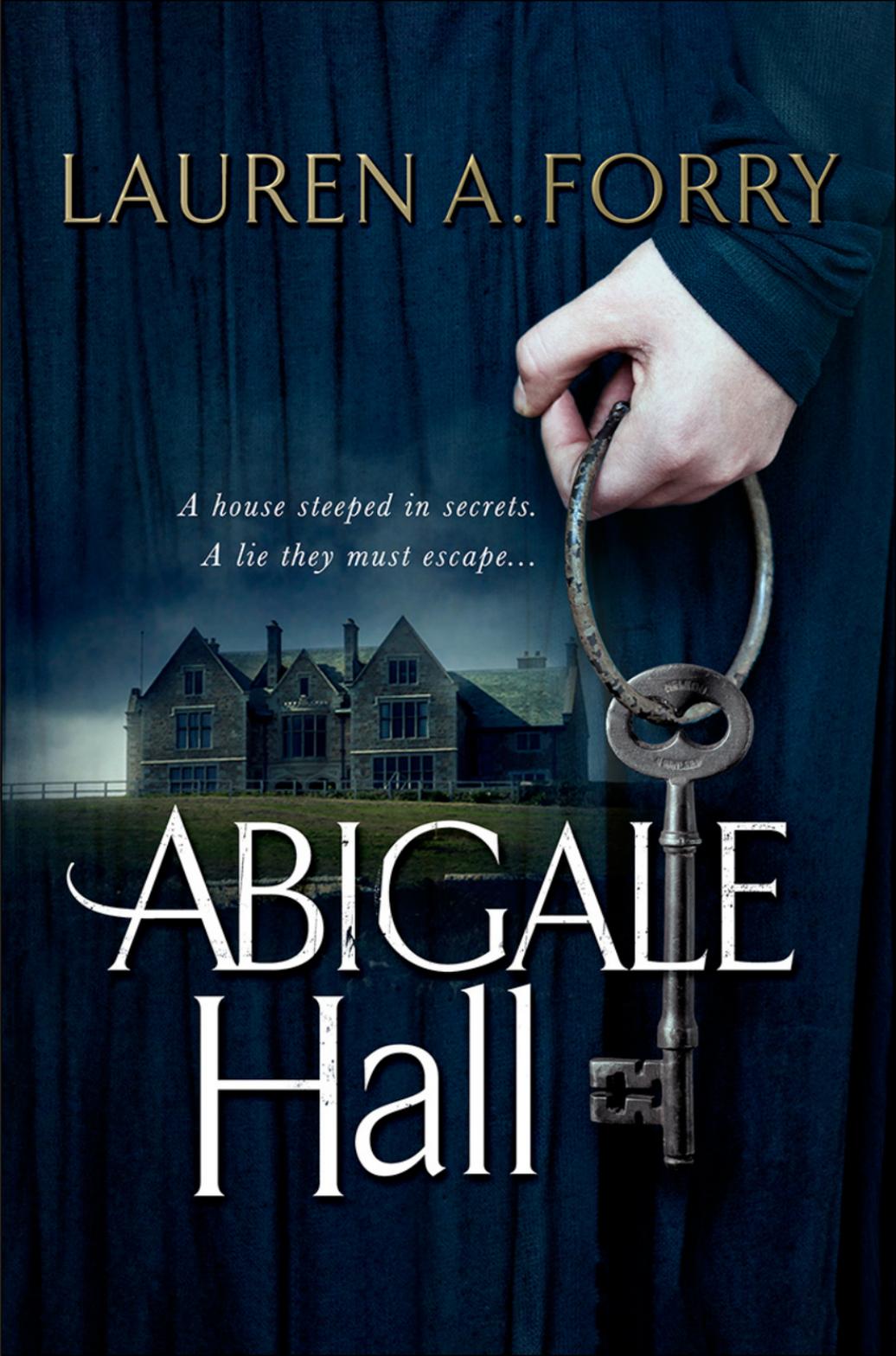


LAUREN A. FORRY

*A house steeped in secrets.
A lie they must escape...*

A hand in a dark blue sleeve holds a large, ornate, antique key. The key has a circular ring at the top and a complex bit at the bottom. The background is a dark blue, textured surface. In the middle ground, a large, multi-story stone house with multiple gables and windows is visible, set against a dark, overcast sky. The house is surrounded by a green lawn and a white fence.

ABIGALE
Hall

ABIGALE HALL

LAUREN A. FORRY

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To Mom, for giving me the time and space and support to
become what I wanted to be.

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PROLOGUE

In a hidden corner of the Welsh countryside, beneath the dark green hills and stretching deep underground, lies a secret. Though few know of its existence, all feel its presence, for above this secret rests a house. One would be forgiven for believing it abandoned. Long grasses choke the overgrown gardens. Boards grey as the old mare grazing behind the rusted gates cover the highest windows. The house sits alone, its crumbling façade a pox on the hills it once commanded.

No one lives there, though a few reside within its walls: a caretaker who tends the grounds, too young for this damnation; a housekeeper who will never be satisfied, not until . . . ; and an old man who sits and thinks round the holes in his mind. If one were at the house now, one would see the caretaker smoking in the carriage house and the old man watching the world with eyes closed. The housekeeper cleans in the cellar. Flames dampen as she throws frocks into the furnace, then grow again to devour the thin fabrics. Next she adds the shoes, undergarments and, finally, the diary. She watches as the fire envelops the journal's pages, the leather cover melting and blistering in the intense heat. Satisfied, she shuts the furnace door, wiping her hands on her apron before ascending the cellar steps and returning to where the old man waits.

'It's all done. I told you I'd take care of it, didn't I?' She brushes the lint off his shoulder. 'She was no different than

the others, was she? There was no reason to worry. Now, shall you retire until dinner?’

She escorts him through the house, making note of her chores as she goes: light the fire in the bedroom, order more coal for the east wing, scrub the blood from the floorboards. There is much to do in a large house such as this.

The door to the veranda jams as she opens it. A firm yank and the frame yields. This house always yields to her. She leaves the old man there to admire one of his favourite views – the little cemetery in the west. The sun will soon be setting, casting crimson light over the ageing gravestones where another waits, watching.

The housekeeper returns to her wing, leaving footprints in the disturbed dust of the bloodied servants’ passage, pausing only to wipe a damp, crimson handprint from the peeling wall-paper. Ensnared in her small office by the kitchen, she settles at her writing desk and produces his familiar grey stationery from its drawer. Upon taking up her pen, she dips the worn quill in a jar of red ink and composes the letter as it has been done so many times before, and as it will be done again. The names are all that change. Tomorrow she will travel to the village and post it. She hates the delay, but all will be taken care of in good time. A few weeks and Mr Brownawell will have his new ward. She smiles as the sharp edge of the envelope slides beneath her fingers.

In the cemetery, as the dimming light casts the house in darkness, the other watches, weeping for those who will join them in the shadows of the dark green hills.

1

‘One. Two. Three.’

The slow, methodical taps punctuated the air, asynchronous to the beat of the morning traffic that filtered through the single-glazed kitchen window.

‘Four. Five. Six.’

