

CHAPTER ONE

June 1942

With their tools over their shoulders, Mabel and the other members of her gang of lengthmen walked from the station to their allocated length of the line. Finding their starting place, they dumped their knapsacks and got going. Bernice wasn't the sort to allow slacking. The first job was to hoe out the weeds from the railway tracks, then they set to in pairs, getting on with the real task of the lengthman, which was to level the railway bed on which the permanent way was laid. While one of each pair used a crowbar or a pickaxe to raise a sleeper, the other had to shovel the ballast back underneath. In due course, the same length of track would need exactly the same work to be done again because the ballast shifted every time a train travelled along the line.

It wasn't long before Bette took off the old jacket she wore for work and dropped it on top of her knapsack. 'Lots of folk hate working outdoors in the winter because of the cold. Me, I don't mind, because this job keeps us warm. It's the summer when I'm not so keen.'

'I don't care how hot it gets,' said Mabel. 'I shan't be stripping off. I'm not going to fall for that one again.'

'You were unlucky, that's all,' said Bernice.

'Unlucky with bells on,' Mabel answered.

'Ah, but you met your Harry as a result,' said Bette.

Mabel couldn't suppress a smile. 'That's true.'

She'd had a tough time two years ago, in her first summer on the permanent way. Working in a sleeveless blouse, she had ended up with badly sunburned arms, which had blistered. She hadn't thought anything of it when some of the blisters burst, but after that she'd become unwell and eventually collapsed, waking up to find herself in hospital, where she was told that soot and dirt had got into her bloodstream via the open blisters and she'd gone down with blood poisoning. It had been a truly ghastly experience, but – and it was a very big but – as Bette had pointed out, it was when she was laid up in hospital that she had caught Harry Knatchbull's eye. Harry, her very own cheeky blighter.

'How long have you two been seeing one another now?' asked Louise. 'It must be coming up for two years.'

'It's about time you made it official.' Bernice stopped working for a moment to wipe the back of her hand across her forehead. 'Look at our Joan, married a whole year as of the beginning of this month, and with a gorgeous new baby. He's a month old now, bless him.'

That made Bette laugh. 'Everything comes back to Max, doesn't it, B? I swear that if I said "Pass the salt", you'd find a reason to say what a good baby he is.'

Mabel laughed too. 'And why not? Max Hubble is the most adorable baby ever, as any of his honorary aunties will tell you.'

The four of them worked on, stopping mid-morning to take off their thick gloves and sit beside the tracks for a drink from their flasks. Later, when Bernice announced it was time for dinner, they walked to the nearest lengthmen's hut. This was constructed from railway sleepers standing up like planks of wood. Inside, more sleepers had been stacked to create makeshift benches, but there was no need to take shelter indoors today, not like they had to in

winter. The real reason for coming here was to have a hot drink, freshly prepared. Bette shook the old iron kettle to ensure it contained sufficient water before she placed it on the brazier.

Once the tea was made, they sat outside, producing their barm cakes and sandwiches. There was fish paste in Mabel's barm cake and she wouldn't have been surprised if the others had paste as well. There wasn't that much choice these days. A picture sprang into her mind of Mumsy's pre-war picnics, with dainty finger sandwiches, delicious meat pies, salads, and summer fruit complete with a jug of cream. Oh, yes, and bottles of wine and home-made cordial standing in wine coolers packed with ice.

And here she was with fish paste! Mind you, one of the advantages of having a billet in number 1 Wilton Close was that Mrs Grayson was a wizard in the kitchen. She was a fellow lodger who had assumed responsibility for all the cooking and baking, while Mrs Cooper, their landlady, took care of the house alongside working as a cleaner. On top of doing the catering for the inhabitants of Wilton Close, Mrs Grayson also used the kitchen to produce jams and chutneys, which she sent to the WVS kitchen located at Darley Court, where her friend Mrs Mitchell was the housekeeper.

Today in Mabel's snap tin was a slice of walnut cake. When she took it out, she caught Louise looking at it and immediately held it out to her.

'Here, have a taste. Go on. It's delish. According to Mrs Grayson, it's eggless and fatless, but I swear you'd never know.'

Louise took a tiny bite and closed her eyes for a moment in appreciation. 'Lovely. Thanks. My mum's a good baker an' all, but she gives the boys the lion's share.'

‘More fool her,’ Bernice said bluntly. ‘Sorry, Lou. I know I shouldn’t speak against your ma, but the whole point of rationing is that we all get the same.’

Louise shrugged.

Bernice tilted her head back to drain the last drop from her mug. ‘C’mon, girls. Back to work.’

Mabel replaced the lid on her snap tin and put it and her mug back into her knapsack, easing them in beside her bottle of hand lotion. You couldn’t get the real thing for love nor money these days, but there were recipes in abundance in women’s magazines and this one smelled faintly of roses. Also in her knapsack was that most essential of all items, toilet paper. There was a toilet, if you could call it that, built onto the side of this particular lengthmen’s hut – a tiny add-on containing a bucket that was smelly and profoundly unpleasant to use. It was a toss-up which was less awful: using the bucket or nipping behind a bush.

They walked back to their section of permanent way. The sky was azure blue, almost cloudless.

‘A perfect summer sky,’ said Bette. ‘Mind you, the war has taught us a clear sky isn’t necessarily something to be appreciated.’

‘Will we ever look at a sky like this again without fearing a clear night for the Luftwaffe to come calling?’ asked Bernice. ‘I know the raids have dwindled to practically nothing these days, but I still wonder.’

Mabel nodded. The most recent air raid over Manchester had been in May, the night Max was born, and the previous one had taken place as long ago as January, but even so, she wasn’t taking anything for granted. Manchester had suffered heavy air raids throughout the second half of 1940 and it hadn’t been until the autumn of 1941, less than a year ago, that the attacks had started to tail off.

‘My younger brothers loved the air raids,’ said Louise. ‘They thought it great sport to identify the planes and collect pieces of shrapnel.’

‘I hope the war will be over long before Max is old enough to do any of that,’ said Bernice, and for once the others didn’t tease her about bringing her precious grandson into the conversation.

