The Writing of *The War Within*:

A Study, Analysis, and Creation of Narrative Reality

A Thesis Submitted to

The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences

In Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

Katelynn Wood

4 May 2023

Liberty University

College of Arts and Sciences

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
To my grandmother, Marietta Lavern—you were the first person to believe in my dream to become a writer.

To my daughter, Marietta Lynn—you are everything God knew I needed bottled into one little body. Equal parts you, equal parts your namesake.

Thank you both for filling my life with purpose.

I hope this makes you proud.
Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my professors at Liberty University. Specifically, my MFA thesis committee, Timothy Shea and Timothy Christian. Your guidance, support, and belief in this project saw it through to its completion.

Secondly, I would like to thank the Riley County Historical Society for their help bringing the Community House to life on the page. I’d also like to thank Matt Anderson, Webmaster, Historian of the 509th Parachute Infantry Association, and honorary member of 509th Regiment, for his help in crafting an accurate depiction of Johnny’s training and time with the 509th.

To my students at Dexter School, may this always inspire you to do hard things, to listen to the “haters” and use every time someone says you can’t do something as motivation to do it and prove them wrong. May you always find joy within the worlds you create both real and imaginary, and never run out of ways to inspire each other. I have never known a group of students who were as creative, compassionate, and willing to learn as you. Thank you for helping me fall in love with teaching again. Thank you for writing with me. Thank you for supporting me and giving me rounds of applause when I announced my word count progress. I’ll never truly be able to capture or communicate just how much it helped drive me toward the finish line.

To my mother, I hope the stress and anxiety I put you through trying to find my way in life makes sense now. I hope you see the decisions I made led me to be exactly where and who I needed to be. Thank you for supporting me and for falling in love with these characters. The first copy is yours.

To my family both near and far, I love you, and I hope you find your purpose in life, no matter where, what, or who that is. If you find it, never let it go. That’s God’s greatest gift.
To my husband, you are my purpose. Your support through the past eight years of this project and especially these last two as I fought to find my footing has been immeasurable. You got me through the dark nights and the hardest chapters while my own demons warred within. Thank you for always letting me cry, but for reminding me who and whose I am. Experiencing the completion of this project alongside you will be etched in my memory forever. I love you more than the day I met you, the day I started this project, the day I married you, even yesterday. But tomorrow? Tomorrow, I will love you so much more than I do today.
Table of Contents

Artist Statement 6
Creating the Narrative Reality 14
Works Cited 29

The War Within 30
Artist Statement

My project, titled *The War Within*, tells the tale of a young woman named Rette who must relinquish control of her own life when World War II breaks out and all her carefully laid plans crumple. My journey to bring this story to fruition has been filled with persistence, dreams, research, and a plethora of grace.

A Legacy of Memory

I write to leave a legacy. I want to find myself at the end of my days, surrounded by those I love the most, and trust that I have done everything I could to make them proud. I, myself, have an irrational fear of running out of time and not achieving all that I want to in life. I also have a fear of forgetting others and others forgetting me. In a strange way, I think those fears are what drives my writing the most. I want to do something worth remembering, and I want to make something of my life that my children and grandparents can be proud of. Perhaps it is a result of achievement-focused celebrations rather than celebrating the effort put into them. My characters have grown to the point that they feel real to me, so I think in some part I am trying to make them proud as well. I feel compelled to bring their experience into the world for readers to learn from. I have worked on this project for over seven years now, and I have gained and lost so many characters over the course of that time. The characters that remain are so real to me now that I akin them to family. I consider it my duty to see their story, successes, failures, and subsequent heartbreaks to fruition.

Johnny and Rette’s story began in my sophomore year of college after transferring to Stephen F. Austin State University and joining the BFA Creative Writing program there. The idea stemmed from a prompt to draw from history as inspiration and the interesting tidbit that the first “Dear John” letter (break-up letter) was written during World War II. My family has an
extensive military history, and I am one of only a few women in my family who is not a military spouse. I never understood how a woman could do that to a man she loved, so naturally I asked myself, *what does a woman have to be going through to break up with the man she loves* while he is fighting for his life and country? The first draft was written completely out of order and as a series of short stories and vignettes. As the story developed and I recognized how large the story was that needed to be told, I began connecting the dots and filling in the gaps. At the conclusion of my BFA, I completed a second draft of Johnny and Rette’s story that looks vastly different from today’s story.

Much of my story was influenced by stories my grandmother and great aunt would tell me about their childhood growing up in rural Kansas during the early 1940s. They both recalled hearing the bombers returning to the base nearby, Fort Riley, and counting the planes to see if all returned home safely. My grandmother was the first person to support me in my writing, so this project is a way of paying tribute to her love, support, and stories. The writing process for the drafts I completed in my undergraduate was almost entirely driven by research and inspiration. I would think of an idea or come across an interesting historical tidbit, and I would place my characters in the situation and imagine how they would find themselves out of it. This practice is what I believe helped me to develop such a deep understanding of my characters. During my time here at Liberty, I have found myself needing to be much more disciplined as I have a multitude of additional responsibilities in my life now beyond just school and writing as I did for my bachelors. My writing process is much more need-based now, and I write mainly from an outline to fulfill the needs of the story rather than waiting for inspiration to strike.
For the Professional Jugglers

As the remainder of my time with Liberty comes to a close, I plan to continue the progress on this story by chipping away at my current outline to create a completed novel-length manuscript before the completion of my MFA. I have a set writing schedule to tackle this monumental task because I have recognized self-discipline as my own hubris as a writer. I would like to pursue a traditional, secular publishing route to reach the largest audience. I have also begun working on outlines for a book about Rette’s mother’s story, a sequel to Rette’s story, and I have at least four other story ideas involving Rette’s grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

This story needs to be told. I feel it deeply in my soul that there is someone in the world, or many someone’s, who are being faced with challenge after challenge, and they feel as though they are drowning. I have felt that. I understand how it feels to not be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel, but I have also trusted God to see me through and guide me until the light showed itself. Not everyone has that, so I wish to bring hope through Rette’s story. Life and God throw a lot at you, and it has been debated by theologians for decades whether God doesn’t throw more at you than you can handle or whether God throws more at you than you can handle to learn to trust His plans for us and to grow from the difficulties. Regardless of which side is correct, Rette’s story satisfies both.

I did not write the first draft of Rette and Johnny’s story as a mother. Rette’s mother and Rette as a mother were simply creations I deemed necessary for the storyline. However, as I grew into my role as a mother, I found a deeper meaning in my own writing that I have been able to develop. Rette makes a choice at the end of this chapter of her story to be independent and raise her child as a single mother, a choice that was socially dangerous for a woman in Rette’s shoes as an unmarried mother. She could have married one of the many men her mother
suggested, they were all willing, but she chose not to. She knows life will not be easy for herself or her child, but she knows, given everything she has already been through by that point, there is nothing she can’t handle.

Motherhood is terrifying, and trying to figure out how to raise a child while staying true to yourself as an individual is impossible, not to mention all the other expectations that are put on mothers and the struggle of life itself. Mothers are professional jugglers. They adapt to make it work. Single mothers, especially, manage to juggle better than the rest of us and put the married mothers’ efforts to shame. Married mothers rely on their partners as much as their partners are willing to assist, but single mothers have no choice but to do it all on their own.

**Epistolary Personas**

As this project is distinctively historical fiction, I also strive to tie it into the realistic fiction genres as I am doing my best to make it as believable as possible rather than riding along on the tropes of the 1940s.

Letters are a significant part of Rette and Johnny’s story. Beyond the flicker of inspiration that started it all, letters are how Rette and Johnny are able to stay connected throughout the course of the story when they are apart. Many books feature letters as a significant part of their storytelling, particularly *Persuasion* by Jane Austen, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* by Mary Shaffer and Annie Barrows, and *P.S., I Love You* by Cecelia Ahern. In each of these, letters are a means for the characters to stay connected, develop connections and romances, and even make the connection and romance last after the death of a spouse, as in the case of *P.S., I Love You*. These novels all also clearly belong in the realm of romance, as I believe Rette and Johnny’s story does as well. Letters are used to drive the plot, guide the characters, and increase the tension and even mystery for the reader.
Letters help readers uncover the heart of the senders. There is something extremely intimate about reading another’s mail, and in a novel, especially when a character is excluded from the storyline or cut off from the other characters it helps to bridge the gap between the reader and this character who is vitally important to the protagonist.

In *Persuasion*, both Anne and Wentworth are stubbornly tight lipped about the way they feel, emotionally constipated after holding back their feelings for years when Anne’s family deemed their match unworthy. In the penultimate scene, Wentworth is writing a letter, clearly occupied, and Anne is meeting with someone, neither knows the other is there until they make eye contact, and as Wentworth meticulously finishes his letter, Anne’s character arc comes full circle, and she finally allows herself to feel what she has been pushing away all those years. She loves him, and to her luck, he loves her, too.

In the case of *P.S., I Love You*, the letters act as a connection between Holly and her dead husband, Gerry. As she navigates her grief, Gerry’s short but sweet letters bring her along on a year-long journey to process her emotions and learn to live her own life as the strong, independent person her late husband knew she was. It acts an excellent driving force through the story to drive the plot, and help the reader get to know not only Gerry through his letters, but the Holly she once was before her grief and before she and Gerry even met.

In *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*, we get an insight into the personas that can be created through written correspondence. Without face-to-face interaction, expectations can develop, and connections can be made based off the words alone. These expectations can be drastically different from reality as we see when Juliet and Dawsey finally meet face-to-face.
Each of these stories seem to contribute to the way letters function in Rette and Johnny’s story. Rette and Johnny pride themselves on their societal status and how others view them. They were also both raised in very romantically conservative households, so PDA for them is not something that is seen very often throughout the course of their story. Their emotions only really come through in their letters. While they are not physically present with each other, it is their main form of communication so there will naturally be some level of discomfort when they do meet again. In the same vein as *P.S., I Love You*, while Johnny writes no more letters after his death, there is one final delivery of the letter he wrote in case he died, a task all military men, even now, are asked to perform when they are sent on a mission or set to be deployed. The letters also act as a way for the readers to get to know who Rette and Johnny really are since when they are together, they are so bogged down with the struggles in their life that the only area the reader sees them free to express their deepest emotions and feelings about each other is in their letters.