Each pat of the brass door handle, underscored by a whispered number, tightened Eliza’s nerves like the winding of a clock. Each pause in between lasted longer than a second, providing a brief respite before the next number dutifully struck.

‘Seven. Eight. Nine.’

She glanced at their grandmother clock, eyes wandering past the singes around the plinth and body before settling on the clock face: half past ten. They would be late, again, but Aunt Bess would need to accept that. There was no such thing as being on time in Eliza’s world, only varying degrees of late.

‘Ten. Eleven. Twelve.’

Rebecca, her face wrinkled and pinched in serious concentration as her breathy voice echoed through the small flat like a ghostly whisper, could not be rushed.

In the mirror above the wireless, Eliza spotted a smudge of coal dust on her cheek and scrubbed at it with her thumb until her skin turned red. Behind her freckles, she recognised her mother’s round face but none of her beauty. At Rebecca’s age, she dreamt of being glamorous at seventeen, like the

women in Mother's fashion magazines. There was nothing glamorous about freckles or straight brown hair too heavy to perm. She looked past her reflection and watched her sister. Rebecca would be beautiful at seventeen, Eliza knew. Though only twelve, she already possessed delicate blonde curls that perfectly framed the sharp cheekbones of Father's side of the family. Boys would gawk at her, trip over themselves asking her to the pictures, compare her to the beauties on the screen.

'Twenty-one. Twenty-two. Twenty-three.'

Eliza wrapped her dishevelled hair in a clean headscarf and turned away from the mirror. She preferred books to films, anyhow.

'Have everything?' she asked as Rebecca skipped across the room.

'I think so.' Rebecca checked her bag. 'Are we going to be late?'

'Course not, dearie.' Eliza placed her arms around her sister's shoulders and guided her out the door. 'Just remember, leave Auntie Bess to me.' As Rebecca's eyes flitted to the lock, Eliza checked for herself that the door was secure behind them. 'Come on then. We may have to run.'

Eliza manoeuvred round the fermenting rubbish that crowded the halls and staircases. With the cool air outside, the smell wasn't so bad today. 'We can head down through Fieldgate Street to save time. Cut over at Romford. They've started clearing the rubble there. Careful. Watch your step. Good girl.'

The heavy front door banged shut. Eliza grabbed Rebecca's hand as she reached for the latch and dragged her down the steps to the pavement where the queue for List's blocked their path. Rebecca's protests were lost amidst the din of a busy Whitechapel morning. Though Rebecca tried to withdraw her

hand, Eliza gripped it ever tighter as they forced their way through the empty baskets and shabby overcoats in the queue.

‘What’s the point, he said, if the bomb’s just going to kill us all? Only fourteen and he thinks it’s the end of the world.’

‘And that’s his excuse for stealing, is it? You tell him, it’s not the bomb he should be worried about. Nationalisation, now that . . .’

Eliza’s coat sleeve caught on a wicker basket. She apologised as she backed into the street, narrowly dodging the number fifteen bus as she and Rebecca hurried to the other side, where the queue for the haberdasher’s waited. After inhaling a lungful of exhaust smoke, she paused to cough while Rebecca fiddled with her shoes.

‘Horrid time for it. And with the shortage and all. I’ll tell you, it’ll be for nought. I’ve lived through two wars now and there’s a third just round the corner. Wait and see.’

‘Oh, don’t get your back up. It’s only a bit of lace! I’ve been waiting months for new . . .’

A delivery truck lumbered past, drowning out all conversation. Eliza tried to rush them past the collapsed Anderson shelter on Romford Street, but Rebecca slowed to a near stop.

‘Eliza, wait! I can’t keep up.’

‘You can if you try harder.’

‘No, I can’t. My shoes are too tight.’

She tried to pull Rebecca along. Every second lost was another second she would have to explain. ‘Well you should’ve mentioned it before. I could’ve given you my old pair.’

‘But your feet are too big.’

‘Thanks very much.’

‘I’d flap about in them. They wouldn’t be any use at all!’ Rebecca stopped and stomped her foot. Eliza took her arm and kept her moving, dodging a man on a bicycle.

‘All right, enough! We’ll ask Auntie Bess if she can spare any clothing coupons. Perhaps if we’re not so late she’ll be kind enough to give them to you.’

‘But you said we weren’t late!’

‘We will be if you don’t keep up.’

‘It’s not me. It’s the shoes!’

Already Eliza was behind in the day’s chores, which meant after work it would be straight back home, instead of a late meal with Peter. There wasn’t time for Rebecca’s complaints. Only five minutes from the office, she stopped at the queue for Dyson’s.

‘Bread rationing, of all the things. This wouldn’t have happened if Churchill were still in charge. My Charlie, he says . . .’

Eliza shouldered her way through the crowd and stopped on a thin strip of unoccupied pavement.

‘Here.’ She bent down and untied her shoes. ‘Hurry up. You, too.’ Eliza stuffed their handkerchiefs into the toes of her larger shoes and handed them to her sister. ‘Put these on.’ Eliza slipped the too-small shoes into her bag while Rebecca laced up Eliza’s pair. ‘Better?’

‘A bit. Yes.’

‘Good. We’ll switch back when we get there.’ They ran to the next street, Eliza ignoring the wetness seeping into her stockings, the feel of the dirt soaking into her feet. It was only a month since the big freeze. Grey snow long pushed into the city’s crevices melted in the cool March air, leaving the ground damp and slippery. She could wash her stockings. It would be fine.

After exchanging shoes outside the office, Eliza pushed Rebecca into the building, preventing her from touching the door. The scent of grime and sulphur in the narrow stairwell

threatened to choke her. A sweet, smoky odour lingered in the air. Unable to breathe, she felt her pulse quicken. The pressure around her neck made her head heavy as the smell pulled at unwanted memories. When they reached the crowded planning office, she inhaled deeply, savouring the rank odour of fag smoke and old coffee.

Aunt Bess stood halfway across the room, devouring another cigarette and wearing that awful red dress – the one she said brought life to their drab world. Eliza thought it garish. That V-neck brought life only to the bulge in Mr Mosley’s trousers.

‘And that lovely floral dress I had, remember? With the pale pink . . .’ Aunt Bess stuck the cigarette between her lips.

‘Oh yes,’ her co-worker nodded. ‘Yes, with the corseted bodice?’

‘Yes, that’s the one. Would you believe a tear, right there . . .’ With the cigarette, Aunt Bess pointed to her shoulder.

‘Now how on earth . . .?’

‘No idea. Think I’d been gaining weight, as if that were possible with the . . .’

‘They should up the butter ration. It simply isn’t—’

‘Fair. No, not fair at all. Oh.’

Eliza smiled as she was finally noticed.

‘I expected you an hour ago.’ Aunt Bess searched through her handbag.

‘The clock is slow,’ Eliza said.

‘Then wind it.’

‘I did.’

‘Well, you’re only hurting yourself, aren’t you?’ Aunt Bess retrieved her tattered ration book and dropped it into Eliza’s hands as if ridding herself of a dead rat. ‘Woolworths will be completely out of cooking fat by now and Harriet told me they already sold the last of the rabbit half an hour ago.’

The co-worker, Harriet, crossed her arms and nodded.

'I don't like rabbit,' Rebecca mumbled. Eliza elbowed her.