As they arrived at the place where they’d left off earlier, they stood to watch a train go by on the furthest track. Two locomotives pulled a long line of goods wagons that took ages to pass by. Every time she saw a pair of locos working together, Mabel wondered whether there was more to it than simply hauling a heavy load. Was it in part because these were locos that in peacetime would have been retired before now? Many older locos were still at work because of the war.

It was the same for people. Numerous old folk had come out of retirement to step into the places of men who had been called up. And not just old folk – women too. Housewives and mothers who before the war would have spent their lives inside the home now did long hours of war work before going home to cook and clean and put the children to bed. Girls who, pre-war, would have worked only until they got married now carried on working, doing their bit for the war effort. That was what everyone did, everyone in the entire kingdom: their bit.

‘You and me will work together until tea break,’ Bernice said to Bette, ‘and Mabel with Lou.’

In some gangs of lengthmen they always worked in the same pairs, but Bernice liked to chop and change about. Mabel liked that. She felt it strengthened them as a group. Not that you had much breath left over for chatting when you were hefting a sleeper or shovelling ballast, but swapping the pairs made you feel you all knew one another.

Bernice was the sensible, no-nonsense sort, which made her an effective boss, but she was kind-hearted too and her heart had positively turned to mush ever since the arrival of her baby grandson. Bette, with her double T, E, like Bette Davis, her copper-coloured hair that peeped out at the front of her turban and her hourglass curves, had been a barmaid before the war but had taken to working as a lengthman as if she'd been born to it. That left Louise. Though she was careful not to let it show, Mabel had always felt rather sorry for her. At the start of the war, she'd looked thin and undernourished, though like so many who had grown up in deprived circumstances, she had benefited from wartime rationing. She would always be as slim as a reed because she had that sort of build, but she didn't look underfed any longer.

But that wasn't the main reason for Mabel to feel sorry for her. Lou came from a pretty rough background. Her father, who by all accounts had been a violent man, had abandoned his family before the war, whereupon Louise's older brother Rob had stepped in and taken up where he'd left off, fists an' all. Then, early last year, Mabel and her chums had worked together to catch a thief who was helping himself to a secret store of food. The thief had turned out to be two thieves, one of whom they had caught. The other was Rob Wadden, who had escaped and disappeared for good.

Hoping that her thoughts hadn't shown in her face, Mabel cleared her mind and applied herself to lifting the next sleeper. Although her muscles were strong and her body was now honed after more than two years of hard physical labour, it was still an effort. She was proud to have a tough physical task to perform rather than, say, something clerical. Pops might be a rich factory owner, but Grandad had been a humble wheeltapper. Mabel had

loved him dearly and she still missed him. Working as a lengthman made her feel they were connected.

‘What are you smiling at?’ Louise asked.

‘I’m remembering my grandad.’

‘The wheeltapper? It takes real skill to do that. You have to be able to hear the tiniest fault.’

Mabel knew Louise’s praise was for wheeltappers in general, not for Grandad personally, but she felt chuffed all the same. She hid it beneath a laugh. ‘Not like us, eh? Shovelling ballast.’

Louise laughed too. ‘Ah, but this is precision shovelling, putting exactly the right amount under the sleeper, and you’ve got to keep it level.’

She stopped talking as she suited the action to the words. When she had finished, Mabel lowered the sleeper back into place, then stretched her spine.

‘One more,’ said Lou. ‘Then we’ll change over and you can shovel and pack.’

‘Deal,’ agreed Mabel.

They carried on until Bernice called a halt for their tea break. They walked across the tracks, lifting their feet clear with each step, and settled themselves at the side. The ground was hard and bumpy, the grass thin and coarse, but who cared so long as it was dry? Out came the flasks. The tea that had been poured in early that morning had cooled somewhat by this time, but again, who cared? It might be cooling and wartime weak, but it was tea and that was what counted.

Finishing hers, Bette lit up a cigarette and lay on her back, blowing smoke into the air. Mabel tilted her face towards the sun, closing her eyes in pleasure at the feel of the warmth on her skin.

‘How’s your mum getting on with her cleaning job, Lou?’ Bette asked.

Mabel poured a thousand blessings on Bette's head. It was a question she would have liked to ask, but she always felt constrained from doing so. As the person who had arranged for Mrs Wadden to lend a hand when needed in Mrs Cooper's little cleaning business, Magic Mop, she didn't feel she could ask in case Louise thought she was lording it. Lou could be a bit spiky about personal matters.

'Fine, thanks.' Louise took out the remaining half of the cigarette she had started at dinner time. 'She likes the work and the money helps. Things were rather tight after Rob went.'

'Aye,' said Bernice. 'I expect they were.'

After Rob went? Mabel looked at Bette and Bernice, neither of whom batted an eyelid. Mabel had to glance away for fear of her own eyelids batting like crazy. After Rob went! Louise said it as casually as if he had gone off to join the army. The man was a wartime criminal, and a violent brother to boot. For all Mabel knew, he was a violent son too. To hear Louise now, you'd never imagine he had given her a serious beating before he disappeared. After he went, indeed!

'And with your Clifford leaving school this summer,' Bernice added, 'that'll be a bit more money coming in. He won't earn much at fourteen, but it all adds up.'

Soon it was time to return for the final stint, carrying out the work that gave them the name of lengthmen. A length was the space from one set of joints in the track to the next and each gang was required to do a certain number of lengths every day. When they had finished, they walked back to the station where they'd arrived this morning and waited for the next train to Manchester Victoria. It came chuffing along the track, white clouds puffing from its funnel. Chuffing and puffing both ceased as the train coasted alongside the platform. The brakes squealed and the train

slowed, then there was a loud clunk as it halted, doors already banging open and passengers emerging.

Those waiting on the platform pressed forward. There was a feeling of urgency these days when boarding a train. So many passenger trains were full to bursting even before they started off and there was always the worry you wouldn't get aboard.

'Think slim, girls!' Bette said and the four of them squeezed on.

