped up on the doorstep –’ Angie pulled a face ‘– Mrs Perkins was not exactly chuffed.’

‘I told Mam I couldn’t stay at home, knowing my squad were going in. Especially when they said what had happened to *Denewood*,’ Martha said.

‘Well, you must tell your mam and dad how much it’s appreciated,’ Helen said.

‘We’ll tell them,’ Angie chirped up. ‘Mrs Perkins invited me ‘n Dor back for a roast after work. Said we’d need it to keep our strength up.’

‘I’m guessing Polly’s all right?’ Helen looked at Gloria, knowing she would have seen her when she went to drop Hope off at the Elliots’.

‘Oh, yes, she’s fine. She said she couldn’t just sit at home while us lot were at work, so she’s gone to get us some sandwiches from Vera’s.’

‘Along with Charlie,’ Rosie said, rolling her eyes. ‘God forbid she misses out on anything.’

In truth, Rosie was glad Charlotte was with Polly after yesterday’s drama at the parade.

Still, at least her little sister now ‘knew’ everything.

Well, *just about* everything.

There were still a couple of things she had yet to tell her.

Polly and Charlotte were walking along High Street East, which, despite a huge clear-up operation, was still looking very much like a war zone. There was rubble strewn about the road, causing the army trucks, fire engines and ambulances to drive slowly. Shattered glass glinted in the sunlight, and there was a trickling rivulet where a water main had burst.

Charlotte had lain awake until the early hours, going over and over everything she had learnt the day before. Every shocking detail – from how her older sister Rosie

had ended up selling her body in order to buy Charlotte a future, to the truth about Rosie's so-called welding accident, which had left her with a smattering of small scars across her face.

Rosie had warned her fellow welder Polly, who was temporarily working as a timekeeper until after she'd had the baby, that her sister might well quiz her about what she had found out. And she'd been right. It hadn't taken fourteen-year-old Charlotte long before she had managed to steer the conversation round to when the squad of women welders had turned up on the night her uncle had nearly killed Rosie.

'Were you scared?' Charlotte asked

'Mmm, I think I was more shocked then scared,' Polly said, wishing she could walk faster, but her bump had now ballooned to a size that meant she had to accept her mobility was compromised.

'Rosie said you all just appeared through the darkness like her knights in shining armour,' Charlotte said.

'Well, that's a nice thing to say.' Polly thought back to the evening when they had found Raymond forcing Rosie's head over a live weld. 'Although, to be honest, I don't think we really did a lot. I think your uncle thought we were quite laughable. It was only when Martha suddenly stomped over to him and gave him a shove that we got Rosie away and he ended up tripping over a welding rod and falling into the Wear.'

'Never to resurface!' Charlotte declared triumphantly.

Polly looked at Charlotte. 'But you know, Charlie, none of us wanted him to end up dead, tangled up at the bottom of the river.' She was, of course, lying through her teeth.

'I know. That's what Rosie said,' Charlotte said, forcing herself to slow down. They were nearly at the café and she had a load more questions she wanted to ask. 'I was

thinking last night ...' she continued, looking at Polly's long, wavy chestnut hair. Her own hair was a similar colour, though it would take a while for her to grow it as long.

'Mmm?' Polly braced herself.

'It wasn't just Rosie you all saved that night, but me too. If you hadn't saved my sister, he'd have come for me as well.'

Polly felt a shiver go down her spine.

'I don't believe in what ifs. Now, have you still got the list?' Polly asked, relieved to be almost at Vera's. Heaven only knew how Rosie coped with the constant barrage of questions. She'd looked shattered earlier and the relief on her face when Polly had agreed to take Charlie had spoken volumes.

Charlotte dug into her coat pocket.

'Ta-dah!' she declared, waving the list in the air.

'Polly! Charlie!' Hannah hurried over to them as soon as she heard the little bell over the café door tinkle and saw who it was.