'What did you say, young lady?'

'Nothing, ma'am.'

Aunt Bess blew smoke out of the corner of her mouth.

'Well, I happen to adore rabbit and was very much looking forward to it this evening.'

'Sorry, ma'am,' Eliza and Rebecca replied in unison. Aunt Bess flicked ash into the tray beside her elbow.

'Right. Well, Eliza, you'd better leave else it'll be offal again tonight. Rebecca, Mr Mosley needs your help running files to the City. Go on.' She nodded to the office behind her.

Rebecca hurried off while Eliza took her time placing the book into her bag. Aunt Bess sat behind her typewriter, already ignoring her.

'Auntie Bess?'

'You have that job of yours tonight, don't you? Cinema cigarette girl or whatever it is?'

'Theatre usher. Yes, ma'am.'

'You'll make sure all the food is prepared before you go out?'

'Yes. Of course. I'll have everything ready, ma'am.'

'Good.' She stubbed the cigarette butt into the ashtray and fitted a piece of paper into the typewriter. She looked at Eliza, the circles under her eyes the same shade as the soot in the tray. The dress didn't do anything for her at all, Eliza thought.

'Why are you still here?'

'I had a question.'

'There aren't any jobs here. Already told you. Harriet can't even get her bloody daughter one and she worked as a clerical assistant in the war rooms! The daughter, you know. So, there's positively no hope for you.'

‘No. It’s not that.’

‘Well, what is it then?’ She sighed, pulling another cigarette from the near-empty pack.

‘Rebecca needs new shoes.’

‘Don’t we all?’ She struck a match and lit the fag.

‘Hers are too small. She’s grown quite a bit in the past year . . .’

‘Then use your clothing card and get her some.’

‘The Post Office still hasn’t replaced the ones we lost during the move and they said . . .’

‘And that’s my problem, is it?’ She tossed the extinguished match onto her desk and slumped back in her chair. ‘I’m sorry, Eliza. Really I am. But she’ll have to wait. Maybe next month. She can wear your other pair for now.’

‘But they’re too big.’

‘Damn it, child, what do you expect me to do?’

‘Miss Haverford?’ Mr Mosley, lanky and balding, stood in the doorway of his office. He looked as if God had made him by stretching a short man’s skin over a too-large skeleton. His black suit, the same one he wore every day, was short around the wrists and ankles, like it belonged to the skin but not the man.

‘Yes, Mr Mosley.’ Aunt Bess smiled, her teeth a muddy brown from her strict tea-and-fags diet.

‘I need those papers on Spitalfields.’

‘Right away, sir.’ She rose from her desk. ‘If rabbit’s out of the question, find some Spam. I’ll only be a minute, Mr Mosley!’ Aunt Bess disappeared down the hall, leaving Eliza alone with her open handbag.

Without thinking, Eliza thrust her hands into Aunt Bess’s bag, fingers digging beneath the empty cigarette boxes, headache pills and make-up before brushing paper at the

bottom. She pulled out an unopened grey envelope and her aunt's clothing card. The envelope she stuffed back into the cluttered bag. The coupon book went into her jacket pocket.

*

The human wall outside their flat had changed faces, but its structure remained the same. With her heavy burlap bags, Eliza forced a path through the fortress of worn overcoats and shouldered her front door open. The trek to the third floor was slow as she navigated round the rubbish. On the first landing, she passed hobbling Mrs Hodgkins, who was struggling down the stairs.

'Tell you what, child,' Mrs Hodgkins coughed. 'If these bags here aren't gone by tomorrow, I'll chuck them out myself!'

'You do that, Mrs Hodgkins, and I'll be right beside you with an armful of my own.'

Mrs Hodgkins' creaking laughter followed Eliza all the way to her door.

She wasted little time preparing the dinner, sparing herself a crust of bread and some margarine for her luncheon. If she was quick enough, there might still be time for Peter to buy her dinner after work. She thought of Peter in his ill-fitting usher's jacket and allowed herself a smile.

With dinner stored in the larder, she pulled the final package from the shopping bags and scribbled a note inside its lid.

Don't tell Auntie Bess.

Eliza shoved the parcel under their bed, knowing Rebecca would find it during her nightly count. A thump from the floor above caused the books on her shelf to shift. *Peter and Wendy* fell over with a slap. Eliza carefully rearranged it, propping it up with one of Mother's porcelain figurines. Eliza had dozens

of books saved from their old house, some still wrapped in brown paper and tied neatly with string. She ran her fingers over the delicate spines, rereading the titles as she checked that all remained in their proper place. As soon as she received her pay this month, she would be back at Foyles adding another to her growing collection. She straightened a dancing figurine so that the woman's outstretched hand fell perfectly in line with the book spines.

The laundry she'd hung in the sitting room that morning was still damp. Nothing dried inside, but it wasn't worth hanging it out the window. It would either be stolen or coated in coal dust. She saw in a magazine that every home in America now had electric dryers. They had everything in America – nylons, chocolate, chewing gum. Mrs Hodgkins received a parcel from her son over there every month. If only they had family there, a friend. Electric dryers. She sighed as she felt the wet sleeve of Rebecca's brown dress. Might as well be science fiction, she decided.

Eliza dropped her hand and took a breath. For the first time that day, there was a moment of quiet. She stood still, surrounded by the dank stench of drying clothes mingling with the fatty scent of cooked bacon. The sound of the cars below crept in through the cracked kitchen window. *Thunk thunk*. There was a crater in the street below. A present from Jerry. The buses could never avoid it.

There it was again.

Thunk thunk.

Every bus. Every cab.

Thunk thunk.

They chose to ignore it. Pretend it wasn't there. Pretend it didn't matter, even if it did.

Thunk thunk.

The noise was constant. Eliza heard it in her sleep.

Thunk thunk.

Even when all else was quiet, there was always . . .

Thunk thunk.

The heartbeat of the building.

Thunk thunk.

A horn screeched and other sounds trickled back – the conversations in the queue outside, Mrs Granderson’s wireless above, the constant drip in the sink.

Eliza looked at the clock. She had just an hour before she was needed at the theatre. It would take her that long to cross London. She changed into her uniform, freshened her face and made her way onto the cluttered stairs. Halfway down, her foot landed in an open bag of tea dregs, mouldy bread and fish waste.

Fighting the urge to be sick, she tried to dislodge her foot but accidentally kicked the mess. The rotting muck exploded, spraying bits of fish-flavoured tea over the wooden stairs and cracked walls. After the bag settled, she straightened her jacket, checked the bun in her hair and proceeded down, nodding to Mrs Hodgkins, who, now struggling up the stairs, stopped to taste a bit of the fish that had landed in her hair.

*

On her hands and knees, Eliza stretched under the seat, her fingers brushing the greasy newspaper. She felt her stockings stick to the unwashed theatre floor as she strained to grasp the edge of the paper. When was the last time Jessie washed these floors like she was meant to? Eliza glanced at her palm. Unidentifiable dark specks pressed into her skin. A shiny brown stain marred the heel of her hand. She could almost picture the filth sinking deeper and deeper into her palm,

worming its way through the muscle and bone, finding a way into a vein . . .

‘Try this.’