They had to 'think slim' all the way to Victoria, where Mabel's heart lifted as it always did as the half-spicy, half-sweet scents of steam and smoke crept into her nostrils. This was the smell of the railway and she loved it. To her, the railway meant Grandad.

Passengers surged up the platform towards the barrier. On the adjacent platform, a guard was walking the length of the train, slamming doors and checking those already closed were secure as he prepared the train for the off. Mabel and the others joined the crowd working its way past the ticket collector and onto the concourse that stretched out beneath the overarching metal and glass canopy. Opposite the platform was the long line of ticket-office windows contained within an elegant sweep of wood panelling, and over at one end were the buffet and the restaurant, the exterior walls of which were tiled in pale yellow, as was the bookstall. The restaurant boasted a glass dome on its roof, as befitted a first-class facility.

Bernice must have caught Mabel looking, because she said, 'I can't look at that dome now without shuddering. Just imagine if it had fallen in when our Joan was in there having Max. As if giving birth in an air raid wasn't bad enough.'

They went to the Ladies, each of them using the supposedly 'Out of Order' cubicle that meant they didn't have to queue up with members of the public.

Louise stood beside Mabel at the mirror above the basins. 'Are you meeting your friends in the buffet before you go home?'

Before Mabel could answer, Bette thrust her face in between theirs, her eyes twinkling in her reflection.

'Of course she isn't, you daft ha'p'orth. She'll be heading home at a run to get ready for darling Harry. Won't you, Mabel?'

Mabel laughed, too excited to feel embarrassed. 'Since you mention it . . .'

She wasn't seeing him just tonight. She was going to be with him tomorrow evening too, at a dance to which Cordelia had invited all her friends. Mabel felt tingly with happiness all the way home.

She loved living in Wilton Close. To begin with, she'd shared a bedroom with Joan and the two of them had become good friends. These days, Mabel shared with Margaret while Alison bunked down in the small bedroom at the end of the landing that in former times had been the box room.

When Mabel opened the front gate and entered the garden, Mrs Cooper and Mrs Grayson were sitting on kitchen chairs in the sunshine, shelling peas into a large cream-coloured bowl.

'Hello, Mabel dear,' said Mrs Cooper. 'Have you had a good day?'

Mabel joined them on the lawn, sitting at their feet. Before the war, she would have thought nothing of helping herself to a few juicy peas from the bowl, but no one did things like that now. Food was precious and you didn't fritter it away.

They chatted for a few minutes, then Mabel stood up.

'I'll go and get changed.'

She ran upstairs to take off her work clobber and put on a skirt and scoop-necked top before carrying her corduroy trousers and old shirt outside to give them a good whack

against the wall, jumping backwards so the day's dust didn't settle all over her. She hated to feel dirty. Mind you, no matter how grimy or sweaty her own job was, it was nothing compared to Margaret's work as an engine cleaner.

Soon Alison and Margaret arrived home and it wasn't long before the girls were setting the table while Mrs Grayson and Mrs Cooper finished off in the kitchen.

When they sat down, Mrs Cooper said grace.

'Thank you for our meal and thank you for Lord Woolton and please bless the brave men of the Merchant Navy. Amen.'

'And thank you for Mrs Grayson and her magic wooden spoon,' Mabel added.

Mrs Cooper looked flustered. 'I'm not sure you should say thank you for something that doesn't really exist.'

They tucked into tomato macaroni followed by stewed apple. Afterwards, Margaret rose from her place. Her hazel eyes had sometimes looked strained earlier in the year, but now they were warm and serene.

'I'll wash up and put the kettle on,' she said. 'I imagine you two are dying to linger over a cup of tea, aren't you?' She looked at Mabel and Alison.

'Very funny,' said Mabel as she stood up, Alison following suit. She addressed Mrs Cooper. 'Excuse us dashing from the table, Mrs C, but you know how it is.'

'I think I can guess.' Mrs Cooper smiled.

'You're welcome to come out with us, if you like,' Alison told Margaret.

'Thanks, but no. I'm going to the flicks with Persephone. We're going to see *The Maltese Falcon*.'

'Ooh, I like Humphrey Bogart,' said Alison.

Margaret nudged her. 'You're not supposed to go all dreamy over another man when you're about to go out with Joel.'

Mabel and Alison went upstairs to get ready. Mabel changed into the apple-green dress she had worn last summer as one of Joan's bridesmaids. They had all worn something pretty and they'd had matching lacy boleros and also white knitted flowers attached to their hats, so that even though their dresses were all different, they still had a similar appearance.

Mabel brushed her dark brown hair, securing it away from her face with a pair of diamanté clips and letting it hang loose down her back. Then she went along the landing to Alison's room, where she found her fastening her pale yellow dress.

Alison laughed. 'Look at us. A pair of bridesmaids.'

Mabel helped Alison do her hair – and just in time too, because the doorbell rang and Mrs Grayson called up the stairs.

'Harry's here.'

Mabel darted back into her room to pick up her beaded evening bag, then ran downstairs to greet Harry with a quick kiss before standing back, feeling a little breathless as she drank in the sight of his dark eyes, generous mouth and broad forehead. He had taken off his cap, showing his slicked-back short back and sides and the slight widow's peak. He was so handsome that her heart drummed in her chest. It wasn't just that he was good-looking. It was also because he was in uniform. Mabel had a thing about men in uniform. They looked so much more attractive than fellows in civvies. The combination of Harry's looks and his RAF blue was enough to make her bones melt.

Harry escorted the girls into town, where they were to meet Joel outside the Ritz Ballroom on Whitworth Street. Joel would be coming straight from work, having got ready at the end of his hospital shift. Mabel felt like an old married woman as she smiled in pleasure at the sight of Alison's

sparkling eyes and pink cheeks when Joel appeared. Compared to herself and Harry, the other two hadn't been going out long. Joel was good-looking, but he wasn't in Harry's league.

It was always a delight to be at the Ritz, with its graceful pillars and art deco features, and the balcony above where you could sit at the tables and look down onto the dancers and the famous revolving stage, if you felt so inclined. Personally, Mabel was far more interested in being on the dance floor.