When I first had the idea for Rette and Johnny’s story, I found myself asking the question, *what must a woman be going through to do such a thing?* The “Dear John” letter, the original break-up text, is a habit that runs rampant in relationships still today. Now we consider break-up via text message to be the modern equivalent, but they all seem to have the same vein of selfish cowardice of being unable to face a person when you are hurting them. In Rette’s case, she never actually mails her letter, but she does struggle with handling the stress and emotional turmoil that is being placed on her shoulders all at once. In Rette’s case, she writes the letter to lighten her emotional load, to be able to take one thing off her plate and no longer worry about it, but she realizes that she will always worry about him—possibly even more so if he wasn’t “hers”.

**Give and Take**
This project has progressed in countless ways, but one of my personal favorite ways it has unfolded is through the themes of motherhood, control, and grace. Motherhood is a recurring theme throughout this book in several ways – Rette and her mother, Johnny and his mother (Lynette), and Rette as a mother herself. Each of these relationships has its own struggles that constantly shift given the circumstances of their lives. Rette’s mother is constantly trying to micromanage Rette’s life by instilling the same values that she learned as a wife. This dynamic is at the forefront of much of the book with Rette consistently giving pushback to her mother’s ways through her thoughts. Johnny and his mother share an amicable relationship full of respect and love, something that Rette wishes she had with her own mother – and potentially a relationship she will model with her daughter. On the surface, motherhood may not be the first theme that Christian scholars would think of, but throughout this project, I have constantly been drawn to the book of James where it says, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” (James 1:27) The Bible refers to mothers as being sacred individuals who should be uplifted and praised, and I want this project to reflect that.

The second theme of my story is that of control. Being in control is something that I have always prioritized in any circumstance; if things are out of my control, my fight-or-flight response initiates and I am either stressed, anxious, or both. The characters within my story, especially Rette and her mother, reflect my own challenges with control, but they also experience periodical victories when it comes to control – something that I perhaps am trying to manifest in my own life. I am always reminded of the phrase, “let go and let God”, but I don’t believe this truly encapsulates the difficulty of letting go of one’s need to control things. In fact, I am more drawn to the book of 1 Timothy where the writer ensures us that, “For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and
love and self-control.” I believe that this power of love and self-control has given me the ability to overcome the darkest of times in my life, and it is this same power that is reflected in Rette and some of the other characters’ abilities to overcome their obstacles. In discovering the vision for my story, I believe that this is what my story is attempting to accomplish, but in a way that is relatable for all strugglers, Christian or not.

The third theme that I found myself fawning over during this project is one that I’ve struggled with throughout much of my life: grace. The Oxford definition of grace is simply “courteous goodwill”, but I believe the grace of God goes much further than that. I am constantly drawn to the song, “Amazing Grace” which perfectly summarizes the beginning, middle, and end of one’s life after being interceded by the grace of God. I am yet to fully uncover how this grace is displayed in my novel, but I believe that after the hardships and difficulties that Rette faces, she faces the reality of either showing grace to herself and those around her or having to live with the trauma of death and lost love.
Creating the Narrative Reality

No matter the form, the relationship between sender and receiver of communication affects the way the message is received. This especially applies to the written word. When the relationship between reader and author is violated or doesn’t sit right for one person or another, in nonfiction, the author’s credibility is called into question, and in fiction, the reader simply puts the book down and declares it “DNF”, deeming it unworthy of completion. This is every writer’s worst nightmare. After all, what is the point of writing if not for the purpose of sharing a part of oneself that is difficult to share? Until the manuscript is read, it is simply words on a page. Once it is processed and ruminated on by a reader’s mind, that is when it truly becomes a story. But how does a writer get there? How do they transition from simply writer, putting words to the page, into author, putting books and stories into the hands of their readers and keeping them there? The key lies within the narrative style, specifically the narrative structure, the tone, and the narrative reality that is created within the piece. With these weapons in a writer’s arsenal, the transition from writer to author will be a natural one, and readers will be salivating over the narrative style that lies between the covers of the book.

The Things They Carried

Tim O’Brien’s relationship with his readers is one wrought with speculation. His collection of short stories, The Things They Carried, took the world by storm, and has not halted in its onslaught. Throughout his entire collection, he works to craft the idea that the stories told within are true, or at least no less important than a true story just because they are fiction. O’Brien addresses this idea plainly in the story titled “Good Form”. He addresses the reader and beckons for them to feel as he felt and understand why “story-truth” is truer than “happening truth” (O’Brien 171). As he works to uncover the “Timmy” he once was, O’Brien unravels years
of trauma at the hands of the Vietnam War, and he crafts a redemptive tale about storytelling and finding one’s true self in the process.

The sequencing of the collection of stories within creates a nonlinear structure that generates an intense sense of ambiguity and convolution when the entire collection is consumed in just a few sittings or studied as a whole. This sense of dissonance is created as the narrative bounces back and forth between the events of the story’s “present” with the men during their military service in Vietnam and the events of O’Brien’s “present” portraying himself as a forty-three-year-old writer struggling over the events and portraying them on the page. The reader finds themselves unable to follow the traditional linear story, as they are accustomed to consuming, and it results in a much deeper analysis on the reader’s part. It is not usually until the book has been consumed about two-thirds of the way (around the story, “Good Form”) that the reader begins to catch onto the bigger story being told. It is not just a collection of war stories. It is a tale of a writer trying to process their own traumas and communicate them in such a way that the true horror and trauma of the times can be communicated and consumed by a reader so that the empathy is developed. Once that empathetic reader has been established, the true goal of the work has been achieved. The purpose of the piece is to be seen, to be heard, and for others who may have gone through similar experiences and traumas to feel seen and heard themselves.

The language O’Brien uses helps to establish the world within the story itself, or the narrative reality. The blunt, coarse language of men at war creates a realistic and justified experience for reader and veteran alike. Both a reader with no military experience and a military veteran could pick up the collection, read any of the experiences held within and agree that it is an accurate portrayal of wartime. But it is more than the profanity that comes with putting yourself at risk in a place like Vietnam in conditions that make home look like a grand palace
filled with luxury, it is the blunt description with which each death within its pages is delivered. One moment the character is there, talking, laughing, and chuffing it up with the others, and the next there is a bullet through his skull—but that’s life, and that’s the testament of the truth with which O’Brien tells the story. That is what creates a truer story truth than the happening truth. In the moment, someone died, but often in the moment, you don’t recognize what happened until it was too late. It is the recollection that makes someone’s death more pertinent, remembering how they were ‘so full of life’ prior to their passing. In the story, their liveliness is illustrated through the stark contrast of death. The tone created through his diction, not just the profanity, but rather the quiet poignancy of a traumatic event stated plainly, is what creates that believability.

O’Brien’s “story-truth” as he calls it, is the very means with which every story is hoped to be told. In every story, the author actively works to create a narrative reality, formatting the very world that exists within the story to make the world believable, particularly if that world is vastly different from our own. In O’Brien’s case, he has the reality of the world we live in working in his favor. Our world is not that different than the world that he is creating, but he must work to create the written world that is then believable as a reflection of our own. Thus, he must create a narrative reality that acts as a mirror to our own reality. This is done especially well on word-level. In the story, “On the Rainy River,” O’Brien recounts his experience contemplating going AWOL and escaping to Canada after being drafted into the Vietnam War. The fear and shame manifest themselves as he floats on the Rainy River off the shore of Minnesota, trying to will himself into the water to swim to Canada. “All I could do was cry…” he wrote, “quietly, not bawling, just the chest-chokes” (O’Brien 54). These “chest-chokes”, though a phrase penned by O’Brien himself, perfectly captures that sensation of sobbing past the point of tears, and it is experiences like this that are described just-so that create that augmented
reality that the reader gets to exist within while they are superimposing their consciousness onto the narrative of the story. O’Bien sets up the narrative reality, but its only once the reader consumes the words on the page that the narrative reality comes to life and lives within the reader’s mind.

**The Kite Runner**

Khaled Hosseini crafts a coming-of-age story told through the point of view of Amir looking back on his life as a young boy dealing with very adult issues in the beginning stages of the Russian occupation of Afghanistan. The linear narrative structure that is reflective in nature immediately tells the reader that they are on a journey to learn something alongside their narrator. Afterall, no one goes back and studies their past, recalling their traumas, without uncovering something new about themselves. Hosseini utilizes tone in a way that relaxes the reader in one moment and grips their hearts with exciting emotion in another. At times, Hosseini draws out the moment and explains in a way that slows the reader down to focus on crucial elements within the story which is necessary to firmly establish the sense of place. The cultural explanations, vivid imagery and dialogue all work together to help craft the narrative reality that the reader can exist within.

The reflective narrative structure begins with the opening line, “I became what I am today at the age of twelve…” and continues throughout the opening paragraph, concluding with the stark statement, “…I realize I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years” (Hosseini 1). This immediately orients the reader in time, especially given the introductory narrative date of “December 2001”, and that his childhood experience begins in 1975. The reader is then free to speculate, given their own individual knowledge of history, how the events that are about to unfold will fit within the folds of time. Hosseini trusts the reader with
their own individual levels of historical knowledge and gives no historical account for educational purposes, choosing rather to err on the side of independent and indirect education for his readership. This immediately works to establish the author-reader relationship and allows Hosseini to proceed with Amir’s story without the weight or baggage that a history lesson may bear.

Through tone, Hosseini creates tension, haste, and urgency in one moment then transitions to languid and juicy description that allows the reader to sink their teeth into the moment rather than just putting them on edge. When Amir and his best friend, Hassan, are at the kite-fighting festival at the local bazaar, Amir flies his kite in a fight against a blue kite, and Hosseini writes the events as though they lie in wait on a chopping block. The sentences are short and provide the reader with a tense play-by-play of Amir’s first victory. The short, choppy sentences also ensure that the tone is easy to understand. There is no question here how the reader should be expected to feel, and the reader can very clearly see what is happening on the page and interpret the events as expected. It also creates a beautiful contrast with the lengthier sentences that contain much more description and leaves less to the reader’s imagination. This first victory is the first time the reader bears witness to the cyclic horrors that Hassan is subjected to as an ethnic minority. Just when Amir and Hassan are at their peak happiness, celebrating their victory, Hassan leaves to retrieve the blue kite and is cornered by a gang of bullies who rape him. There is no other way to report the horrors that members of an ethnic minority like Hassan must face other than the blatant statements of fact. Through the lens of Amir, the reader witnesses the horror, and again, it is perfectly clear to them how they should feel in the moment.

