

CHAPTER 23

1400 hours – Lincoln, England.

The smell of wet grass drifted in through the open casement windows, carrying with it a damp, yet sweet fragrance. The black rain clouds finally relented, allowing the early June sunlight into the large bedroom. Enid Porter now stood with her back to the sunlight streaming through the large window. The light formed a hazy halo around her long auburn hair.

Her reflection was captured momentarily in the silvered glass of a long vanity mirror, and she caught the gleam of excitement in the eyes that glittered back at her. With a sudden childlike impulse, she stuck out her tongue, attempting to banish the poised, elegant stranger watching her. She turned from the mirror, and walked across the thick rose-patterned carpet to her Edwardian wardrobe. The dark wood brooded in the corner, dominating the daintier furniture. The doors gleamed through the high polish, and the grained wood played chase with the sunbeams which skated across the smooth surface like water. Inside awaited her future, preserved in lace.

She gripped the ornate gold handle of the left door, and it swung open soundlessly to reveal the pale gleam of ivory. There, suspended between shadow and sunbeam, hung her mother's dress like a gift waiting to be unwrapped, imbued with the expectation of ceremony. She stretched out her hand and

caressed the smooth fabric with her fingertips. The dress was beautiful, and impossibly soft, as if frozen in a moment of time, like an insect in amber. Her mother had worn it only once, on a day filled with joy, before war had reshaped the world and stolen away the man she loved. Now it was to be worn again by their daughter, and Enid felt the heavy burden of that inheritance.

A small smile tugged at her lips as she played out a little daydream; a daughter of her own, perhaps with her hair, perhaps with Steven's eyes, one day wearing this same dress. Maybe by then the world would be quieter, kinder.

With reverence, she lifted the heavy dress out of the wardrobe, laying it gently across her extended arm to cascade in a whisper of lace towards the floor. She carried it to the bed and arranged it carefully so as not to interrupt the smooth lines, coaxing each fold into place, unwilling to disturb its fluid grace. She wriggled out of her skirt so that she stood only in her camisole. With trembling fingers, she slowly unbuttoned the small row of pearls, which ran halfway down the back of the dress. The fabric pooled against the floor and she stepped into the circle of lace, inching the material up over her hips and stomach, slipping her arms into the tiny sleeves until her hands peeped through the ends. She shrugged her shoulders into the bodice and straightened the sheer material over her waist, breathing in as she turned towards the mirror once more. The sight that met her was almost too much, an exact replica of her own mother sitting in the picture frame on the dressing table. The gown fitted her like something destined to be,

the delicate material clinging gently where it should, falling away elegantly where it must. She placed her hands on her hips.

“Steven Kane,” she murmured to her reflection, “you are a lucky man.”

“He certainly is.”

Enid swirled to face her mother, who was standing in the open doorway of the bedroom, her eyes wide with unrestrained pride. She was holding a bottle of wine and two glasses which she set down on the dressing table.

“You know it’s bad luck to wear the dress before the wedding,” her mother chided.

“That’s just a silly superstition,” Enid said. She turned in a slow graceful circle. “What do you think?”

Gwen Porter stepped into the room and fussed with the dress, smoothing down the material and kneeling to straighten the hem of the gown. She stood up and took a step back.

“It looks exquisite,” she said, tears springing to her eyes.

“What is it, mother?” Enid asked, concerned.

Her mother picked up her wedding photo from the dressing table. “It’s like looking back in time at my own reflection.”

“What should I do with my hair?” Enid asked, gathering the auburn locks up in her fingers. “Up or down?”

“How does Steve like you to wear it?” Gwen asked.

A flash of memory came to Enid, of Steven chasing her through some old ruins. She touched her wrist recalling the heat of his playful grip as he caught her and pinned her against a pillar. He had released her hair from the clip and allowed it to fall about her shoulders before kissing her passionately. The recollection made her blush.

"He prefers it down," she said.

Her mother smiled, unable to hide the sadness in her eyes. "My little girl is all grown up," she said. "I wish your father had been here to see this."

A familiar ache stirred in Enid's chest. Her father had died before she ever saw his face. He was remembered only in photographs and the stories told with such tenderness. Enid wrapped her arms around her mother, resting her cheek against her shoulder.

"He *is* here," she said.

Gwen squeezed her tightly. "And he'd be so proud of you. You are so beautiful."

"It's in the genes," Enid said, wiping her moist eyes.

Gwen opened the bottle of wine and filled the two glasses, handing one to Enid. "Let me give you a tip for a long and successful marriage, darling," she began. "The three P's; paper, pipe and pie."

"Don't forget the Pims, mother," Enid said. She adopted a passable impression of her fiancé's Oxford University accent. "Pims, my dear, it's the only drink for a discerning RAF pilot."

“The four P’s then,” her mother amended, with a laugh.

They both heard the drone of bombers passing overhead. Suddenly the lightness of the mood evaporated and Enid’s stomach flipped as her thoughts turned to her fiancé. They had listened to the many BBC broadcasts of the unfolding Allied invasion. Steven would be in one of the many squadrons flying tonight. Suddenly, the dress seemed frivolous, an undeserved luxury in a bleak time of death and fear. Gwen had seen the look of despair in her daughter’s eyes.

“We forgot the most important P of all, darling,” she said. “Peace.”

Enid raised her glass. “Let’s drink to that.”