They chose a table before taking to the floor for a waltz followed by a quickstep. Mabel felt weightless as she whirled round in Harry's arms. How she loved him! Early in their relationship, she had been distraught to discover that his original interest in her had stemmed from finding out about her father's money, but he had worked hard to convince her that since then he had truly fallen in love with her. From then on, their love had deepened and he meant the world to her – just as she knew she meant the world to him.

'Shall we sit this one out?' Harry suggested.

He escorted her to their table, holding the chair for her as she sat down, then he went to buy drinks. When he returned, he pulled his chair closer to hers. Oh, the temptation to snuggle against him! Plenty of other couples these days showed their feelings in public in a way that would have been unthinkable before the war, but Mabel, although she was happy to show affection, had never quite shaken off the influence of Mumsy and her etiquette book, much as she had been tempted. Nobody was better acquainted with the rules of social behaviour than Esme Bradshaw. It came from being new money and the determination not to make any blunders.

'I've got something to tell you,' said Harry.

His dark eyes were serious and alarm flickered into life inside Mabel.

‘What is it?’ she asked.

‘Don’t panic. You’ll think it’s good.’

‘But you don’t?’ Mabel asked at once. ‘Sorry. Tell me what it is and I won’t interrupt.’

‘Last year, the Air Council put a two-hundred-hour maximum on any single tour of duty. What’s meant to happen now is that you do your tour of duty, then you’re rotated for six months before your next tour. It’s normal to spend the six months working in the OTU – that’s the Operational Training Unit – training up the next batch of pilots and so forth.’

‘Or bomb aimers, in your case,’ said Mabel, making sure she kept her voice steady as she said the words.

‘And my tour of duty is coming to an end,’ said Harry.

‘I understand if you feel disappointed to be grounded, but obviously it’ll be a relief to me.’ And how! Bomb aimer was said to be the most dangerous position.

‘There’s something else,’ Harry went on. ‘RAF Burtonwood is going to become an American airbase. I’ll be leaving there.’

Mabel’s breath caught in her throat. Having Harry close to Manchester had always been something to be grateful for.

‘Where will you be sent?’ This time, there was no keeping the tremor out of her voice.

‘I don’t know yet,’ said Harry. ‘It could be anywhere.’

CHAPTER TWO

Cordelia sat in front of her triple-mirrored dressing table, making the final adjustments to her ash-blonde hair. Before Kenneth had entered the bedroom, she had skilfully arranged her hair around a stuffed stocking to create a stylish shape. Satisfied, she reached for her earrings. For everyday wear, she loved her pearls, but for evenings out she had several sets of precious and semi-precious stones. This evening she chose pretty sapphire drop earrings and a matching sapphire on a silver chain. Kenneth would willingly have bought her gold, but she preferred silver. It looked better against her skin. She reached behind her neck to fasten the clasp.

Kenneth was standing before the long mirror set into the wardrobe door, concentrating on fastening his bow tie beneath his wing collar. Twelve years older than Cordelia, he had always been a good-looking man and now, in his middle fifties, he was distinguished and likely to remain so into old age. Evening dress sat well on him, the smart black with silk lapels adding to his gravitas.

‘Another Saturday night, another fundraiser,’ he remarked.

Cordelia looked at him through the reflection. ‘I shall enjoy attending one I haven’t had a hand in organising.’

In common with everyone else she knew, she worked tirelessly for the war effort. By day she was a lampwoman, cleaning and replacing the lights on wagons, carriages and signals. At home, she was the local collector for the Red Cross’s Penny a Week Fund, as well as having her regular

night-time work as a fire-watcher. When she wasn't doing all that, she often helped organise events to raise money for the armed forces.

She'd always been good at that sort of thing. Before the war, as the wife of a solicitor, it had been important to be skilled at arranging dinner parties and bridge evenings and she had sat on various charity committees, where, hiding her impatience at the patronising drivel spouting from the lips of certain ladies who had wanted the glory without any of the graft, she had deftly organised auctions, musical evenings and dinner dances. Now, in wartime, her repertoire had expanded to include beat-the-clock crosswords, jumble sales, ping-pong competitions and quizzes. She'd recently had a new idea for a potato-growing competition. Why not? Everyone seemed to be growing potatoes like mad so as not to be so reliant upon wheat, which had to be brought across the Atlantic by the Merchant Navy.

'I'll go and see if Emily is ready,' said Cordelia.

Outside Emily's room, she tapped softly on the door and went in, her heart melting with love and pride at the sight of her beautiful daughter, with her heart-shaped face and dainty chin. Her eyes were cornflower blue and her brown hair still had a natural tendency to curl, whereas all her friends had lost their baby curls years ago. Emily was wearing a dress Cordelia had lent her, a simple mint-green gown with a skirt that flared when she moved, thanks to the masses of tiny pleats.

'You look lovely,' said Cordelia.

'Thank you for lending me the dress, Mummy.'

'It's good to give it one last airing before pleats are banned by the new austerity regulations next week.'

'It's only new pleats that won't be allowed,' Emily pointed out. 'Existing pleats will still be permitted.'

Cordelia smiled. 'If that's your way of hinting that you might wear the dress again, I'm sorry, darling, but the answer's no. It's important to be seen to follow the rules. The dress must be put away until after the war.'

'But the war might go on for years yet.'

Cordelia felt a stab of sadness. She was old enough to remember the last war, the one that was supposed to end all wars. When that had started, everyone said it would be over by Christmas, and look how long it had dragged on. It had been interminable. This coming September, they would have been at war for three years. Three years! How could this have happened again so soon? How old would dearest Emily be when it ended?

Cordelia placed her hands on Emily's slender shoulders and kissed her. 'Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to see you looking beautiful in that dress time after time, but not until after the war.'

Emily gave her a cheeky smile. 'Fashion will have moved on by then.'

'Classic styles never go out of fashion,' Cordelia retorted. Goodness! She sounded like her mother-in-law. 'Come along, darling. Time to go, but first you need to show Daddy how you look. You'll knock his socks off.'

Emily giggled. 'Are you going to make him change from long socks to ankle socks when the new regs come in?'

'Certainly not, you cheeky little minx. No one can see how long a man's socks are – and you're not to tease him.'