Throughout the entirety of this book, Hosseini repeatedly changes the rhythm and pacing of his words to keep the reader actively participating in the narrative reality, rather than as a
simple observer. The one, two, and even three-word sentences used at the end of chapter twelve when adult Amir asks his girlfriend for her hand in marriage, puts the reader into the moment, and exposes Amir’s unprocessed traumas of his childhood. The lengthier more languid moments keep the reader connected to the description even when the events are no longer portrayed in the choppy, short syntax manner. The empathy created because of the tone and syntax, takes the reader from just an observer of the horrors Amir was forced to witness, and makes the reader themselves a witness to the horrors. Hearing about something happening and being told the story of an event is one thing, but it doesn’t suggest any particular level of empathy but rather sympathy. Seeing something happen and bearing witness to it alongside the narrator creates a level of empathy that is impossible to ignore. The reader has no choice but to feel the same way as Amir, and that is the mark of a true author.

*The Wrath & The Dawn*

Renée Ahdieh’s retelling of *One Thousand and One Nights* brings the reader along as Shahrzad volunteers to be the murderous caliph’s next bride, but she has a secret—she is going to assassinate the caliph to end the murdering of all the young women chosen as his brides. Ahdieh’s relationship to her readers is very different from other authors. The reader awaits in uncomfortable expectation for the worst to happen, for Shahrzad to be murdered as all the wives before her had been before their first dawn as a wife to the caliph. The reader plays into the false sense of security, just as Shahrzad herself, and is thrusted into a moment of disbelief when it seems as though the worst is upon her. This cat and mouse tête-à-tête pits the reader against Ahdieh. There is trust, seeing as page after page, the reader must continue to discover whether Shahrzad will break the cyclical murders, but there is a mistrust in knowing that Shahrzad must
not be able to make it through unscathed. The narrative structure, tone, and narrative reality all play into this relationship and help to maintain it throughout the course of the narrative.

From the start, Ahdieh sets the precedent that Shahrzad will not survive to see her first dawn, as hundreds of brides before her did not. The starting tension creates a level of intrigue that hooks the reader and doesn’t let go until they find out if she will survive or not. While the trust is not broken from the start, the reader is conditioned from the beginning to recognize that the author may not be trustworthy as secrets are made known without revealing their contents. The reader knows there are things happening beyond just Shahrzad and the caliph and that there is more to the murders than just a murderous caliph, but it is not clear from the start what is truly behind it. The novel progresses through one night after another of Shahrzad trying to make it until the following dawn, taking on the role of storyteller to her murderous husband, telling the story of *Aladdin* and leaving her husband on a cliffhanger each night, wanting more. This is effective in two ways: one the reader becomes accustomed to the tale that the novel itself is inspired by, but it also acts as a ribbon woven throughout the story carrying Shahrzad and the reader from one night to the next until Shahrzad finds the moment she needs to kill the caliph. This teasing structure of give and take on the part of Ahdieh is what carries the reader from one page to the next and proceeds through the narrative structure seamlessly while causing great strife to the reader’s narrative understanding.

Ahdieh creates a world where language that is reminiscent of an ancient time merges with the vibrant cultural language of the Middle East. Though the world is rooted in mythical fiction, the tone created through this language is one that encourages the reader to mull over each and every word. As the third person perspective gently shifts from Shahrzad to Khalid, the caliph, and even to other characters working simultaneously behind the scenes of the main narrative, the
tone shifts as well, aiding in the transition and ultimately providing the reader with greater insight into the characters and their desires. It is this tactic that eventually helps Ahdieh win over her readers and gain her trust as the reader begins to gain insight into Khalid and recognize that the murders are not of his own volition. Piece by piece the reader is warmed over to Ahdieh and Khalid ultimately. Khalid’s general tone of passivity, rich honesty, and humanity helps the reader to see and understand that there is more to the situation than Ahdieh has chosen to reveal. This helps Ahdieh maintain her relationship with her reader by giving them that reassurance bit by bit that she is taking them along on a journey that they will not regret nor forget any time soon.

The narrative reality that the reader faces within *The Wrath & The Dawn* is one wrought with reluctance. The reader is an active participant and witness to the narrative reality, but they are not sure if they want to be a part of it because of the mistrust between themselves and Ahdieh. Regardless, the narrative reality is artfully created and maintained by Ahdieh’s persistence with the narrative and the inner workings that occur to help the story come to fruition. The tone and culturally rich language used throughout helps to create a world and environment in which the reader finds themselves sucked into and thriving. The pacing, which at times runs parallel to that of a snail’s, allows readers to take in the full surroundings and events of the moment, and it provides Ahdieh with ample time to take it one step further with her reader. It is this pacing and dedication to closing the gap between herself and her reader that makes Ahdieh’s narrative reality within this novel so rich.

**Narrative Structure**

If there is a writer, there must be a reader, the alternative piece to the puzzle who makes it all worth it—or not—in the end. The link between author and reader is not always an easy one and is wrought with personas, narrators, drama, characters, and expectations. Patricia Duncker
described the narrative chain in this order: Author, implied author, narrator/speaker, dramatization, characters and events, implied reader, and reader (Duncker 195). This chain shows that it is not as simple as one writes and the other reads what is written. There are expectations, both spoken and silent, that affect both the creation and the reception of the written work. Readers have their real selves to contend with while also handling who they are within the pages of the book that they are consuming, and idea that becomes exponentially more complicated the more one thinks about it. The author, too, has a version of themselves that is put forward as the “author” rather than the unconfident, timid, self-conscious creator of thought. This persona is what creates the narrator who tells the story and acts as the mode of transport to the reader, but this goes beyond just a first, second, third, or omniscient presence. The narrative structure and reality create the very means with which the story is consumed and communicated from one consciousness to another. This mode of transport of thought is unparalleled in any other communicative form, which is what makes the written word so timeless and versatile.

Duncker described narrative structure in two parts: a siege narrative, and a quest narrative. A siege narrative is one that is stationery where the events of the story are maintained within a small number of settings and the protagonist feels a certain level of claustrophobia or a need to escape. Well-constructed, a siege narrative can create tension and intensity, but they must be believable at their core or risk bathos (anticlimax or disappointment). War stories are often considered siege narratives when one considers that those telling the war stories are not typically there of their own volition. *The Things They Carried* is a siege narrative because of the claustrophobic sense that Tim feels throughout his entire recollection of his time in Vietnam. He is trapped within his own trauma of wartime memory. *The Wrath & The Dawn* is another siege
narrative, as all Shahrzad wants to do is complete her mission (assassinate the caliph) and return home.

A quest narrative is desire driven, especially the desire to go home—which lends itself to many war stories as well. These narratives are typically on the hunt for something as a lost-and-found narrative. Readers prefer endings with satisfying closure to those that are left ambiguous or open-ended. Most prominently, *The Kite Runner* is a quest narrative and provides excellent final closure with its conclusion. The opening and closing mirroring effect allows the reader to see the entire narrative come full circle which creates a deeply rooted sense of satisfaction after the grueling and emotional journey that the narrative takes the reader on.

A story that is action packed is satisfying at its conclusion, but it can also be exhausting. The narrative structure does not always have to be wrought with drama but rather movement. Ursula Le Guin suggests that writers keep the story “interconnected with itself, rich with chaos forward and backward…crowded with sensations, meanings, and implications” (Le Guin 118). The crowdedness is not in reference to the events themselves but rather the way that the events are portrayed and described. Le Guin goes on to suggest that what is left out “is infinitely more than” what is included, and that there must be “silence around the voice” (Le Guin 118). It is up to the author to create a narrative that does not insult the reader’s intelligence by spelling out every little detail, but rather leave the reader room to interpret and apply meaning to the situation as they deem necessary. Lindsay Clarke draws attention to the danger of overwriting, stating that it can signal “a failure to trust the imagination of the reader” (Clarke 252). The reader must be allowed to breathe. Le Guin also mentions Jill Paton Walsh’s idea of “trajectory” which suggests the “shape of a movement…that never ceases…which all messages contribute in some way” (Le Guin 124). This sets a precedence for the author’s prewriting steps as the ending must be
suggested in the story’s beginning. There must be a sense of circularity and mirroring between the beginning and ending. This is done particularly well with *The Kite Runner* and *The Wrath & The Dawn*.

In my own work, the narrative structure resembles that of a siege narrative. Johnny and Rette are both trapped, claustrophobic in their own lives and the choices they make. Rette is claustrophobic of her own fault, choosing to restrict herself to the predictable plan that she has been working toward all her life, and she tries to hold Johnny to it as well. Johnny is trapped in that he wants to be home and he wants to give Rette the life she wants, but he can’t—he is stuck fighting a war that neither of them started and is trapped. The story captures a sense of redemption and acceptance when Rette’s life looks drastically different by the end, but she is happier, healthier, and better for it.

**Tone**

In Jack Hart’s book, *Wordcraft*, he provides a clear guide to creating powerful writing. His chapter on Force is ample in applicable advice for creating a tone that cannot be ignored. He speaks in part on voice, mentioning “writing in terms of personality”, that how something is said reflects on who the author is and the implied persona that they are creating (Hart 77). This seems obvious, but that sense of putting the “strong, vibrant human being” that each writer is, down on paper in the form of a narrator is also a surefire way to create a tone for the narrator that will compel the reader to listen and continue to read (Hart 77). That compelling tone is, in part, what accustoms the reader to the story they are about to embark and acts as an instant relationship establisher between the reader and the author so that they both know where the other stands. In a trusting sense, as with *The Kite Runner* and *The Things They Carried* or at odds as in *The Wrath & The Dawn*. 
Variation in tone is a necessary tactic. If everyone went around yelling at each other all the time, then yelling would lose its dramatic effect, and then what would angry people do to express themselves? The same goes for tone. If everything is pitched “at the same high-decibel volume” as Hart puts it, then readers will stop listening (Hart 78). Quiet writing carries just as much impact; “the secret is not in the volume, but in the delivery” (Hart 78). This delivery is carried through on the tone, and particularly the expert conducting of tone through the orchestra that is the narrative. The action-packed sequences are balanced with the languid, rich, thought-provoking moments that allow the reader to suspend in their own thoughts and speculation. This is a running theme throughout all three novels mentioned within this critical analysis. Each author recognizes their tone—when to shout and when, in the most critical of moments, it is better to whisper—or better yet, stay silent. Tone is created through the word choice, but also in the choice of what not to say.