A wooden cane hovered over her head. Holding it was Stephen, his bulldog face caught somewhere between a smile and a grimace, a piece of meat stuck between his crooked teeth.

‘Cheers.’ Eliza took the cane and guided it under the chair, unable to rid the feel of dirt from her skin.

‘Last to leave again, eh, ducks?’

‘You’re still here, aren’t you?’

His horrid aftershave was worse than the smell from under the seats. Stephen bragged how his cousin sent it from Canada, but that scent was nothing to be proud of.

‘Well, I can’t possibly leave you here on your own, can I? Want me to . . . ?’

‘No.’ She accidentally knocked the paper further away.

‘It would go a lot quicker if—’

‘I didn’t ask for your opinion.’

He leaned closer, his sour breath warm on her neck. ‘I’m only trying to help.’

‘That’s very kind of you, Stephen, but I can manage.’ She hooked the cane behind the paper and dragged the rubbish towards her.

‘Well, I wouldn’t be a gentleman if I didn’t offer.’ He placed a heavy hand on her shoulder. She felt it creeping towards her neck, his thumb stroking her through her blouse.

‘Eliza?’

She jumped at the sound of Peter’s voice.

‘Over here!’ she called, grabbing the rubbish.

Stephen leant back against a seat as Peter tripped down the aisle towards them, his wavy ginger hair matted down

with Brylcreem, light freckles nearly invisible in the dim light. Freckles didn't look so bad on him, she thought. Flecks of white lint peppered the unkempt uniform that hung from his lean frame. She resisted the urge to reach out and pick each bit off one by one and settled for scrubbing her dirty palm against her thigh.

'I couldn't find you anywhere,' Peter said, struggling to juggle the heavy bin bags in his arms.

'Purvis had me clear Jessie's rows.' She tossed the greasy newsprint into her bin bag.

'That's the second time this week she's missed her shift.' Peter dropped one of the bags on his feet. 'Good Lord.'

'Easy, Lamb.' Stephen laughed.

'I don't see you helping.'

'Enough, boys.' Eliza picked up one of Peter's bags along with her own. 'And don't be so hard on Jessie. Think she's finally got herself a new job. Wants to tell me all about it on Saturday. She's been saying for weeks how much she hates this place.'

'I'm beginning to see her point,' Peter sighed, noticing a stain on his vest.

'You're going to see her?' Stephen yawned, baring his teeth like a dog. Eliza hooked her free arm through Peter's, resting her head against his shoulder.

'She rang yesterday. Wants my advice on how to break the news to Purvis. Come on, Peter. Let's toss these out and go to dinner.'

Stephen leapt to his feet. 'Is the invitation open?'

'Couples only.' Eliza smiled, escorting Peter up the aisle and away from that revolting aftershave. Alone in the lobby, she pulled him closer.

'Is everything all right?' he asked.

‘Yes. Fine. I’m tired, that’s all.’ Eliza peeked over her shoulder to see Stephen watching them from the darkened stalls. He picked the food from his teeth and spat it onto the floor.

*

A church bell chimed the hour as Eliza entered her building. Two years on and it still warmed her to hear the bells again. Eleven o’clock – Rebecca would be in bed and Aunt Bess complaining about the laundry. Maybe Eliza would tell her about electric dryers. She slipped her key into the lock, pushed open the door and got slapped in the face.

Aunt Bess radiated fury and fag smoke.

‘In.’

Cheek stinging, Eliza bowed her head as she closed the door behind her. Rebecca sat on the edge of the ratty sofa, the box of new shoes at her feet. If Rebecca had cried, her last tears were already smacked out of her.

Aunt Bess reached out her hand.

‘Well?’

Eliza pulled the clothing card from her handbag and handed it over without a word. She wanted that to be the end of it. She knew it wasn’t. Aunt Bess threw the card onto the side table and grabbed the shoebox lid from the floor.

‘*Don’t tell Auntie Bess?*’ she read. ‘Don’t tell Auntie Bess!’

‘Rebecca had nothing to do with it. It was my idea. Please . . .’

‘Of course it was your idea! I bloody well know she wouldn’t do anything like this on her own.’ She waved the lid about her head, threatening to bring it down like an axe.

‘Please let her go to bed.’

Aunt Bess dropped her arm, fingernails gouging the pulpy

flesh of the lid as stiff tendons protruded from the thin skin of her tightened hand.

‘You do not tell me what to do. Not in my home. You’re bloody lucky to have a home at all. Would you rather be squatting at Bedford House? No heat? No running water? Or should I chuck you out and send her to the orphans’ home?’

Rebecca remained still. Eliza trembled. She wanted to run to her sister, sit by her, hold her. Aunt Bess blocked her path.

‘What? Nothing to say for yourself this time?’

‘I’m sorry,’ Eliza whispered. She kept her eyes on the ground.

‘Oh. Yes. Sorry is going to get my coupons back, is it?’

‘I’m sorry,’ she repeated. She stared at the blackened floorboards beneath her feet. Soot was embedded deep into the wood grain. No amount of washing would ever get it clean.

Silence overtook the room. A bus hit the pothole outside. *Thunk thunk*. Aunt Bess’s rage receded. She took a seat at the kitchen table, tossing the box lid onto the warped surface. She lit a cigarette and avoided Eliza’s eye.

‘Take Rebecca and go to bed. I’ll decide your punishment in the morning.’

Eliza felt the release in those words. Her paralysis was gone, but Rebecca’s remained.

‘Come, Rebecca. Time for bed.’ Eliza held out her hand. Rebecca did not take it; her eyes remained fixed on an unseen point. Eliza crouched before her. ‘Rebecca?’ She stroked her sister’s soft hair. ‘It’s time for bed, dearie. Aren’t you tired? Rebecca?’

Rebecca turned her head and met Eliza’s gaze. Eliza could see nothing in Rebecca’s eyes. They were so like their father’s, those eyes – large and brown and empty.

‘Come on. Bedtime,’ Eliza repeated. Rebecca’s hand snaked

into hers. She guided her to their bedroom as Aunt Bess's cigarette burned in her hand, the filter never raised to her lips. The key turned stiffly in the door. Eliza double-checked it was locked then sat Rebecca down on the shared double bed while she changed out of her uniform.

'The weather was nice today. They said on the wireless it was only supposed to get warmer. I bet we could have a picnic soon. We could head across town and sit in St James's Park and feed scraps to the ducks. Wouldn't that be lovely?' Eliza finished changing and helped Rebecca lie down underneath the threadbare blankets, pulling them up to her chin the way Mother used to.

'Eliza, are you cross with me?' Rebecca asked, her voice distant. Eliza neatly folded her uniform.

'Why would I be cross? You've done nothing wrong.' She slid the uniform into their dresser, rearranging the collar and sleeves before shutting the drawer.

'Suppose I did, would you still love me? I don't think Auntie Bess does.'

'Oh, Rebecca.' She switched off the light, already feeling the pull of sleep, and crawled into bed beside her sister. 'We're not like Auntie Bess, you and I,' she said, wrapping her arm around her. 'We'll always love each other no matter what.' She kissed Rebecca's cheek then rolled over and stared out the window, unable to see the clear night through the grime-covered glass. Rebecca whispered to the darkness.