As Cordelia had known would happen, Kenneth thrust out his chest in sheer pride at the sight of his daughter looking so beautiful and grown-up. Cordelia felt proud too – and enormously grateful. Kenneth's original plan had been that when she finished at boarding school, Emily should live out the war in the relative safety of Auntie Flora's home in Herefordshire. Emily, however, had had

other ideas and had arrived home unexpectedly this time last year. It had been extremely naughty of her, of course, but . . . but Cordelia had been overwhelmed with delight to have her at home and had begged for her to be allowed to stay. She completely understood why Kenneth had wanted Emily to live with Auntie Flora, but it had been so hard for Cordelia not to have her daughter at home with her.

They both loved Emily so dearly. It was their daughter who made their marriage worthwhile.

The long windows in the hall had been boarded up for the blackout with thick material on lightweight wooden frames, but someone had pasted silver stars and RAF roundels onto the fabric. At one end was the stage, where the dance band played a dreamy waltz, and at the other end stood trestle tables holding the raffle prizes. Kenneth had purchased twenty tickets each for Emily and Cordelia. Around the dance floor were large circular tables where guests sat and chatted or where half-full glasses standing in front of empty seats showed that places were taken.

Kenneth had bought not one but two tables, paying for every seat and leaving it to Cordelia to invite their friends. That was typical of Kenneth. He had never been afraid to put his hand in his pocket. It was one of the things Cordelia appreciated about him; that and the fact that he wasn't showy about it. Some people liked their generosity to be recognised by others, but Kenneth wasn't one of them.

He wasn't alone in his generosity. Even though their seats had already been paid for, Cordelia's guests had all paid a second time. It hadn't come as a surprise to Cordelia that her friends had stumped up. Everybody did what they could to boost the war effort.

She looked around the table where she was sitting. These people were friends and acquaintances of long standing.

The wives were the ladies with whom Cordelia had enjoyed croquet tournaments and intimate little afternoon teas at the Claremont Hotel before the war. The husbands were similar to Kenneth, well-to-do, rather stuffy. Up until last Christmas, this was the only kind of table Kenneth would have countenanced sitting at.

Over on the other table sat – well, actually, sat just Dot and her husband, and Margaret. All the other places were empty because the rest of them were dancing. It was a great joy to Cordelia that she'd had Kenneth's blessing to invite her railway friends. Last summer, her pleasure at her daughter's unexpected homecoming had soon been tempered by Emily's snobby attitude towards Cordelia's railway friends, especially working-class Dot, an attitude that was in perfect harmony with Kenneth's. With her husband, her daughter and her formidable mother-in-law all ranged against her, not only at her choice of friends but also because of her insistence that these girls and women would continue to be her friends after the war came to an end, Cordelia had, after much heart-searching, regretfully concluded that her duty lay with her family and she must walk away from Dot, Persephone and the rest for ever.

But then she'd been buried alive and her rescue had been due in no small part to the very friends her family scorned. What a difference that had made. Kenneth and Emily had completely changed their tune. Adelaide, Kenneth's mother, hadn't been best pleased, but Kenneth and Emily wouldn't be swayed.

So Cordelia's friends were here tonight on a table originally paid for by Kenneth. Dot and her husband, who was an ARP warden. Mabel and her handsome beau, Harry Knatchbull, whose good looks and broad shoulders together with his RAF uniform were drawing plenty of glances his way. Alison and her boyfriend, Dr Joel Maitland.

Cordelia liked Joel. If she was honest, she preferred him to Harry Knatchbull, whom she had always suspected of being a bit too full of himself.

Joan and her signalman husband Bob were here, as were Margaret and Persephone, the two single girls of the group. Margaret appeared happier these days, which was good to see. Cordelia had always sensed a certain reserve in her. Being reserved herself, she could always recognise it in others. After Margaret's long estrangement from her father, was their being reunited the cause of Margaret's more relaxed attitude? On top of that, Margaret's brother, who had for a spell been listed as missing in action, was now known to be in a field hospital. It was pleasing to think of things looking up for Margaret.

Cordelia smiled to herself. It was good to have her special friends here – though they weren't all here, were they? And never would be again. Lizzie, Mrs Cooper's only child, had been tragically killed early in the war, and Colette had died in a bomb blast last December. Then there was Joan's sister Letitia . . .

Cordelia sat up straight. Now wasn't the time. She had a duty as a guest to make the most of this occasion. Moreover, her duty as the hostess of these two tables was to ensure that everyone enjoyed themselves.

Excusing herself, she went over to the table her railway friends were using. Joel and Alison, Mabel and Harry, and Bob and Joan were returning to their seats. Persephone was also being escorted from the floor by her current partner. When she had entered the room, the men had practically elbowed one another aside in their eagerness to ask her to dance. She was the loveliest girl present, with her honey-blond hair and those beautiful violet eyes. Best of all, she was lovely on the inside too, a thoughtful and considerate girl who was always happy to step in and help.

Cordelia slipped into the seat next to Joan.

'You shan't mind if we leave soon, shall you?' Joan asked.
'We want to get home to Max.'

'Of course you do. I'm just pleased you were able to come.'

'I did wonder if it was right to leave a young baby for the evening,' Joan admitted. 'Gran thinks mothers shouldn't go gadding about, but Bob's mum volunteered to look after him and she all but pushed us out of the front door.'

'Good for her,' said Cordelia.

'Even so, we don't want to be late back.' Joan looked around. 'Where's Mr Masters?'

Cordelia glanced vaguely over her shoulder. 'He said he was going to bribe the band to play "It Had to Be You".'

'Is that your special song?' Joan asked.

Cordelia almost laughed in sheer surprise. 'No. We don't have one.'

How could they have one? That was what lovers had and she had never been in love with Kenneth. She had been a good wife to him, the perfect partner for a prosperous gentleman of the law who had a certain position in society to uphold. But love? That had never entered into it.

Now, though, she looked around the table. Harry was whispering in Mabel's ear, making her face light up with laughter. Joel listened to Alison, both their expressions showing their devotion. And the look that passed between Joan and Bob was so full of tenderness that Cordelia's heart ached.