Beyond the words themselves, syntax is the next step in creating tone. Henry David Thoreau said, “A sentence should read as if its author, had he held a plow instead of a pen, could have drawn a furrow deep and straight to the end.” In other words, each sentence should be created with confidence and depth and ultimately add to the tone of the overall collection of sentences, creating the story. This will happen anyway of course, but it works best if the author is cognizant of the fact that their sentences carry impact on the theme and overall message of their work rather than just hoping that it will be perceived in the way they want. Strong verbs provide a strong foundation for a powerful sentence. Jack Hart refers to William Zinsser’s On Writing Well, stating that Zinsser “advises that we target verbs with inherent qualities that evoke action” (Hart 80). This inherent quality is what allows many verbs to carry imagery or sound within their word structure or meaning. The more concrete, the better. When variations of the root verbs
come about, that’s when the narrative falls into trouble. Verbs are weakened when they are used as nouns or adapted into other forms. These strong verb forms create an unarguable tone that leaves nothing left to question for the reader, providing clarity and justification for a stable reading experience.

In my own work, I try to craft a narrative tone that creates a riveting, vibrant experience for the reader. As the perspective shifts and as the characters develop throughout the story, the narrative tone shifts and morphs as well, lending itself to an adaptable, believable reading experience.

**Narrative Reality**

Narrative structure and tone both participate in the creation of the narrative reality, or the reality that exists within a book. This augmented reality or sense of escapism is what draws so many readers into the depths of books with rich narrative style, but it is not something that is created easily. The level of trust between the reader and the author must be astronomical, even if the reader is hesitant to admit that they trust the author, as in *The Wrath & The Dawn*, the reader is along for the ride whether they want to be or not because of the poignant narrative reality that is created at the story’s conception.

O’Brien’s idea of “story-truth” is reiterated by Edward Jones’s experience with his novel *The Known World*. As he mentions in his talk from a lecture series titled “Finding the Known World”, reprinted in *The World Split Open*, Oprah Winfrey called him personally to ask what about his book was real and what was not, and question after question “[Jones] just kept saying, ‘I made it all up. I made it all up’” (Jones 85). Jones was able to create an unarguable setting that felt real but was entirely fictitious. Much like *The Things They Carried*, the story-truth can sometimes seem more real than the reality of truth itself. Jones created an effective narrative
reality in which his readers were able to exist and had such a hard time coming to terms with the fact that it was all fake. As the creator of the narrative reality, Jones considered himself “the god of the world [he] was creating” (Jones 95). From the position of a storyteller who created all the personalities within the pages, that is not a blasphemous thing to consider rather it put a great sense of responsibility upon the shoulders of the writer to justify the created world, the narrative reality, so that it can be consumed by the reader.

Marilynne Robinson describes the relationship between reader and writer as “creating a lingering dream, good or bad, that other souls can enter” (Robinson 128). This dream is the narrative reality that is created within the story itself. Lindsay Clarke in his essay “Going the Last Inch,” brings the idea that dreams’ images “allow the oldest proverbial parts of the brain to speak to the neocortex, thus opening a channel of communication between the conscious and unconscious minds” (Clarke 250). By relying on this inward imagination, good writing works in the same manner as dreams, creating more freedom for the reader’s experience. The narrative reality that the characters exist within is also the place where the reader’s own memories and horrors—and the emotions tied to both—are trudged up. The beauty of language is what creates, according to Robinson, “the fabric of experience itself” (Robinson 129). Just because the reader is not the active participant in the events within that narrative reality, does not make them any less part of the experience. The danger of overwriting is to insult the reader and is often a sign of a writer’s “anxiety to make sure that [their] meaning gets across” (Clarke 252). The reader is considered when the narrative itself is created, and to separate the reader’s consciousness from the narrative reality, is to unravel the tapestry of the piece. Readers read to understand their own world, to connect with the events of the story and find the “essential mode of [their] being in the world, individually and collectively”, and they read fiction to find a “narrative freed from the
standard of literal truth,” finding instead, a truer truth (Robinson 130). The power of the narrative reality carrying more import and empathetic impact than life itself is the driving force behind the conservation of literature in a unifying acceptance that sometimes, fictional though they may be, stories are more honest than life itself.

In my own work, the narrative reality has become part of my own living reality. Anytime I sit down to write, I find myself of two minds and living in two worlds, the world where I am writing, sitting at my desk or in a coffee shop, and the world in central Kansas in the early 1940s with Johnny and Rette. It is that sensation that I then try to capture for my readers to create as realistic of an experience as possible for my readers. I want them to be engrossed and immersed in Johnny and Rette’s story, so I try to make their story as fool-proof and believable as possible, leaving no room to entertain the idea that their story is anything but real.
Works Cited


Chapter One

Life has a plan. On it, some details are carefully placed in strategic order, while others remain mysteries right up until their grand reveal. By the end of it, what is there? More plans, arrangements for the end of life to try to fulfill one’s final wishes. Sometimes those wishes are met, sometimes not, and others go so soon that wishes and plans are not even deemed a necessity.

Since childhood, Rette Murphy carefully planned every part of her life under the scrutinious guidance of her mother, and those who loved her humored them in the process. Most were grateful for the structure, logic, and predictability that the plans offered—or so she liked to tell herself.

As a result, surprises were often inconvenient, so when her beau, Johnny, and their best friends Helen and Frank had shown up at the end of her shift at Olly’s Diner, she tried her best to settle into the change of plans but was on edge their entire meal, only able to think of her mother waiting for her at home. She sat in the booth, struggling to relax into the conversation.

“We want to get married,” Helen told her excitedly.

Rette stared between Helen and Frank, and taken by surprise, she forgot her usual societal niceties. “Are you pregnant?”

“Margarette,” Johnny hissed in her ear. Rette waved him off and continued staring between their two best friends.

They both smiled– knowingly, Rette noticed–but shook their heads.

“No, no, we’re not,” Helen assured her, reaching across the diner’s table to place her hand over Rette’s. “But once we’re married, we’re hoping to be blessed enough to be expecting by the end of the year.”
“Of the year?!” Rette’s voice raised an octave the same moment Johnny said, “What’s the rush?”

Helen brushed her hair behind her ear and glanced at Frank, her cheeks flushing. “We just want to be able to enjoy our life together.”

“But I thought you wanted to be a nurse?” Rette felt a twinge of betrayal. For the past three years, Helen had confided in her time after time about her deep desire to become a nurse.

“I want to be a wife and mother more.” Helen shrugged as if it was the easiest question she’d had to answer yet.

“What did your parents say?” Johnny spoke up.

Helen’s gaze dropped to the table, and they all sat in silence for a beat before Frank shifted in his seat, the booth’s cushion creaking beneath him.

“My grandfather loves Helen. He has been asking me for years when I was going to marry her. I don’t think he realized how young we were when he began asking—we were barely sixteen!” Frank chuckled and pulled Helen closer into his side. There was an edge of discomfort in the motion.

Rette’s gaze moved to Helen expectantly. Johnny clasped his hands together and leaned back in his seat.

Helen cleared her throat. “Mama and Papa would rather I remain focused on my studies, but they love Frankie. They will love our plan when we share it with them.”

Johnny held up a hand, and Helen’s gaze shifted to Johnny’s face quickly. Rette saw Helen wince.

Johnny pointed at Frank. “You mean to say, you are as good as engaged to her, and you have not asked her father? Herr Lehman will be furious with you, Frank. What are you thinking?”
Frank sat up straighter, and Rette saw his jaw clench. His eyes blazed, and Rette saw something new there. “I am thinking I am in love with Helen and have been for years. If Helen's father doesn’t know my intentions by now then one of you is a fool, and I don’t think it is him.”

Johnny sighed.

Rette sat straighter. Surely, they knew Rette and Johnny just wanted the best for their best friends. “I think what Johnny meant is that we’re happy for you. We support you. We love you.”

“I don’t know if we–”

Rette silenced Johnny with a look.

“We just want to make sure you have a plan.” Rette smiled at Frank and Helen. Frank shook his head and chuckled without humor.

Helen looked at Rette with pity. “Not everything has to be planned, Freundin.”

Rette sat back in the booth she shared with Johnny and noticed a bit of skin peeling beside her nail.

“So, you’re still thinking Army?” Johnny’s voice brought Rette’s gaze to his face, but he stared at Frank across the table.

“Yessiree,” Frank replied, jovial. “I want to fly.” He motioned his hand through the air, reminding Rette of the schoolboys along their street with their tin airplanes.

“They’ll never let you fly. You get your letters and numbers upside down and backwards more often than not. You couldn’t read off the coordinates!” Johnny’s voice was warm, and the smiles on the young men’s faces were enough to tell Rette neither of them took Johnny’s words to heart, but Rette did remember Frank struggling in many areas throughout school.

“They’d take a doorknob if it could shoot a gun! In fact, I think they did with Wrenwick.”

“Wrenwick joined up?”
“Just last week, could barely make his mark on the form, but they took him.”

“Don’t be unkind, Frankie,” Helen chastised him. “Eugene’s family owns a farm. He couldn’t go to school with us for years. He had to help at home so they could keep it. The past decade was not kind to their family.”

“Lad probably needed an escape,” Frank chuckled.

The kitchen door of the diner breezed open and Rette watched Olly clamor out with a bin full of coffee cups. It clattered on the chrome bar top, and he set to work drying and stacking the mugs upside down beside the coffee maker.

Rette glanced at the time. She’d been off the clock for an hour now, since the dinner rush cleared and Johnny, Frank, and Helen showed up to surprise Rette for some milkshakes. She was surprised Mother wasn’t storming the diner, demanding her home.

She stood from her seat and gathered the glasses, carrying them behind the counter, and setting to work alongside Olly.

He grumbled something under his breath about her being off the clock and not getting paid for working over, but she just shrugged in response, picking up a towel and drying a mug.

“I’m already late. Mother will already be angry, and besides, Joan will be glad to have you home early tonight. Let me.”

Olly glanced at her with a half-smile but said nothing more.

Rette watched Frank and Helen as they chatted with Johnny. Every third word they would catch each other’s eye—a feat when sitting right next to one another. They were clearly in love and had been for a few years. Rette wasn’t sure why this came as such a surprise to her. For years it had been the four of them. Rette and Helen, friends since girlhood, and Frank and Johnny, practically brothers with how much time Frank spent with Johnny’s family, the Carvers. Rette
supposed it was this—the simple nights like this—that she feared losing. She had planned for years on helping Helen through nursing training, and Frank going to school alongside Johnny to work at the bank. But now it seemed everything had changed.

Everything aside from her and Johnny, of course. Johnny recently began his internship at the bank down the road from the diner, and Rette was steeped deep in her ‘societal duties’ that Mother deemed more appropriate than her job at Olly’s.