'Onetwothreefourfive.'

Eliza couldn't block it out.

'Sixseveneightnineten.'

She remained awake, focusing on the flickering street lamp outside.

'Eleventwelvethirteenfourteen.'

Its orange glow filtered into the room, becoming more pronounced as Eliza's eyes adjusted to the dark.

'Fifteensixteenseventeeneighteen.'

A chair scraped against the kitchen floor.

'Nineteentwenty.'

The stool tipped over. She smelled sulphur and marrow liqueur. Eliza cried.

'Twenty-one.'

No. No stool.

'Twenty-two.'

A chair. Aunt Bess.

'Twenty-three.'

It was only Aunt Bess rising from her chair. Eliza stopped crying and closed her eyes. Rebecca began counting again.

2

Mother stood on the shore, watching them from across the sea. Far, far away she was, but Eliza could see her clearly, see her smiling. At the dock was a little wooden boat, rocking gently back and forth. Father picked up Rebecca and sat her inside. He offered Eliza his hand, but she could not move. Peter held her, anchoring her to the grassy bank. Father turned his back on her and climbed into the boat. The dock faded and he rowed in long, even strokes, taking Rebecca away. Mother waited, solemn. Eliza wanted to tell them to wait but she had lost her voice and did not know if it would return. The boat became a pinprick in the ocean, so small Eliza could hold it in her hand. She balanced it on her palm. A mighty screech startled her. She dropped the boat and it broke at her feet.

The bus honked again, and Eliza startled awake. She checked the mattress was dry then slipped out of bed, careful not to wake Rebecca, as the scent of the ocean still lingered in her mind. Pulling on Mother's dressing gown, she crept out of the bedroom to find Aunt Bess cooking breakfast. A cigarette butt burned in the cracked ashtray beside her.

'Good morning,' Eliza said.

Aunt Bess dropped the wooden spoon. She picked it off the floor and stuck it straight back into the porridge.

'Morning.'

'Did I oversleep?' Eliza approached the table, keeping her arms tucked around her waist.

‘No. I had to wake early today.’

‘Oh.’

The contents of Aunt Bess’s handbag were dumped across the table. Eliza’s eyes were drawn to the grey envelope, now opened, that she had glimpsed yesterday. The stationery was thick – expensive – with Aunt Bess’s name and address scrawled in red ink in a neat, slanting hand.

As if sensing Eliza’s gaze, Aunt Bess forgot the porridge and grabbed the letter. Then she cleared the rest of her things. ‘Set the table, would you?’

‘Of course.’ Eliza retrieved the plates from the cupboard. ‘Would you like me to wake Rebecca?’

‘No. Let the girl sleep. Pour us some tea, would you?’

Eliza obliged, retrieving the pot and two cups. They were both eating before either spoke again.

‘Rebecca needn’t come to work today,’ said Aunt Bess.

‘She hasn’t been let go?’

‘She’s getting the day off. I’ve already discussed it with Mr Mosley.’

‘But she’ll be allowed back? She loves the work. It keeps her—’

‘That’s not for you to worry about, Eliza.’ Aunt Bess dabbed her mouth with the edge of her apron then rose from the table. ‘I need to change. Keep her busy today.’

‘I have to leave for work at five o’clock.’

Aunt Bess hesitated as she pushed in her chair.

‘No. You don’t.’

‘But . . .’

‘I’ve spoken to Mr Purvis as well. Perform your household duties as per usual and I’ll be home for dinner at six.’ She went to the sitting room to change into her work clothes while Eliza remained at the table.

‘Is this our punishment? Taking away our livelihoods?’

‘Working as a cigarette girl is hardly a livelihood.’

‘Auntie Bess, I know what I did was wrong, but—’

‘There’s to be no further conversation on the matter. Now do as you’re told and be here at six. Understood?’

Eliza stared into her bowl. The porridge was runny, tasteless.

‘Understood, Eliza?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘Good.’ She finished applying her lipstick then dropped the make-up into her handbag and stared inside the small handbag. ‘Good.’ She snapped it shut. ‘Six o’clock. And I expect you to be on time.’

Eliza stared at the closed door, feeling Mother’s old dislike for Bess Haverford threatening to escalate into her own absolute hatred. The floor creaked behind her. She turned to see Rebecca standing in the bedroom doorway, tapping the handle.

*

‘What’s she planning, then?’ Peter asked as they strolled down Charing Cross Road. Eliza held a new book from Foyles under one arm, the other threaded loosely through Peter’s, as Rebecca skipped beside them.

‘I don’t know. I never know.’

‘All over a pair of shoes . . .’

‘Peter, please. Can we talk about something else?’

‘Yes. Sorry. Course we can.’

They continued their walk, neither saying a word. Rebecca darted ahead to look in a shop window, then ran back to Eliza and Peter. A pigeon flew low over their heads and landed on a nearby ledge. Rebecca ducked and laughed, sticking her tongue out at the bird.

‘Well. This is exciting,’ Peter said.

‘I’m sorry. I’m just . . .’

‘Worried? Tired? Angry?’

‘Do I look worried, tired or angry?’ Eliza fussed with her limp hair.

‘No. I think you look . . .’

‘Normal?’

‘I was going to say beautiful.’

‘Thank you.’ She blushed.

‘Well, I mean it. By the way . . . I was thinking . . .’

Say it, she thought. *I’ll say yes if you ask*. She spun the Claddagh ring on her finger.

‘I’ll be finished with my apprenticeship soon. Uncle Marvin says I’ll be a fine accountant, earning a good wage. I won’t have to work at the Palladium any more . . .’

‘Yes?’ She squeezed his arm, encouraging him. *Say it . . .*

‘Thought I might go on holiday. Leave London for a bit . . .’

For a honeymoon, she thought. *Please say . . .*

‘If you’ll be all right without me.’

She stopped walking.

‘Oh. Well,’ Eliza started. ‘If it’s what you . . .’

‘Hard to get abroad, but I thought maybe the Isle of Wight or the Lake District. Could be difficult, but can’t hurt trying, can it?’ He smiled and checked his watch. ‘That can’t be the time. Suppose I should be off or Uncle Marvin will have my head.’

‘Peter, wait.’

‘Work and all. You know.’

‘Just . . . thank you. For wasting your luncheon hour on us.’

‘Waste? Nonsense. What else would I do?’ He pressed his lips to Eliza’s cheek. The lingering warmth of his kiss remained as he walked the opposite way down the street. Eliza

watched him, pressing her hand to the still-tingling spot below her cheekbone.

‘He will. One day,’ she whispered. ‘Rebecca, let’s go home. Rebecca?’ She could not spot her sister in the crowd. ‘Rebecca?’ She clutched her book with both hands.

A squeal of tyres ended in a sick thump.

‘Rebecca!’

A small crowd gathered by the street was already dispersing as Eliza ran towards it. Rebecca stood safe on the pavement, looking down. A dead cat lay by a sewer grate. Fresh blood seeped from under its carcass, the neck broken. A dark red blotch stained its chin where its mouth was frozen in a permanent scream.

‘Leave it. Come away. Rebecca, come away.’ Eliza grabbed her sister by the wrist and pulled her down the street.