These three young couples had so much love to give one another, so much happiness to share. Did they have any idea how lucky they were?

CHAPTER THREE

Mabel walked home from church arm in arm with Mrs Grayson, telling her all about last night's dance. She had a special place in her heart for Mrs Grayson. They had met when she had moved into Mrs Grayson's house as her lodger back in 1940. To start with, Mabel had found her landlady downright odd. Not only was just about everything in the house – lampshades, waste-paper baskets, cushions, plant holders, coat hangers, hot-water bottles, doorstops – dressed in knitted covers, but Mrs Grayson never set foot outside her own front door and hadn't done so for years. Not until Manchester had endured the devastation of the Christmas Blitz and Mabel had resolved to prise Mrs Grayson out of the house to seek safety in next door's Anderson shelter had Mrs Grayson finally shared the desperate heartbreak that, along with a lack of family support, had gradually resulted in her becoming agoraphobic.

Then, when others were being bombed out courtesy of Herr Hitler, Mrs Grayson had lost her house thanks to a bombshell of a different nature, when her long-estranged husband had demanded that she leave the premises so that he could move in with Floozy, his bit on the side. As distressing as that had been for poor Mrs Grayson at the time, it had, looking back, been the best thing to have happened to her in years, because that was when Mabel's railway chums had taken her under their joint wings and helped her move in with Mrs Cooper. Later, when Mrs Cooper's

house copped it in an air raid, the two of them plus Joan had moved into Wilton Close, thanks to Cordelia, who was friends with the owners. Mr and Mrs Morgan had gone to North Wales for the duration to be near their son. Young Mr Morgan worked in London for the Inland Revenue, which had been transferred, lock, stock and double-entry ledgers, to Llandudno until the war was over.

These days, Mrs Grayson was able to walk to nearby places as long as she had a trusted friend to keep her company, and it was easy to see how much better she was for it. Her eyes were brighter, her skin smoother, her cheeks plumper. Mabel knew only too well from her own grief and guilt after her best friend Althea had died how inner unhappiness and turmoil could adversely affect outward appearance.

She glanced back over her shoulder. Behind them, Mrs Cooper was walking with Alison. Margaret had gone to church with her father somewhere near Alexandra Park.

They arrived at Wilton Close, a quiet cul-de-sac with two pairs of semi-detached houses on each side and another pair at the top. The front gardens, which must have been so pretty before the war, were now given over to growing vegetables. Everyone did that these days. Even people who lived in flats had window boxes of salad leaves.

They went into the front room for a cup of tea.

'Tony didn't come yesterday,' Mrs Cooper remarked, 'so I suppose he'll come today.'

Mabel laughed. 'Smile when you say that! He's good to come and help us.'

'I know, chuck,' said Mrs Cooper. 'I don't meant to be ungrateful. It's just that—'

'—with three strapping girls on the premises to dig for victory,' Mabel finished jokingly, 'there's no need for him to keep coming back every weekend.'

‘It’s not good for him,’ said Mrs Cooper. ‘Coming here, where he always used to come with Colette . . .’

‘Perhaps it keeps her memory alive for him,’ Alison suggested.

Mrs Cooper seemed to deflate a little. ‘Yes, of course.’

‘He must be desperately unhappy, poor fellow,’ said Mrs Grayson.

‘I understand about wanting to feel close to Colette,’ said Alison, ‘but it’s not as though he joins in and chats when he’s here. Sorry if that sounds mean.’

‘He never did join in, not even when we still had Colette,’ said Mrs Grayson. ‘He spent all his time digging the garden and doing odd jobs.’

‘He probably wanted to keep out of the way of all the gossiping women,’ said Mabel. ‘You know how full of visitors this place can get at the weekend.’ She’d belatedly realised that the others were being serious and was sorry she’d made light of it.

‘I think he must be a deeply shy person,’ said Mrs Grayson. ‘We owe it to him and to Colette to make sure he knows how much we appreciate his attention. Don’t forget how he battled his way here at the start of the big snow-storm to advise us on preventing burst pipes.’

‘He might not be the most sociable chap,’ said Alison, ‘but he’s a good sort. I’ll never forget how protective he was of Colette. He worshipped the ground she walked on. He must miss her dreadfully.’

‘Poor chap,’ said Mabel. She didn’t say so out loud, but she promised herself she would join Tony in the garden for a while that afternoon, just to show willing.

For Colette’s sake.

Mabel spent an hour in the garden with Tony. Margaret came out too. Mabel harvested the early potatoes, which

Margaret took indoors to wash. Mabel looked with pleasure at the neat row of lettuces.

‘They’re ready to be picked now,’ said Tony. ‘I’ll sow another batch next week. I’ll get the leeks planted out as well.’

Mabel made an effort to chat and Tony was polite, but no one could accuse him of being the life and soul of the party. Mabel found it better to get on with the work in near silence. It wasn’t her preferred way, but Tony didn’t seem to mind.

She glanced his way surreptitiously. He had gone thin after Colette died and the weight still hadn’t come back. Poor beggar. Losing his beloved wife had clobbered him good and proper. She remembered her own anguish when Harry’s plane hadn’t returned from a mission on time and the horror of the hours of waiting. Harry had come home safely in the end, but Colette was gone for good.

‘I’ll stop now if it’s all the same to you,’ said Mabel.

She went inside to wash her hands and scrub her nails. Tony appeared in the scullery doorway.

‘The Scouts are here to collect the salvage.’

‘What is it today?’ Mabel asked.

‘Paper, tin cans, rags.’ Tony smiled. He didn’t often smile. ‘You name it.’

Mabel indicated the salvage box in the corner. These days, so many items were being taken away to be reused in some way that they dropped everything in the same box and sorted it on collection day.

‘I’ll sort it out,’ said Mabel.

Tony stepped inside. ‘No need. I’ll help the lads do it.’

He picked up the box, securing it under one arm, already sifting through it with his free hand as he disappeared. Mabel dried her hands and went into the front room.

‘It’s the longest day today, isn’t it?’ said Margaret.