'*Pojď sem!* Come in! Come in!' Hannah, a Jewish refugee from Prague, often broke into her native Czech when she was happy, excited, shocked or upset. Today she was overjoyed to see that those she knew and loved had survived the latest air raid unscathed.

Polly and Charlotte manoeuvred themselves around the tables, most of which were empty, though judging by the crumb-strewn plates and pots of cold tea, the café had been busy.

'Well, this is a surprise!' Hannah wrapped her skinny arms around Charlotte and hugged her, before turning to Polly, taking her hands and squeezing them.

'Your baby is forcing me to keep you at arm's length,' she laughed. 'How are you feeling?'

'Fit as a fiddle,' Polly said, waving over to Vera and Hannah's aunty Rina, who were both busy behind the counter. 'Well, perhaps not quite as fit as I was ...' she looked down at the maternity dress she'd had to buy as none of her old clothes fitted her '... but I'm fine. I *feel* fine.' Polly forced a reassuring smile on her face. She knew how lucky she was to have so many people around her who loved and cared for her, but since she'd nearly miscarried back in March, she felt as though she spent most of her time convincing people that she and her baby were in tip-top health. Even her letters to Tommy these days were mostly about how well she was feeling and reassuring him how easy she was taking it, cooped up in the timekeeper's cabin – and that she was *definitely not* welding.

'You got Olly working here now?' Polly joked as she spotted Hannah's boyfriend coming out of the kitchen.

'Only on his days off,' Hannah chuckled, looking over at Olly, who had taken off his black-rimmed spectacles and was giving them a clean.

'Ah, you've come to give us a helping hand!' Vera exclaimed, rolling up her sleeves.

Charlotte shot Polly a worried look.

'Just fling yer coat over there, pet.' Vera nodded over to the side of the café where there was already a small pile of coats. Seeing the last customers leave, she shuffled over to drop the latch and turn the sign to 'Closed'.

'Just this lot to clear and wash up,' she said, tipping her head towards the tables with the dirty dishes.

'Well ... I'm afraid ...' Charlotte stuttered.

Vera let out a throaty laugh as she bustled back to the main counter.

'She's having you on,' Rina said, walking over to Charlotte and giving her a kiss on both cheeks. She lowered her voice. 'My boss has a strange sense of humour.'

'Ha! "My boss" my foot!' Vera said. She might be old but there was nothing wrong with her hearing. 'I may well be the one paying the wages, but there's only one boss here – and she's stood right there. All five foot ten of her.'

Charlotte chuckled. Vera and Rina were like some odd comedy duo – one short and fat, the other tall and slim. One with a strong north-east accent, the other pure BBC, despite her Czechoslovakian roots.

Vera turned her attention to Polly. She noticed she was twisting her wedding and engagement bands around on her finger – beautiful rings that had once belonged to Arthur's wife, Flo. *God rest their souls*. Arthur, a former dock diver and Tommy's grandfather, had died on Boxing Day, just hours after seeing his grandson married. Vera knew the old man and Polly had become close and that she missed him terribly.

'I'm not gonna ask yer how yer are, pet,' Vera said, 'cos I'm guessing yer sick to death of folk asking. And I'm not gonna ask how Tommy is because I know he's fine too. I can feel it in my waters. Next time yer write to him, tell him there's a bacon butty going spare, so he best sort Jerry out 'n get back here pronto!'

Vera laughed, as did Polly. They both knew that the one thing Tommy missed more than anything – apart from Polly, of course – was Vera's bacon baps. Well, it was a toss-up between that and his mother-in-law's stew and dumplings.

'We've come for some sandwiches for the workers,' Polly said. 'Charlotte and I said we'd go and get them provisions.'

'They're working today?' Aunty Rina asked as she started to clear the tables.

'*Denewood* got damaged,' Polly explained.

'They've gone to patch her up?' Olly asked. He and Hannah had both worked on the ship's plans.