Olly picked up the final mug before Rette could reach for it, and he motioned to the door with a nod. “Head on out, Murph. I don’t need your mother calling. I’ve got the rest.”

Rette shook out her towel and wiped her hands on her stained apron. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Bright and early. Joan will be here to relieve you at two.” Olly placed the fountain glasses in the bin he toted the mugs in and made his way back into the kitchen.

Rette waved at him as he went, sure that he did not, in fact, see her wave.

She retreated to the booth where Johnny waited with Frank and Helen. “I’m beat, Johnny. Mother expected me home an hour ago. Walk with me?”

Johnny scooted out of the bench seat and took Rette’s hand. “It would be my pleasure.”

Frank stood beside Johnny and clapped him on the shoulder. “Is it still alright if I stay at yours tonight, Johnny?”

“Momma said you’re always welcome. I would take that to heart if I were you.”

“Dear me, yes. I wouldn’t even tell her you questioned it,” Rette chimed in.

Helen stood and took Frank’s arm when it was offered. “I’ll walk with you as far as I can.”

They strode out, leaving behind the brightly lit Olly’s Diner for the shadows of the late-night main street of their town.
Rette and Johnny strode slowly, trailing a few yards behind Frank and Helen. Rette’s feet ached, and with each step her right shoe pinched the spot where it had rubbed a hole in the back of her stocking mid-morning. She had half a mind to ask Johnny to carry her, but she knew he would oblige even if he didn’t really want to, which put her off from even asking.

“Rette, about what Frank mentioned tonight–”

“I’m sure they’re just very in love at the moment. They’ll come down out of the clouds in a day or two.”

“No, not that–I truly do think they’ll be married before the end of the year.”

Rette glanced up at him, her chest clenching slightly for a reason unbeknownst to her.

Johnny opened his mouth to speak, and an uncharacteristic stammer came out without any actual words.

Rette rubbed her thumb on the outside of his hand, offering the small comfort she could.

“What is it?”

“I think I’d like to…” he trailed off, and his words hung incomplete in the air.

“To what?” Rette chirped before the realization set in. She stopped in her tracks.

Johnny continued forward, not looking back at her.

“Get married?!” Rette’s voice was so loud, Johnny whirled around. Rette spotted Frank and Helen stop and look back at them, concern clear. Johnny gave her a stern look before glancing at the shops around them for anyone she’d disturbed.

“Really, Margarette, surely that doesn’t come as a shock.”

Rette gaped, open mouthed. She tried to find words, but every time she tried to speak, her mouth opened again then closed without sound. “I should be getting home.”
Johnny studied her, taking in her apparent shock. Rette watched his shoulders sag, and his demeanor seemed to shrink before her eyes. “Clearly, I’ve been mistaken.”

Rette sprang back to life. She rushed to take his hand and continue their walk. “No, no. I just—Mother’s waiting for me, and her lecture is sure to be one for the books. You’re not mistaken—I mean yes, I’m shocked, but only because we’ve said for so long that we would wait until you’d secured a place at the bank. There’s no way we could make a home with my earnings from Olly’s. Sure, he pays me much more than I’d get paid anywhere else but still. Once we’d marry, I’d be expected to stay home, take care of the house and the children—” Rette broke off, her future flashing before her eyes. She wasn’t sure it was something she enjoyed the thought of just yet.

Johnny held her hand and continued their stride, waving at Frank and Helen who, too, turned to continue on their way home by moonlight.

“I want all of those things with you, but we have a plan, Johnny.”

“Ah, yes. The plan.” His voice dripped with layers of exhausted faux enthusiasm.

Rette met his gaze out of the corner of her eye. “Do not pity me for my plan. I would rather know what was going to happen and be prepared than be surprised and make a mistake that could have been preventable.”

Johnny nodded along, and Rette continued.

Rette motioned with her free hand into the empty night air. “Look at your parents. They went into their marriage with a plan, and they’re happy.”

“Your parents aren’t happy?”
Rette sighed. That she couldn’t decipher for herself how to answer. “It depends on the day, who you ask, the direction of the wind, and what temperature Mother’s tea was steeped at that morning.” She shrugged, not truly knowing.

“Rette, I don’t think happiness is tied to the financial planning of a couple.”

Rette huffed. “Says the wise future banker.” She knew the way her tone mirrored his own faux enthusiasm earlier was unfair, but this wasn’t the first time they’d had this disagreement.

Johnny raised their clasped hands in frustration and turned more of his body toward her to address her as he walked. “Be free with me. Be spontaneous for once, Rette. Marry me.”

Rette laughed, but Johnny stopped walking.

She tugged on his hand, but he resisted. It’s not as though she wanted to face her Mother’s anger with her not being home when she’d said, but she knew it would be more manageable if she was home sooner rather than later. She turned to urge him along, but he stood there, clutching something small between the fingers of his right hand.

He looked up at her, his blue eyes dark in the dim streetlight. His cheeks flushed, and a small smile played on his lips. “I imagined this differently, I’ll admit.”

Rette looked between his gaze and his pinched fingers, now held up to show her. It was gold with a single, round, glittering stone set into it.

Johnny sank to the ground, and Rette was of the mind to try to pull him back up.

“I’ve loved you every day since you came knocking on my front door asking my mother if I could come out to play. Sure, I may not have known it, or been too afraid to admit it, but I’ve never been able to say no. You’re my guide, Rette. When I’m lost you find me, and you remind me of my way home, and I want to be reminded every day that you are my home.”
Johnny reached for her hand which hung at her side as she stared open-mouthed at him for the second time that evening. “Johnny—”

“Let me finish,” he chastised her. “I love you more today than I did that day I said yes to come out and play. I’ll love you more when I wake up tomorrow knowing my grandmother’s ring is on your finger, and in sixty years when we hand this ring over to our grandson to propose to the love of his life, I will love you so much more than I do in this moment, and that, my dear, is quite a bit.” Johnny chuckled, and Rette trembled with the realization that tears were now falling down his cheeks.

She was even more shocked to find tears on her own cheeks. She laughed too, not knowing what else to do.

Johnny stared at her in a silence that was broken only by a short gasp and exclamation that was quickly cut off from behind Rette. Without turning, she knew Frank had shushed Helen’s surprise.

Johnny looked between Rette and Frank and Helen behind her. He shifted the knee he was kneeling on, and Rette wondered why he was still knelt. She squeezed his hand and shifted her weight to her other foot, easing the pain on the pinched spot.

“So?” Johnny prompted her.

“What?” Rette blinked, her brow furrowing.

“Will you marry me?”

“Oh!” Rette lunged forward, realization setting in, and mentally kicking herself for her idiocrasy. Mother would have a heyday with this. “Yes! Yes, of course!”

Johnny’s face split into a grin, and Rette caught a glance at the relief that washed over him before he leaned down to peck her lips. She returned his kiss, but glanced back at Frank and Helen
who were embracing, watching them from a few yards away. Helen squealed and danced, and
Frank clapped his hands, hooting at Johnny in that way young men do.

“Here–this is yours now,” Johnny mumbled quietly, slipping the cold metal around the ring
finger on her left hand.

Rette watched it glisten there in the streetlamps until Johnny wrapped his arms around her
shoulders. A perfect fit.

“You know,” Johnny began as he wrapped his arms around Rette’s waist as they stood on
her front porch, illuminated only by the small porch light. “We could be married and expecting by
the end of the year, too—if you wanted.”

Rette choked out a laugh and gripped her hands behind Johnny’s neck, holding on—
Johnny’s words made her knees quiver but not from excitement. “I’m thinking summer. Next
summer we’ll marry, and once we’re settled in our own home we can talk about babies.”

“Hmm.” Johnny leaned his forehead against hers. “Babies. I like the sound of that.”

Rette smiled, letting her eyes close as she settled into the proximity of him. “That is if you
grow sick of me.”

Johnny pulled away, and Rette regretted her words, already pulling at the back of his neck
to bring him closer again. “Never. I could never be sick of you.” He furrowed his brow at her, and
Rette giggled as he settled his forehead against hers again.

Rette sighed into his embrace. “I should be getting—”

Rette’s front door swung open then, revealing Mother standing in the dim glow of the porch
light. “Where have you been?”
Rette stepped away from Johnny, the distance between them paining her, and Johnny’s hand was still reached out, maintaining contact with her waist. She opened her mouth to respond, but Johnny spoke up.

“It’s my fault Mrs. Murphy. Frank, Helen, and I surprised Rette at the end of her shift and we stayed for some milkshakes and conversation. It’s far too late, but please don’t blame Rette.”

Mother studied him, and Rette watched as her mother’s eyes raked up and down Johnny, disdain growing on her face. “Right. Good night, Johnny.

“Goodnight, Mrs. Murphy.” Johnny looked to Rette, and Rette saw so many more words on the edge of his lips. She wanted to stay, to hear them, soak them and him in, but he turned and descended the steps without another word, glancing back and hesitating for a moment.

“Inside, Margarette. Now.”

Rette watched Johnny’s face settle into a pitying half-smile before he turned to cross the distance between their homes, Frank having already disappeared inside before Johnny and Rette had made it up her own front steps.

Rette opened the screen door and stopped it from slamming behind her, not wanting to wake their entire neighborhood.

“What do you think you are doing out this late, alone, with that boy?”

Rette sighed as she closed and latched their front door, running her thumb over the finger of the ring on her left hand.

“We weren’t alone, Mother. Frank and Helen—”

“We nowhere to be found when I found you two on the porch! Honestly, Rette. Have you no respect? First, you’re late, then I find you in the arms of—”
“Mother, please. I’m tired—” Rette slipped the ring from her left hand, tucking it into her pocket.

“I’m sure you are. From now on, I’m calling Olly’s the second your shift is over, and if you’re not already out that annoying diner door, I’m coming to get you myself.” Mother punctuated her statement by turning off the lamp in the front room, leaving them both in darkness.

Rette sighed, and crossed to the stairs, willing their conversation to be over. “Goodnight, Mother.”

“Until you two are wed. I don’t want you two alone. I’m not sure I trust him.”

Rette whirled to defend Johnny and his honor, but she stopped. It was a fight she wasn’t sure she’d win. “Yes, Mother.”

Even in the darkness, Rette could see Mother’s stern expression as she met Rette at the foot of the stairs. “Bed,” she ordered, and Rette went.

Rette trodded down the stairs the following morning, stifling a yawn. She retrieved the coffee pot from the stove and filled her mug, droplets sloshing over the rim.