'Do we still have a longest day with double summer time?' asked Alison. 'Or is it an even longer longest day?' She laughed. 'The land of the midnight sun.'

Mabel smothered a sigh. It certainly felt like the longest day, and not in a good way. Yesterday had been the same. What if Harry was posted to the back of beyond? She would miss him dreadfully. She hadn't said anything at home so far. Yesterday she couldn't bear to because she felt rather wobbly and didn't want to blub. Today she didn't want to cast a cloud when she, Alison and Margaret had prepared a special surprise for Joan.

Realising she had left her wristwatch on the scullery window sill, Mabel went to fetch it. In the hall, she stopped in surprise. Tony had taken his jacket from the hallstand and had one arm thrust into a sleeve. The other sleeve dangled while he used his free hand to open the front door.

'Are you going?' Mabel asked. Silly question. She could see he was. As he turned, she was concerned to see how drawn his face looked. 'Are you all right?' Another silly question.

'Sorry – I have to go. I – I've just remembered something.'
'Come and say goodbye.'

Mabel stood aside so she wasn't blocking the doorway to the front room. Tony always said goodbye before he left, but today he shook his head.

'Sorry – no. I'm in a hurry.'

And off he went. Well! What was that about? Mabel fetched her watch and returned to the front room.

'Tony's gone.'

'Has he?' said Mrs Grayson. 'He didn't say goodbye.'

'He suddenly remembered something important.'

Mrs Cooper stood and went to the bay window, as if to catch a glimpse of him. 'He's gone.' Then she smiled and said, 'But here's Joan,' and went to open the front door.

There was a clicking of paws on the floorboards beside the hall runner, then Brizo shouldered open the door and came into the room, trailing his lead. He was an appealing fellow, with floppy ears and a shaggy coat that was gingery in places and golden brown in others. Joan and Bob had adopted him at the beginning of the year, just before the country had vanished beneath several feet of snow. Brizo was a friendly dog and although he was rather bouncy, he was gentle, especially when he was with baby Max. His nature also made him suitable for his job on Victoria Station, where he wore a little collecting box attached to his back by a leather strap around his middle to collect money for charity. Now that Joan had left the railways, one of the others collected him and brought him home at the end of each day.

Brizo did the rounds, pushing his damp nose into everyone's hands, his tail wagging madly. Joan walked in and they all looked round, but she wasn't carrying the baby. Mrs Cooper followed her in and her arms were empty as well.

'Have you left Max at home?' asked Alison.

Joan laughed. 'He's sound asleep, so I've left him outside in the pram.'

'Instead of us playing pass the parcel with him, you mean,' said Mabel.

They chatted for a while, then Alison, unable to hide her smiles, said, 'We're glad you've come, Joan, because we've got something for you.'

Mrs Cooper exchanged glances with Mrs Grayson. 'Can me and Mrs Grayson take Max for a walk?'

'You don't have to leave,' Margaret said quickly.

'This is your surprise for Joan,' said Mrs Grayson. 'It'll be nice for you girls to have some time together without us breathing down your necks.'

'We'll take Brizo an' all,' said Mrs Cooper.

As the two ladies set off with the pram and the dog, Mabel watched them from the window.

‘Mrs Grayson looks proud pushing the pram. It’s quite a beast, isn’t it?’

‘I’m so lucky to have it,’ said Joan. ‘Prams are like gold dust these days. Most mothers-to-be have to put their names down to get one and the baby is probably a few weeks old, if not older, by the time it appears. This pram has been in Bob’s family for years, being passed from baby to baby. Auntie Marie’s daughter had it most recently. It’s a proper coach-built one.’

Alison disappeared upstairs for a minute. When she came back, she was holding her hands behind her back.

‘This is from all of us,’ she said. ‘It’s not wrapped because there’s no such thing as wrapping paper these days. All three of us helped make it and it’s for you, or rather for Max, with our love.’

Mabel smiled as Alison produced a little folded garment and handed it to Joan, who carefully shook it out and held it up. It was a small pair of dungarees in two shades of green rayon velvet.

‘How sweet,’ Joan exclaimed. ‘Don’t you just adore baby clothes? They’re so tiny – though I can see this is big enough for Max to grow into.’

‘Do you recognise the material?’ Margaret asked.

Joan frowned.

‘The night Max was born,’ said Alison, ‘Margaret and I were scrambling all over the station canopy, extinguishing incendiaries. This is the dress I was wearing. Mabel lent it to me.’

‘Let’s just say it wasn’t returned to me in mint condition,’ said Mabel, ‘but it didn’t matter. All that matters is that Margaret and Alison helped keep you safe while you had Max.’

‘It wasn’t me,’ said Alison, ‘not really. Margaret was the brave one, the one with the initiative. I just followed on behind, not quite believing what I was doing.’

Margaret chimed in. ‘Mabel sacrificed her dress so we could make something for Max that you might want to have as a keepsake after he’s grown out of it.’

‘What do you mean, “might”?’ asked Joan. ‘Of course I want to. I know everyone is supposed to pass on baby clothes, but I’m going to keep this for ever.’ She brushed away a tear. ‘This is so sweet of you – and it was so clever of you to think of it. Thank you. I love it – and I love all of you.’

She got up to hug them all, then sat down again, wiping away more tears with her hanky before she cleared her throat and laughed. Mabel, Margaret and Alison looked at one another, exchanging indulgent smiles.

Margaret stood up. ‘Time for refreshments. Mrs Grayson has made some cordial.’

She and Alison went to fetch it. Joan watched them go, then she turned to Mabel.

‘Are you going to tell me what’s wrong?’

Mabel’s skin tingled. ‘Wrong?’

‘Don’t pretend,’ said Joan. ‘You weren’t quite yourself at the dance last night. Do you want to talk about it? You could walk home with me later.’

Mabel made a decision. ‘There’s no need to keep it private. I’ll tell all of you.’

When the others returned with the tray, Mabel explained about the likelihood of Harry being posted away.

‘So you don’t know where to?’ asked Joan. ‘Oh, Mabel.’