‘What’s wrong, Eliza?’

‘Nothing.’

‘It was only a body, wasn’t it? What made it a cat was gone. That’s what you said when . . .’

‘Yes. I did. But I told you not to stare then, too, didn’t I?’ She walked quickly, straightening the collar of her blouse as she dragged Rebecca behind her, slowing only when she heard her sister crying.

*

Six fifteen p.m. Aunt Bess was late. The only logical explanation was that something awful had happened to her. Rebecca was too busy counting the cutlery to notice. The beef stew grew cold. All her life, Eliza had never known Aunt Bess to be late, not even by fifteen minutes. She focused on her knitting. Her mother had made the most beautiful gloves and scarves. Eliza hadn’t inherited her natural ability. The current project

was a blue scarf for Peter that she had started in January. She hoped to have it finished by Christmas.

6.20 p.m.

What if something had happened to Aunt Bess? She was the only family Eliza and Rebecca had left. And there had been so many muggings lately. The papers blamed mothers who continued to work after the war – said there was no one to look after children, who now ran rampant through the streets.

6.25 p.m.

‘Liza, can’t we eat yet?’

‘You know we need to wait. Why don’t you practise your cross stitch?’ Eliza handed her the sewing basket. Rebecca sat beside her on the couch and pulled out a scrap of fabric, a needle and some thread. In the flat above, the muffled sounds of *It’s That Man Again* drifted down from Mrs Granderson’s wireless.

6.30 p.m.

What if Aunt Bess had been attacked? What would happen to them if she died? Would they be separated? Rebecca wouldn’t bear being away from her again. Eliza could see Aunt Bess walking home down the street, pausing to search through her handbag for a cigarette, unaware of her surroundings. Unaware of the man sneaking up behind her. He would grab her, his meaty hand covering her mouth, preventing her from screaming as he dragged her into an alley. Aunt Bess would kick and scratch, desperate to fight him off but not possessing the strength. Her neck could snap so easily . . .

The front door clicked open. Eliza sprang to her feet, the scarf slipping to the floor as Aunt Bess appeared, unharmed.

‘Good. You’re here.’ She twisted her red gloves in her hands as she avoided Eliza’s gaze.

‘Yes. Are you all right? We were . . .’

A man stood behind Aunt Bess. He was tall – taller even than Mr Mosley – his great height causing his broad shoulders to slouch forward. His left arm hung loosely at his side, drawing attention to its missing counterpart, the right sleeve of his dirtied flannel shirt pinned up at the shoulder. He looked no more than thirty, but his face was a patchwork of scars, reminding Eliza of the crumbling Egyptian statues she'd seen at the British Museum as a child.

The door smacked shut behind him.

Aunt Bess spoke first. 'This is Mr Drewry. He's taking you to Wales.'

Eliza must have heard wrong, must have still been imagining things.

'I'm sorry?' she asked.

'You have an hour to pack your things. Then Mr Drewry will escort you to the train station. I've secured you work at a house in—'

'We have work. Here. In London.'

'You had work in London,' she said, removing her thinning burgundy coat. Her hands were shaking. 'Now you have work in Wales.'

'What . . . Who gives you the right?'

'Your father.'

Eliza felt Rebecca grow still beside her. She kept her attention on Aunt Bess.

'He never said you could send us away from everything we've ever known. He never—'

'He made me your legal guardian, which means I can raise you however I see fit. But, as you are an adult now, Eliza, I suppose I can't force you to go. Yet I needn't let you stay. From this point on, you're no longer permitted to live here.'

They didn't have to leave London, she thought, thank God.

And they didn't have to live with Bess, either. Peter's parents. They could stay with them in Shepperton. Peter was right about his apprenticeship. He'd be earning a good wage soon. Surely then he'd propose. That was all he was waiting for. She and Rebecca would pack tonight. Leave this wretched place forever. Live with people who truly cared for them. This was a blessing, really. A blessing . . .

'As for Rebecca,' Aunt Bess interrupted her thoughts. 'She is under my care until she is of legal age. I am her guardian. Not you. And, regardless of what you choose to do, she will be going to Wales.'

'No!' Rebecca threw herself at Aunt Bess, stabbing her in the leg with the sewing needle then scratching at her stomach and face. 'No! No, you won't take Eliza away! I won't let you! No!'

'Rebecca!' Eliza pulled at her sister's shoulders, tried to get her arms around her waist, but the girl's wiry frame was tense with rage. She could not get a hold of her.

'Bitch bitch bitch!' Rebecca screamed, now kicking Aunt Bess's legs. Aunt Bess raised her hands in front of her face but otherwise did nothing to defend herself.

'Rebecca, stop!' Eliza begged. Feeling a hand on her shoulder, she turned and saw Mr Drewry standing next to her. He pushed her aside and reached for Rebecca, but Eliza shoved him back.

'No!' She threw her entire body over Rebecca and dragged her away from their aunt.

'I hate you!' Rebecca screamed. 'I hate you, I hate you, I hate all of you!' She broke free from Eliza's hold and ran into their bedroom.

The slam of the door was the full stop to her outburst. The room went quiet. Laughter from Mrs Granderson's wireless trickled through the ceiling.

Eliza watched as Aunt Bess bent over and extracted Rebecca's sewing needle from her thigh. A sheen of red glistened on the thin metal. Aunt Bess went pale then carried the needle to the kitchen sink. Eliza retreated to the bedroom. She closed the door softly behind her and rested her head on the cold wood, listening to Rebecca sobbing on the bed.

She could leave all this behind tonight.

She turned to her sister. 'You know you mustn't use such language. It's very rude.' She took her handkerchief and wiped Rebecca's face clean of tears.

'You won't leave me, will you, Eliza?'

Rebecca was so small for her age. Such a fragile thing, easily broken. Eliza could still see the cracks from before. Rebecca absolutely wouldn't survive being away from her again. Eliza took a breath.

'Never, dearie. We'll stay together. Always. I promise.'

An hour later and the room was empty save a ratty blanket, their gas masks and Aunt Bess's derelict furniture. Their entire lives fitted into two brown suitcases, except her books. There wasn't enough room. They remained on the shelf, abandoned, begging to be brought with them. The paperback Peter had bought her that afternoon lay abandoned on the shelf, unread and out of place. Eliza had to look away, unable to bear the sight. She wrapped up her hair in a headscarf and slipped on her ragged mauve coat. Into the pocket, she slipped one novel – a gift from Father. Forgotten in that pocket was a government pamphlet, one she received during her evacuation – *Information on Bed-wetting for Householders Taking Unaccompanied Children*. She considered saving it, then tossed it into the bin instead.

Aunt Bess sat in the kitchen, smoking, when they emerged. Eliza helped Rebecca carry her luggage to the door, where

Mr Drewry waited. Rebecca had become vacant, the way she often did after a fit, and made no protest when Mr Drewry took her arm. Before Eliza could wrench her sister from him, Aunt Bess called from the table. Eliza would not look at her.

‘Aren’t you going to say goodbye?’ Aunt Bess asked.

Eliza picked up both suitcases and motioned for Mr Drewry to exit the flat.

‘No.’ She closed the door calmly as she left. Mrs Hodgkins was carrying a bin bag downstairs.