“Late night?” Rette’s father, Henry, grumbled from his place at the table. Rette turned and caught him glancing at her over the top of his newspaper. His graying eyebrows spiraled out of control.

Rette’s parents had been asleep by the time Johnny finished kissing her goodnight under their porch light. Rette slurped her coffee, her cheeks flushed from the heat of her coffee as she raised an eyebrow in acknowledgement.
Henry folded the newspaper and took a pull from his cigarette before dabbing it into the
ashtray that held a permanent residence in the center of the Murphy’s dining table. He looked at
Rette expectantly who sighed.

“Daddy, how did you and Mother decide when to get married?”

His eyes crinkled at the edges, and his eyes shifted to the ring finger of her left hand which
glittered around her coffee cup. “Much like you and Johnny did, I suppose.”

Rette studied the translucent coffee—Henry’s frugal habits applied to his use of coffee
grounds as well. “But we had a plan, Daddy. This isn’t the plan.”

Henry sighed.

Rette felt like a child waiting for her sentencing to come after admitting that she had done
something wrong.

“Rettie, we cannot plan every second of our life and expect to truly live. Life happens in
unplanned, unexpected moments.”

“But there are so many unknowns. How do you prepare for that?”

Henry blinked rapidly and sipped his coffee. “You don’t.”

Rette brushed her hair behind her ear, swirled what was left of her coffee in her mug then
turned to place it on the counter.

“Johnny is going to join the military, Rette.”

Rette looked back at her father. “No. He doesn't want to.”

“He won’t have a choice.”

Rette smoothed the band of her apron at her waist. “I know,” she replied quietly, not truly
wanting to admit it to herself.
“If you love him, you will give him a life to come home to. The U.S. military is not your enemy. Whoever he goes up against is. The military doesn’t try to make widows and orphans.”

“Yet they succeeded with Mother.”

Rette was raised with the knowledge that her grandfather, and her mother’s first husband were both lost to the Great War.

Henry sighed. “I would not wish those horrors on anyone, but you must agree that Johnny will be safer knowing he has you to come home to.”

Rette frowned. “Will I not be here for him to come home to if we don’t marry?”

“You know what I mean, Rette—as his wife you will have a life together waiting for him when he returns, there is much more joy and security in that.”

“But why must we marry now? Why not wait until after the war?”

Henry stood from the table, the wooden chair screeching along the floor. “Rette, we’re not even in this war yet, but I doubt anyone knows when—or if—it will truly end.”

Henry placed his mug in the sink.

“If you love him, marry him now, Rette, or you may lose your chance.”

Rette held her left hand in her right, tilting her head to study the glittering stone. “And be left a widow? Shunned from society like Mother?”

“Your mother shunned herself from society, Rette. She shut herself away in that house for months before Aunt Florence asked me to check in on her.”

That was news to Rette. Mother always told her life as a widow was lonely, and that she was rejected from her circles. It didn’t dawn on Rette to ask anyone else their side of things. She gave her father a questioning look.
He sighed before he continued. “There were hundreds of thousands of widows after the Great War, do you really think society could exclude an entire group of people? She cut herself off from everyone she knew and loved. I was the first person she opened that front door for. If I hadn’t gone to see her, she’d probably still be shut away in that house, left to go derelict and neglected.”

Rette blinked under this newfound knowledge. It was a lot—to much for an early morning. She glanced at the clock and knew she’d be early. She turned to walk out of the kitchen anyway. “I’ve got to go.”

“Rette, wait.”

She turned. Her father was holding out his large, calloused hand. She placed hers on his, small and pale in comparison.

“I love you, dear girl, and Johnny does too. You know he would not have asked if he hadn’t already asked me for your hand. Trust me. Trust him. Trust yourself. Let yourself love him.”

Rette’s eyes prickled with tears, and her chest ached. She knew she couldn’t speak without crying, so she gave a meek smile, squeezed her father’s rough hand, and let go.

**Chapter Two**

When Johnny woke the morning after his impromptu proposal, he was breathless with panic. That had *not* been the plan. He wanted to propose to her somewhere in some *way* that was meaningful. Not just walking home from the diner. She deserved more than that.

He combed his hair in the small mirror atop his dresser. The empty ring box lay there discarded, now useless.
“Johnny! Breakfast, dear!” Lynette’s voice lifted up the stairs and through his cracked bedroom door. He cinched his tie up to his collar and brushed at the stubborn wrinkle in his sleeve. For the bank, it would do.

He jogged down the stairs and swept into the kitchen. He took his plate from his mother and pecked a swift kiss on her cheek in thanks. “Morning, Momma.”

He sat across from the Colonel who scraped up his last bit of eggs and tossed back the last of his coffee before he rose from the table.

“Good morning, son. Did you sleep well?”

Johnny almost mumbled around his mouthful of food but composed himself before answering his mother. “I was quite restless actually.”

The Colonel turned from where he was washing his plate. “Why’s that?”

Johnny placed his fork down on his plate and couldn’t fight the smile that caused his cheeks to ache. “I asked her.”

Lynette gasped, nearly choking on her own breakfast that she was munching on as she puttered around the kitchen. The Colonel patted her gently on the back. “And?”

“Rette and I are getting married.”

Lynette squealed and rushed forward, hugging Johnny’s head and shoulders to her chest. She let out a cry and laughed at the same time. “Heavens above, this—this…” she trailed off, and Johnny pulled away to look at her.

She was staring around, searching for the right words to describe what she was experiencing.

“There’s something else I wanted to speak with you about though,” Johnny said, his voice shifting to a more serious tone.
Lynette stopped searching for her descriptors and focused her attention back on him, her brow furrowing at his tone. “What is it?”

“I would like your blessing to enlist.”

Lynette gaped at him, and the Colonel turned back around, wiping at the counter with the rag Lynette had abandoned.

The silence rang in Johnny’s ears. He wanted so badly to fill it, but he wanted to hear what his parents had to say more.

“Have you—” Lynette started. She closed her mouth, and her brow furrowed further, Johnny worried the lines would become permanent. “Does Rette—” she sighed and worried her apron between her hands.

Johnny turned back to his food and took a bite of his breakfast, and he braced himself.

“Johnny, I just want to be sure—” She stopped again.

The Colonel sighed. “Have you talked to Rette?”

Lynette nodded her agreement, shrugging and offering a sympathetic smile.

Johnny studied his breakfast again, which no longer looked appetizing, yet he lifted yet another fork full of eggs to his mouth and chewed carefully before answering. “No. I haven’t.”

Lynette sat in the seat beside him and placed her hand on his arm. “Last time you two talked about it, didn’t you both agree that it was not the plan?”

“Plans change,” the Colonel muttered.

Johnny looked back at him gratefully, and the Colonel shrugged.

Lynette sighed. “You know Rette, dear. She’s always got a plan. She always wants to know what comes next.”

“Some spontaneity won’t kill her,” the Colonel muttered again.
“Andrew,” Lynette hissed. She turned back to Johnny and considered her words carefully before she spoke. “All I am saying is that you should talk to her before you decide. You know your father and I will support you no matter what you decide, but Rette has chosen to spend the rest of her life with you. She deserves to have some say in what that life looks like.”

Johnny nodded and sipped the last of his juice. He expected as much when he came to them. “Thanks, Momma.”

She patted his arm and stood. “You finished?”

He wiped his mouth and nodded, pushing back from the table to prepare for his walk to the bank.

As he donned his jacket in the entryway, the Colonel stopped him. “Son? A word?”

Johnny hesitated but followed his father out to the front porch.

The Colonel leaned against the railing of the porch and stared out at the open field across from their home. Johnny stood beside him, studying the sun-bleached grass as well.

The Colonel cleared his throat, and when he spoke, Johnny had to strain to hear him.

“Something that I would like for you to consider is that the tensions abroad are growing much worse.”

A warm breeze blew the tall grasses across the road and Johnny watched them sway.

“So far, Roosevelt is adamant in the U.S.’s neutrality, but there have been many whispers that he can’t maintain it for long. We’re on the brink of war, son.”

Johnny looked to the east where the sun was just beginning to color the scattering of clouds red. In any other moment, it would be beautiful, but it raised the hair on Johnny’s arms at the menacing words of his father.
“One act is all it will take to send us in, and if we do, you’ll get called. If not immediately then within the duration of the war. You’ll have no choice.” The Colonel’s voice was louder now, and Johnny turned to meet his inspecting gaze. Johnny felt like that sometimes, as though his father was searching for something within him, inspecting every nook and cranny of his character to reveal something that he was waiting for. Johnny broke the gaze first, returning to studying the tall grasses in the field. It was better to not be looking at his father when he didn’t find what he was looking for.

The Colonel sighed, and Johnny closed his eyes for a moment, willing the disappointment to run right off his skin, but it clung on, its chilling claws sinking into his chest.

“If Rette wants a plan, and you could be forced to join anyway, perhaps it is best if it is on your terms.”

Johnny opened his eyes again, pushed back from the railing and began walking down the steps to make his journey to work. “Thanks, pop. I’ll keep that in mind.” He wished he could wipe the entire encounter from his mind, but he knew it would replay through his mind over and over as he slaved over Mr. Brecker’s accounts.

Olly’s Diner bustled with the lunch crowd. Forks and knives clattered against the plates, and cups clanked against the tabletops. Rette swept behind the chrome-topped bar and dropped a pile of dirty dishes beside the cash register.

“Did you hear about the new conscription laws?” Randall asked conversationally as he scraped together his final bite of eggs and toast.

Rette wiped her hands on the rag that hung from her apron tie. She raised her eyebrows but otherwise remained silent, unsure she really wanted to have this conversation.
“The term’s been extended. Thirty months now. There’s a war comin’.”

Rette continued to fiddle with the rag, unsure what to say or how to respond.

“I’m surprised Johnny hasn’t joined up yet. I’m sure the Colonel has been breathing down his neck.”

Rette offered a polite smile. She didn’t want to talk about Johnny, the military, or pressure from the Colonel. She knew they were all possibilities, but she preferred to shut them away in a distant corner of her mind and pretend they didn’t exist.

Randall leaned off his bar stool with a grunt and pulled his billfold from his back pocket.

“How much do I owe ya?”

Rette shifted her weight, suddenly comfortable with the subject change. She laughed. “All these years, and you still ask?”

Randall smiled at her in a fatherly way. “Still waiting for my discount.”