‘Then there’s the other way of looking at it,’ said Mabel, lifting her chin. ‘We’re jolly lucky to have been so close all this time. Think of all the wives and sweethearts who don’t get to see their chaps for months, if not years, on end.’

‘That’s true,’ Margaret agreed, ‘but it doesn’t make it any less of a blow for you.’

Mabel’s heart felt full as gratitude swelled inside her at her friends’ understanding.

‘Maybe Harry will want to get engaged,’ said Alison. ‘After all, you did catch the bouquet at Joan’s wedding.’ She caught her breath in a gasp of shock. ‘I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. That was the old me speaking. You don’t want to be like the old me,’ she added emphatically. ‘I was so desperate to get engaged that I could barely think of anything else.’

‘I’ll be honest,’ said Mabel. ‘When I caught the bouquet, Harry and I looked at one another and it was a sort of promise between us.’ She smiled, warmed by the memory. ‘But you’re right, Alison. If I’m going to get engaged, it has to be at the right moment and for all sorts of happy reasons, not because things are desperate.’

She heard herself sounding brave and sensible, which was precisely the impression she wanted to create – and it was how she felt, up to a point. But at the same time, a chilly unease rippled through her. Things had been stable for her and Harry for so long and now they were going to be shaken out of it.

What did the future hold for them?

Mabel and Louise paused for a breather out on the permanent way. It was Mabel’s turn for hefting up the sleepers so that Lou could pack the ballast underneath, both of which were physically demanding jobs, especially beneath the June sun, but Mabel wouldn’t swap her job with anyone. She loved what she did and took pride in helping to keep the railways running safely. Some people talked about their beloved dead relatives watching over them. Mabel wasn’t sure about that, but she knew that if

Grandad was keeping an eye on her, he'd be chuffed to pieces to see his best girl working on the railways he had devoted his life to.

Louise looked as if she was about to say something, but she didn't; then she changed her mind again. 'Mabel, can I ask you a favour?'

'Of course.' Mabel hid her surprise. Louise had never sought her help before.

'It's our Clifford – you know, the oldest of my little brothers.'

'Not so little now,' said Mabel. 'He's about to leave school, isn't he?'

'Aye, he is. That's the problem. He has to get a job and so far he hasn't managed to.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.' It was the standard polite response, drummed into Mabel courtesy of Mumsy's etiquette book. As soon as she said it, Mabel wished she'd said something warmer. It wasn't like Louise to share a problem and Mabel wanted to appear interested and helpful.

'We're heading towards the back end of June now and it'll be the finish of the school year before you know it. The thing is,' said Louise, choosing her words, 'it's not easy for Clifford being related to Dad and Rob.' Her thin face coloured, but she persevered. 'Round our way, we're known as a – a rough family, but that isn't fair, because that was Dad and Rob, not the rest of us. Cliff's got a good reference off his teacher, but so far no one has offered him an interview, let alone a job, while other kids have got jobs to go to simply because the school arranged them. I thought maybe if you could help him write an application letter, it could help. His written English isn't up to much, any more than mine is or I'd help him, but I thought that you . . .' Her voice trailed off.

About to utter the formal 'I'd be happy to,' Mabel said instead, 'Of course I'll help. Poor kid. It can't be easy being held back because of your dad.'

'It's not a problem you've ever had,' Louise said with a touch of the old dryness.

'No, it isn't,' Mabel agreed cheerfully. 'I'm lucky.'

She left it at that. Much as she wanted to offer her willingness and reassurance, she didn't want to come across as privileged or, heaven forbid, superior. She left it to Louise to suggest arrangements. Would she receive an invitation to the Waddens' house? But no, Louise got Clifford to meet them in the Worker Bee, a café in town.

Clifford was thin, like his sister, only he was tall and gangly, his sleeves not long enough. The shorts he would exchange for long trousers the day he started work, assuming he could get a job, showed off skinny legs and he walked with the telltale crackle that said his tatty old shoes were lined with newspaper.

'He's shot up,' said Louise. 'One thing about the war: school dinners have improved.'

Before Lou could object, Mabel went to the counter and ordered tea for two, fruit cordial for Clifford and a cheese scone each. Clifford wolfed down his scone with a big grin, then rolled his eyes when his sister gave him a sharp nudge and told him not to be greedy. Mabel offered him half her scone. She wanted to give him all of it and buy another plateful, but she mustn't look like Lady Bountiful.

Louise delivered another dig in Clifford's ribs. 'Miss Bradshaw's here to help you. What do you say?'

'Thank you, Miss Bradshaw.'

'You're welcome, Clifford,' said Mabel. 'I thought we could make a few notes on the back of this old letter, then I'll give you these pieces of paper for you to write your own letters. The paper isn't brand new, but it's decent quality

and there's writing on one side only.' Determined that no one should object to her largesse, she went on without stopping. 'Now then, why don't you tell me why you'd be a good person to employ?'

'Well . . .' said Clifford. 'I'd work hard.'

'Good. We can use that. What else? At school, what are you good at?'

'Not much, really. I like PT more than sitting in the classroom.'

'Team games?' asked Mabel. 'That shows you play by the rules. We can find a way of wording that.'

Clifford looked at her with open admiration. 'I'd never have thought of that, miss. I never knew PT was going to help with a job.'

Mabel smothered a smile. She had learned a lot from listening to Pops. Gradually, she drew a few useful examples from Clifford, but there was still something missing, though she couldn't put her finger on what.

'D'you think this will really help me, miss?' Clifford asked. 'I want to get a job. My mum says we need the money. I really want to help my mum. She works her fingers to the bone and goes without so she can give me and my brothers the best she can. With our Rob gone, I want to be the man of the house, but not like Rob was, not thumping everyone and making us all cringe away from him. I want to look after the family. I know nobody wants to employ a Wadden, but if somebody will just give me a chance, I'll show them what I can do.'

The air that Mabel breathed in seemed to fill her with satisfaction. This was precisely what was needed. 'I think you should put that in your letter.'

'No!' Lou exclaimed.

Mabel looked at her. 'You said yourself that it'll be hard for Clifford to find work because of being a Wadden. Let's