‘Going on a trip, love?’

Eliza ignored her.

Outside, a cab waited for them. Mr Drewry opened the taxi door and climbed inside with Rebecca. Eliza followed with the suitcases. Their escort sat close to the driver while the girls settled in across from him. A layer of grime coated the floor, and the thin seats had little cushioning left. A spring jabbed into Eliza’s upper thigh. She tucked in her legs and arms, attempting to touch as little of the filthy car as possible. As the cab drove off, Eliza saw a tall, skeletal man enter their building – Mr Mosley.

‘May it be an unhappy union,’ she muttered, and looked away.

With Rebecca leaning against her, Eliza stared out of the window as the cab made its way through the streets. She watched the buses and pedestrians, admired the old Victorian homes now pockmarked from bomb blasts and glanced down narrow side streets where spivs stood selling their wares. She watched the damp pavements speeding alongside her, empty of queues now the shops had shut.

Eliza watched it all as the cab took them further away from home. She was still here yet missing it already. She did her best not to think about Peter. As soon as she could, she would

write to him. Rebecca kept silent. She wasn't counting, at least not aloud. It was the best Eliza could hope for. Mr Drewry also remained mute, staring out of his window for the duration of the ride. If he was familiar with London, Eliza couldn't tell. He expressed neither the interest of someone visiting the city for the first time nor the apathy of someone who'd seen it all before.

The cab stopped outside Paddington Station. Mr Drewry paid the driver then led Rebecca out, leaving Eliza with the suitcases. When Peter went on holiday, would he leave from here, she wondered as she followed Mr Drewry and Rebecca inside. Would Peter think of her as he travelled alone, or would there be another girl at his side?

She followed Mr Drewry to Platform 4, where a train awaited them underneath the high, vaulted arches. The ticket collector directed them to a first-class carriage, for which Eliza was grateful. Returning to London after the war, she and the other children were packed in the coach compartments so tight there was no room for anyone to sit. A little boy had vomited on her only pair of shoes.

Mr Drewry chose an empty compartment and slid the door shut behind them. Only then did he help Eliza with the luggage. Together, they lifted the pieces onto the racks above their heads, his solitary arm proving remarkably strong. Once finished, he sat across from the sisters and went back to staring out of the window. Eliza could no longer bear the silence.

'My name is Eliza. This is Rebecca.'

She waited. He said nothing.

'What part of Wales are we going to?'

No answer.

'Could you at least tell us how long the journey will take?'

'Seven hours, fourteen minutes,' he replied. Eliza expected

his voice to be soft, lilting and Welsh. Instead, it was hard and English. Possibly Northern, though it was difficult to tell since he spoke so little. She thanked him then leant Rebecca against her shoulder and began her silent goodbyes to home.

*

It did not take long for the city to disappear. Eliza watched as the lights faded away into fog. Once they were rolling through darkened fields, she felt Rebecca's heart beat faster.

'Better than last time we left, isn't it?' she said. 'Don't have to worry about bombs falling on us before we get there. And no awful luggage labels on our coats, either.'

Despite Eliza's words, Rebecca remained tense and unresponsive.

Now three hours had passed since the train left. Eliza thought Mr Drewry would fall asleep, maybe pull his hat down to block out the carriage lights, like Father used to do on long journeys, but Mr Drewry did nothing. Every once in a while he'd smoke a cigarette but that was all. He didn't appear to mind Eliza and Rebecca talking, however.

'Why don't you read to me?' Eliza asked when, for lack of something to do, Rebecca began kicking the underside of her seat. She pulled the tattered copy of *Mrs Miniver* from her handbag and gave it to her sister.

'Where should I start?'

'Oh, why not the beginning?' Eliza replied, closing her eyes. 'We have plenty of time.' She heard Rebecca open the book and fold back the pages.

"'For my girls. No day is complete without a story. With love, Father.'"

Eliza smiled. Rebecca turned the page.

'Eliza, does Aunt Bess hate us?'

‘Hate is a very strong word. I think maybe she grew tired of us.’

‘Do you hate her?’

Eliza sighed and opened her eyes. ‘Right now, I’m very cross with her. But I don’t know if I’ve ever hated anyone.’

‘You hate Hitler.’

‘Well, that’s true.’

‘For what he did to Mother.’

‘For what he did to lots of people. Now go on and read. I can’t remember how it starts.’

Rebecca began the opening chapter but stopped after the first paragraph.

‘I hate Aunt Bess,’ she said.

‘You’re too young to know if you hate anyone.’

‘No I’m not. And I do, I hate her. I hate her and I’m not sorry for hitting her.’

‘Well, if you’re not sorry now then you will be,’ Eliza said.

‘Why?’

‘Because you’ll realise it was wrong. Are you going to keep reading or shall I do it myself?’

Rebecca continued then stopped when she reached the end of the page.

‘Liza?’

‘Yes, dearie?’

‘Will you grow tired of me?’

Eliza wrapped an arm around her sister’s shoulders. ‘I can’t. It’s against the law for sisters to grow tired of each other.’

‘It is not.’

‘Is too. Mr Attlee passed it through parliament just the other day.’

‘You’re fibbing,’ Rebecca giggled.

‘Am not. The king asked for it. The princesses had an

argument and he wanted to make sure that – no matter what – they would always remain friends.’

‘Liar.’

‘Saw it in the papers.’

‘Well, I don’t believe you.’

‘Well, I think you should keep reading.’

They shared a smile and Rebecca returned her attention to the book, reciting page after page as the train continued forward through the fog.

*

Eliza rummaged through her purse. All she had was £2 12s 8d. Pay day would never come after all.

‘I’m hungry, Eliza.’

‘I know.’

‘We didn’t get dinner.’

‘I know.’

‘I haven’t had anything to eat for ages!’

‘Hush!’

Mr Drewry appeared to have fallen asleep, and Eliza was afraid of waking him. Slowly, she rose, pressing her finger to her lips to keep Rebecca quiet. Her hand was on the carriage door when a train thundered past in the opposite direction. Mr Drewry shot up in his seat, using the stump of his missing arm to search for something at his side. When he couldn’t reach, he looked at the missing limb as if seeing it for the first time. The panic only lasted a moment, already dissipating when he saw Eliza at the door.

‘Would it be all right if we went to the dining car?’ Eliza asked, hoping he wouldn’t notice they had already been leaving. Mr Drewry glanced at the floor then at the window, touching his hand to the glass.

‘Mr Drewry?’

‘Suit yourselves,’ he said, keeping his gaze on the window.

Eliza thanked him then exited the compartment with Rebecca. They had just passed the five-hour mark of their journey and Eliza’s legs were cramping, her back stiff. A headache was brewing and her stomach sent hunger pains up into her chest as her dry eyes itched. She wanted a bed – a double, no a king – where she and Rebecca could both stretch out and fall asleep and not wake for a very long time.

Instead, she stood in the dining car, Rebecca clinging to her arm for support as she pleaded with a waiter.

‘Please, sir. We didn’t realise what time the kitchen closed. We’ll take anything you have. It can be cold. I do have money. We’ll pay for anything. Please. My poor little sister is famished.’

As they spoke, the train pulled into a station. *Swansea*, read the sign. On the platform was a telegram office.