Rette smirked. Olly’s discounts were built into the price and Randall knew it. Olly’s had the cheapest, most delicious breakfast anyone could get in Attabury, unless one considered the monthly luncheons provided by the Deacons’ wives after church or the annual potluck at the mill.

“Dollar thirty-five.”

Randall scattered a handful of change on the counter, not bothering to count it out. “Keep the change.”

Rette swept the coins into her palm and began counting them out, depositing them into the register as she went.

“You’re gonna go broke, Randy.” Olly’s gruff voice made Rette jump. She was so focused on the change that she didn’t hear Olly push through the creaky kitchen door.
“I’m too old to worry about all that.” He pointed a finger at Olly and raised an eyebrow.
“You let me know about that discount.”

Rette pushed the change drawer shut and turned to begin clearing Randall’s dishes from the bar near the register.

Olly extended his hand across the bar, his stained, white apron straining against its ties.

“See you tomorrow.”

Randall shook Olly’s hand.

“Randy, wait!”

Rette glanced over her shoulder as Martin approached Randall who was about to walk out the door.

“My sister’s husband has been in D.C. It’s getting rough, Randy. You should hear some of the—”

Randall held up a hand to stop him. The diner around them quieted. “Not here, Marty. The women—” Randall cut off when he noticed the silence. Rette picked up her damp rag and began wiping the crumbs and coffee rings from where Randall had been sitting.

“They’re going to hear about it soon enough if those Nazis keep on.”

Rette stopped wiping at this, watching and listening to their exchange.

Randall held up his hands and backed Martin toward the door. “Come, now, Marty, let’s go for a smoke.”

With a glance around at the full and silent diner, Martin nodded once and walked outside. Olly shook his head and disappeared back to the kitchen.

Rette watched them through the large window as the usual bustle that filled the air of the diner resumed its fervor.
Martin, with his back to the window, motioned extravagantly to Randall, whose eyebrows rose in shock as he raised a hand to his mouth, his other hand wiping at his brow. What Rette would give to turn Martin around so she could read his lips.

“Rette, I need a set of sunny and a cup of joe at the Scotts’ table.”

Rette broke her gaze to look at Joan. “What?”

“Two eggs. Sunny-side-up. A cup of coffee. Where’s your head, darlin’?”

Rette turned back to the counter as Olly lined plates of food up to be delivered. She took the plate of eggs in one hand, and a mug and the pot of coffee in the other, returning to the lunch rush.

Johnny walked down Main Avenue. He pulled at the knot in his tie. His day at the bank was spent sorting through Mr. Talley’s files and organizing his office rather than aiding the people of Attabury with their banking needs. The October breeze caught his suit jacket, and he pulled it closed, catching one of the buttons through its hole.

“Carver!”

Johnny whirled and found Major James poking his head out of the Army Recruiter’s office Johnny had just passed.

“Come in for a chat, sonny.”

Johnny hesitated. He glanced between Major James and the street around him. Mrs. Hughes waved to him as she walked out of Hooper’s Grocery, and Mr. Lance tipped his hat as he passed Johnny stopped on the sidewalk, glancing between Johnny and Major James.
Johnny didn’t wish to be rude since Major James was a friend of his father’s, but he knew how it would look for Johnny to be seen walking into the military recruiter’s office. He couldn’t until he had a chance to talk with Rette. He had to talk to Rette before he talked to anyone else.

Major James had disappeared inside the glass-front building without a response, expecting Johnny to follow. Johnny had no choice but to go back and at least excuse himself from the lengthy conversation he knew would follow.

“Afternoon, Major James,” Johnny began as the bell on the door jingled at his entrance. “It’s good to see you sir, but I’m expected for a meeting with Major Murphy at Olly’s so I—”

“We need you, son.” Major James studied him over his spectacles. He had stated it plainly as though discussing the changing seasons. He was hunched over his desk, in the midst of looking over a pile of papers.

As Johnny stood there, his mind scanning through the possible responses that could end the conversation before it went further, Major James returned his gaze to the top form, his eyes raking over it through his spectacles.

Johnny ran his fingers through his carefully combed hair. They came away sticky from the balm that never quite dried. “Sir—”

“Uncle Sam is holding out as long as he can, but you must see that your choice will not remain as such for much longer.” Major James’s voice was stern, but it was a voice that spoke potential to Johnny rather than one of condemnation.

“I—I plan on pursuing my academics at Kansas Wesleyan.” Johnny shifted from foot to foot, suddenly uncomfortable.

“Academics—” Major James hissed. “In a time like this, with potential like yours, and a family history of greatness? A waste.”
Johnny took a step back, half turning to the door. “Sir, I am expected at Olly’s—”

“Wait.”

Johnny turned back toward him.

“I’m sorry, son. I’ve had my office filled with young men, not even of draft age, in and out of my office all month asking what they can do to not be drafted when their day comes. Their mothers are all in a tizzy since the conscription last month. They think this war will be like last time, but times have changed—”

“Sir, really, I must be going.” Johnny turned to leave, not prepared to be on the receiving end of a lecture over consequences he had no control over.

“It’s the girl, isn’t it?” Major James’s voice was quieter now, clipped.

Johnny looked back at him. “Pardon me?”

Major Murphy was studying the papers on his desk again but looked up to answer. “Your little lady? Major Murphy’s girl. She’s always been academics minded. My Susanne was two grades ahead of you both. She’s the reason you have not volunteered.”

Major James’s eyes studied him from head to foot. “You have your father’s build. You’re built for the military, Johnny.”

Johnny took another step back, his hand now on the handle of the door. “Miss Murphy and I have a future together. One that I plan on being there for. If you’ll excuse me—”

“It’s your duty. Your birthright, Jonathan.”

Johnny sighed. He gripped the knob tighter, preparing to turn it.

“Where is your honor?”

Johnny’s chest clenched, and he rolled his shoulders back, trying to ease the tension. He sighed, feeling Major James’s stare dissolving his determination. He released the knob of the door,
and turned his full body toward Major James, standing tall for the first time since he walked into the office.

Johnny spoke, but his voice sounded foreign to his own ears. “Where can I be of service?”

Chapter Three

The Carver’s dining room was unusually warm when Rette walked into it one Sunday afternoon after church. The large oak table which dominated the space was already laden with the Sunday Roast Lynette had bragged about at church that morning.

“Come in! Come in! Have a seat!”

Johnny urged her into the room and pulled one of the high–backed chairs out for her. Rette’s parents, Carol and Henry, followed behind them, and the Colonel emerged carrying a gravy boat, the sleeves of his dress shirt rolled up. Rette glanced at her father, still dressed in his Sunday best, and her mother who scowled at the Colonel’s sleeves as she sat down in the chair Henry held back for her.

The Colonel pulled Lynette’s seat out for her and motioned for Henry and Johnny to take theirs before he finally settled into his own. He clasped his hands together, and Rette followed suit, bowing her head as the Colonel prayed, “Be present at our table Lord. Be here and everywhere adored. These mercies bless and grant that we may feast in fellowship with Thee. Amen.”

There was a mumbled, scattered agreement as Rette opened her eyes, breathing in the savory scents of rosemary, garlic, and onions.

“Amen. Let’s eat!” Lynette proclaimed.
Johnny lifted the serve ware on the platter of roast beef and took Rette’s plate, settling a serving of meat onto her plate. “Pastor Phillips’ message this morning was…patriotic,” Johnny began.

Rette whipped her head in his direction and tapped his foot with her own.

He gave her a look and shrugged.

Rette’s mother clattered her plate back onto the table with a glare at Johnny. “How dare that man discuss such matters in church? In the pulpit!” Her voice was so shrill, Rette fought the urge to cover her ears.

Rette gave Johnny a knowing look.

Lynette sighed, and when Rette glanced at her, she offered a sympathetic half-smile.

“Carol, sweetheart,” Henry cooed at her, placing a hand on her white-knuckled fist.

Carol took a deep breath and smoothed the tablecloth around her plate. She picked up the napkin from where it was folded and shook it out, placing it in her lap. “Please excuse me. The roast looks delicious, Lynette.”

Lynette nodded to her and smiled. Her eyes crinkled at the edges. “Thank you, dear. I tried a new seasoning this time.”

“It smells divine,” Rette offered, her mouth watering as she admired the meat, vegetables, and fragrant gravy that pooled on her plate.

“Tastes divine, too.” Henry spoke around his first mouthful of beef.

Now that everyone’s plates were full, Johnny tucked into his own, and his hand found Rette’s where it rested on her lap.

“This may very well be the last roast before rationing starts again.” The Colonel raised his fork to his mouth and sighed.
Rette watched her mother pick up her water glass with a shaky hand and took an angry sip.

“Any news from Washington, sir?”

The peppered gravy hit the back of Rette’s throat, and she spluttered. Rette could tell Johnny was only meaning to make conversation, but his persistence on the topic caught her by surprise. Rette released his hand beneath the table, and she casted an angry glance at him as she raised her own water glass to her lips.

Johnny put his hand to her back, patting gently, but did not look at her.

“No much,” the Colonel began, “but I know this neutrality Roosevelt is all about isn’t going to last.”

Rette opened her mouth to speak as she returned her glass to the table, but she closed it again, unsure if her opinions truly mattered on the topic.

“Europe needs to sort itself out. If we keep our nose clean and mind our own business, no one will bother us.” Henry punctuated his statement with a large bite of roast.

“So, we just let the Nazis run rampant? Who’s to stop them from coming here?”

Rette stared at her father, who had stopped chewing. She glanced around. Everyone had stopped eating. Carol’s face flushed red before Rette’s eyes, and she wrung her napkin in her hands.

The Colonel wiped the corners of his mouth, and Rette noticed a smile appearing behind the napkin.

“Well, I’m sure going to miss this,” Lynette laughed lightly on Rette’s right.

Rette looked at her in confusion. “Miss what?”

“These Sunday dinners. They won’t be the same without–”

“Mother,” Johnny hissed.
Rette looked between Johnny and Lynette, who had gone pale. Johnny’s eyes were wide, and Rette could see his jaw tighten.

“Without what?” Rette exclaimed.

Rette looked to her mother for help. Her complexion had settled as she looked between Johnny and Lynette, an expression of understanding on her face. “I think it’s without who, dear.”

Rette looked between Johnny and Lynette again.

Johnny looked at her for the first time, and realization dawned on her. She could hear her pulse and was suddenly aware of every ounce of blood pounding through her body. She plucked her napkin from her lap. She shook her head and stood from the table, her chair almost toppling backward.