‘How long will our stop be?’ Eliza asked.

‘At least half an hour. We’re changing engines here.’

‘Rebecca, wait here.’

‘Where are you—?’

‘If Mr Drewry comes, tell him I went to the toilets.’

Eliza ran out of the carriage and onto the platform.

‘Please, please be open,’ she whispered to herself as she weaved her way through the crowd of disembarking passengers. The telegram office was indeed open. A bored young man waited behind the counter.

‘How much to send a message to London?’ she asked, digging through her small purse.

‘Six pence per ten words.’

Eliza grabbed the form. Mr Drewry grabbed her arm. Rebecca stood outside the office, the suitcases beside her.

‘I . . . I was . . .’

‘We’re changing trains.’ He took the blank form from her

hand and set it on the counter then pulled her from the office. Eliza looked for the young clerk, but he had disappeared.

On the platform, Mr Drewry shoved Eliza's suitcase towards her with his foot. It bounced against her shins. He picked up Rebecca's case and walked to the platform opposite. Eliza took Rebecca's hand and the other suitcase and went after him.

As they waited in the bitter cold for the connecting train, she glanced often at the telegram office. One message, that was all Peter needed and he would come running after her. How else would he be able to find her? And who would help Mrs Hodgkins carry her shopping, or look after Mr Pendleton's canary when he went to Blackpool? She was to meet Jessie on Saturday for tea. How long would she wait at the Corner House before deciding Eliza had abandoned her?

There was so much left unfinished and nothing she could do as their new train pulled into the station. Only a handful of passengers climbed aboard its four coaches. They settled into an empty compartment in the last car. Mr Drewry lapsed back into silence, but Eliza could see he was keeping a closer eye on them. Once they were seated, Rebecca elbowed her. In her hand was some cold ham and bread wrapped in newspaper.

'When he saw Mr Drewry,' she whispered, 'he said we could have it.'

Eliza grabbed a piece of the bread and took a bite, closing her eyes as she chewed slowly.

'God bless the waiters,' she sighed.

*

Click-clack-clack.

Eliza listened to the rhythm of the train as it carried them deeper into Wales. It was well past midnight. Usually, she would be home from work now.

Click-clack-clack.

Rebecca was already asleep, but Eliza fought to remain awake. She wanted to stay alert. She could sleep when they arrived.

Click-clack-clack.

She had to keep an eye on Mr Drewry. She had to pay attention.

Click-clack-clack.

She had to stay awake.

*

Rebecca did not scream. Even as Eliza shouted, Rebecca said nothing. Nor did she move. Eliza grabbed her, tried to push her up the stairs. Eliza did not want to look. All she could hear was her own voice, crying. All she could smell was dust. Dust and marrow liqueur, spreading across the cellar, the brown syrup seeping into the dirt floor. Dust and marrow and . . .

Her screams became the screeching of the train lurching to a stop. Eliza jolted awake and placed a hand to her throat. It was not bruised. Nor should it have been, she reminded herself.

‘Only a dream,’ she whispered. Rebecca stared at her. Eliza looked away and saw that they had stopped at a dimly lit station.

Mr Drewry pulled their luggage down from the rack then carried Eliza’s suitcase out of the cabin. Eliza took Rebecca’s case in one hand and Rebecca’s hand in the other then followed him onto the platform. As the train pulled away, Eliza realised they were the only ones to disembark. The tiny station had one sheltered waiting room where a solitary lantern hung above a rotting door. The name *Plentynunig* was painted in whitewash on an old wooden sign. Mr Drewry led them down

a few creaking stairs that led to a patch of grass beside an unpaved road.

Across the way was a pub, a light still on despite the lateness of the hour. Mr Drewry headed directly for it. He set down the suitcase and rapped several times on the pub door. Eliza heard the bolts being thrown back. The door cracked open. A balding head appeared, saw Mr Drewry and nodded. The door then closed; the bolts slid back in place.

Mr Drewry picked up the suitcase and walked the girls back to the road.

‘Eliza,’ Rebecca whispered. ‘I’m still hungry.’

‘Me too. I’m sure they’ll have something for us when we arrive.’ She squeezed her sister’s hand. It was colder here than in London, and Eliza found herself pulling her coat tight around her. A chilling wind cut through the stillness of the night and a light mist coated the girls in fine droplets of rain. Eliza remembered when she was evacuated, how the Littletons had immediately filled her with Ovaltine and sponge cake and told her she was going to be just fine as she warmed herself by the fire. And she had been, until her evacuation ended.

Around the corner of the pub came an open-top carriage driven by the balding publican. He stopped the weary grey horse in front of the trio and hopped down. Mr Drewry handed the man some money then tossed the girls’ luggage into the back.

When he offered them a hand into the carriage, Eliza climbed up by herself then helped Rebecca in. Mr Drewry ignored her refusal and hoisted himself into the driver’s seat. With a flick of his wrist, the horse moved steadily forward. Eliza glanced behind her, watching the man’s silhouette fade as they disappeared over the first hill.

‘Excuse me, Mr Drewry, may I ask how long till we arrive?’

‘Twenty minutes.’

A single lantern hanging towards the front of the carriage was all the light they had. Eliza searched around them for something to keep warm and eventually found an old wool blanket under their seats. She tucked it around herself and Rebecca. There was nothing to see in the dark. Eliza began humming to keep her nerves steady. She didn’t realise what song it was until she reached the refrain – ‘We’ll Meet Again’. She stopped mid-phrase. Memories came unbidden into her mind. Memories of that song playing on the wireless when Mr Littleton had handed her the telegram that informed her of Mother’s death.

Eliza let the journey continue in silence. The biting wind prevented her from falling asleep. She focused on finding signs of life in the unfamiliar landscape. A house, a shop, a stray dog, anything. All she could see was the road they travelled on and the grass either side. The effort drained her and exhaustion tired her body. The increasing pulse of a headache created a growing pressure behind her eyes.

Despite her vigilance, Eliza didn’t notice the stone and iron gates until they were passing through them. She turned round to try to get a better look, but they had already disappeared into the darkness. Facing forward, she saw a speck of light in the near distance, growing stronger with each pull of the carriage.

From the light emerged the outline of a manor house. Like Carroll’s Cheshire Cat, it came into being piece by piece – there a window, there a chimney, there a hedge. The carriage drew closer. There appeared a door and, by that door, a thin, unmoving figure.

Mr Drewry pulled the carriage to a stop in front of the house. The still figure remained in the doorway. It was a

woman – Eliza could see now – her hair pulled back in a loose bun, dark dress swaying in the night-time breeze. Eliza had barely enough strength to climb down from the carriage and nearly fainted as she and Rebecca waited to follow Mr Drewry into the house. As they did so, the woman stepped aside, allowing them entry, then approached the girls, a lantern held above their heads as she inspected them.

The shadows from the flame fell on her face, exaggerating the wrinkles around her mouth and eyes. Grey flecked her dark brown hair, and her serious manner reminded Eliza of their long-dead grandmother. When she spoke to Mr Drewry, her breath smelled of aspic and her voice sounded much younger than such a face should allow.

‘Why,’ she asked, ‘are there two of them?’