“Rette, please.” Johnny reached out a hand for her, but she backed away, running into the wall.

“No.” Her voice shook, but she turned and walked away before anyone else could try to stop her.

She made her way toward the front door, hearing Johnny continue to call after her and a flurry of movement that signaled he was not far behind. She pushed through the front door and stopped when she hit the chilly October air on the Carver’s porch.

The creak of the front door announced Johnny’s presence, so she didn’t bother turning to look at him.

“What did she mean, Jonathan?”

“Rette–please.”

“What did she mean?”

“You don’t know–”
“I know your mother just said she’ll miss our Sunday dinners. Where are our Sunday dinners going, Jonathan?”

“Will you stop calling me that?”

“That’s your name.”

“That’s what our schoolteachers called me—that’s not what you call me.”

“Well, I’m not sure I know who you are because the Johnny I know would never—”

“Margarette.”

“No Johnny. Just no. You can’t go. You don’t want to.”

“You don’t want me to,” Johnny muttered under his breath.

“So, you want to leave me? This life we have planned?”

“Rette, I either go now or be ordered to go later. I would rather fulfill my duty of my own volition rather than being ordered to.”

“Who says it’s your duty?”

Johnny looked away, but Rette fought to catch his gaze. He studied his mother’s morning glories growing on her porch trellis.

“Your father?”

“No,” Johnny snapped.

“Frank?”

“Jeepers, Rette, can you just leave it be? I joined. It’s done. I made my mark on the form, and it is done. I can’t go back now.”

“But you could apply for a waiver—for deferment. I’ve heard of young men not having to serve at all.”
“And avoid my duty while every other man in this country goes to sacrifice his life and serve? No, Margarette. I won’t.”

“Not even for me?” she whispered, not wanting to hear her own words or acknowledge the shame they made her feel.

Johnny put his hands on either side of her face, and she leaned into his palm. “I am doing this for you. For every other man, woman, child, and anyone else who cannot serve for themselves. I am doing this for the life we live and the life we want to live.”

“But how do you know we will actually get to live it?”

“Margarette, I could not live that life or enjoy it knowing I did not work for it or earn it. I don’t know if I will survive this war—”

Rette let a sob escape.

“Oh, Rette, I don’t. You don’t either. There is only one being who knows, and they control it all.”

Rette pulled away and turned to face the field across from their homes, laughing without humor. “I know one thing, Jonathan Carver. I can’t stand by and wait for the inevitable. I won’t. I’m sorry Johnny. I can’t be that girl for you.”

Johnny put a hand on each of her arms, staring at the field over her head. “It's not fair for me to ask you to wait, I know, but I love you Rette. If I don’t have you—”

His voice broke, and Rette winced, shaking her head at the innate emotional response to his pain.

“If I don’t have you, Rette, I have nothing to come home for, no future.”

He flinched under her words, she could see the pain they brought, but he just stood there, her whipping post.

“Shall I name a few? Your mother, your father, Geller? Your career at the bank? You have a life here, Johnny. I’m not going to waste the next who knows how long sitting around waiting for my life with you to start.” Rette gripped the petite diamond ring on her left hand and pulled. She fumbled in her fury, and the ring fell.

Panic gripped her, and she furiously dropped to her knees to catch it before it slipped between the wooden patio slats. Johnny was there too, kneeling before her. He picked up the ring, held it up and looked between Rette and the glittering stone.

With a trembling breath and without meeting is gaze, Rette folded his hand over the ring, gave his hand a squeeze, then stumbled her way down the Carvers’ porch steps, across their adjoining driveways, and through her front door. The Murphys’ screen door slammed closed like a shot, making Johnny flinch. Still kneeling, he gripped the ring tighter, his fingers growing numb in the chill, aching with the effort.

The Carvers’ front door opened. “Johnny?” It was Lynette, her voice quiet. A tremor of shock at Johnny’s crouched position. “Where’s Rette?”

“She’s gone.”

Chapter Four

Rette awoke the following morning to a knock on her bedroom door. Her father poked his head in. “Good morning, Rettie.”
She stretched beneath her bed covers, snuggling down further into the warmth.

“Morning,” she mumbled.

Her father hesitated there in the doorway as though trying to decide whether to enter. He pushed the door open further and settled on the edge of her bed, which sagged beneath his weight, causing Rette to roll slightly toward the edge.

She shifted back and adjusted her pillow, picking at a snag in her fingernail.

He sighed and stared out her door. “You must see he wasn’t going to have a choice at one point or another,” he said without looking at her.

“I know.”

“You can’t fault him for doing his duty, Rette. It’s who he is. It’s something you’ve always loved about him. I know because you used to talk about it constantly.” He laughed at that.

Rette smiled, too. Before Rette had admitted it to herself and Johnny that she was and had been in love with him for many years, she went through a phase of chattering about him incessantly. On one occasion, her father had lost his patience and shouted at her to go tell Johnny. That day, at sixteen years old, she marched next door and when Johnny answered the door, Rette flung herself at him, to which he responded most fervently.

“Helen is downstairs to see you.”

Rette’s heart beat faster. “Here? Now?” She searched for her clock. It was just after seven. “At this time?”

“Apparently Johnny called Frank who, of course, told Helen–you know how it goes.” He smiled at her. “Go talk with her–it’ll be good for you. Or would you like me to send her up?”

Rette glanced at her messy dressing table and her wardrobe overflowing with clothes just tossed in. “Is Mom home?”
Her father smiled. “No, she left to meet with Mrs. Gaunt.”

If Mother wasn’t home, then Rette would be able to talk through the previous day without the ridicule that had come with her mother’s finding out that she and Johnny were no longer engaged. “Give me five minutes.”

“She’s out on the porch when you’re ready.”

Rette dressed quickly and poured herself a cup of coffee before stepping out onto the front porch in the chilly morning air.

“There she is,” Helen greeted her. She sat on the porch swing Johnny and Rette’s father had built together the summer when Rette was twelve. She held a cup of tea, the steam rising and breaking over her rosy cheeks. Her black hair glistened in the rising sun, and Rette thought for a moment how much it reminded her of the flowing lines of her fountain pen, particularly the curly bits that stuck out, untamed, from her chignon.

Rette settled beside her, angled so they could talk comfortably. The swing glided gently beneath them, the chains squeaking quietly in the cold.

“Frank told me. Are you alright?” Helen’s brows furrowed, and she sipped her tea.

Rette sighed. “I don’t know,” she answered honestly. “I am, but I’m not. I don’t know what to think—or feel.”

“Understandably. Everything has changed now.” Helen sat up straighter and her face brightened. “But they’ll be together! Frank said he and Johnny were able to go in it together, so they’ll train together and everything—battle buddies I think it’s called.” She laughed. “Sounds like a silly name for grown men, let alone soldiers.”

Rette’s shoulders relaxed, tension leaving them though she hadn’t realized it was there. Johnny would have Frank, and Rette knew Frank would never let anything happen to Johnny if
his life depended on it. From childhood, Frank was the brother Johnny never had and Johnny
his.

“As for your plans.” Helen gave her a knowing smile before sipping her tea once again.
“You and I both know you can’t control everything. I tried to have a plan, but I’m not sure Frank
has even talked to Papa yet.”

Helen and Frank’s pending engagement didn’t make Rette feel any better about her own.
She sipped her coffee, savoring its warmth.

“I’m sorry. I came to see how you were about Johnny, but I also wanted to ask you
something.”

Rette held her mug in both hands, letting the stinging heat soak into her palms and
fingers. She looked at Helen expectantly.

Helen took a deep breath, and she was uncharacteristically nervous.
Rette shifted in her seat, anticipation making her antsy.

“Will you volunteer with me?”

“Oh,” Rette said brightly. She hesitated, caught off guard.

“At the War Office.”

“Oh,” Rette said again, now serious. Her tone dropped and she studied her coffee. “I
don’t know—”

“Please, Rette. Mama would rather I not go in alone with all the men there.”

“Helen, I’m not sure I can. I have—”

“Olly’s, I know,” Helen finished, sighing. “I thought maybe on your days off, or in the
afternoon after your lunch rush ends?”
“Where is this coming from?” Rette sat her mug down on the flat arm of the swing, which was still.

“I just thought we would both feel better about Johnny and Frank leaving if we could have some insight into what they might be facing.”

Rette thought about it, and she knew knowing everything wasn’t always the better option.

“Will that help or just make us worry more?”

Helen looked as though she wanted to answer but stopped. Then, quietly, she spoke, “I also was hoping someone there could help me.”

Rette’s pulse quickened. “You? What do you mean?”

Helen sighed. “Rette, I am a Jew.”

Rette nodded. “Yes, I know, but you’re safe—”

“But my family isn’t. Over there.” She looked out at the field across from Rette’s home, and Rette knew her mind was traveling thousands of miles.

Rette reached a hand out and covered hers. “Helen, I’m sure they’re fi—”

“No,” Helen said firmly, taking her hand out from under Rette’s. She met Rette’s gaze, and Rette’s heart ached at the pain and tears she found there. “I haven’t heard back from my aunt in over two months, Rette.”

Rette’s heart sank, and by the look on Helen’s face, both of their minds, unfortunately settled on the same conclusion. No one knew for sure what was happening, but there were rumors of work camps now amongst other horrors.

“I was thinking if I could be on the inside, I might—” she choked, and took a steadying breath.

Rette replaced her hand atop Helen’s giving it a comforting squeeze.
“It’s the not knowing that makes it all worse. Every day I wait for Mr. Gerralls to deliver the post, and every day, he hands me a stack of correspondence completely devoid of any word from Germany. They’re lost Rette. I just know it.” She sobbed.

“Oh Helen.” Rette put an arm around her friend and held her. She wanted her life back. She wanted Johnny here with her–safe. She wanted Frank to be able to live out his life happily with Helen, and for Helen not to have to suffer everyday wondering what would become of the people she loved. Rette didn’t wish that upon anyone, and she willed it all to go away. Life was simple once–not perfect by any means but simple at least, and it seemed as though in the past year everything had grown increasingly complex and messy.

Helen clutched Rette’s hand tighter and sobbed, tears dampening Rette’s blouse, so Rette did the only thing she could. She held her friend and let her cry.

“While I’m gone, I need your help,”Johnny spoke quietly over the cups of coffee Joan had delivered a few minutes earlier as Johnny, Henry, and the Colonel dispensed with their pleasantries.

“Anything my boy,” Henry spoke affectionately to Johnny as he always had. Ever since Rette came dragging him into their home for a glass of lemonade the summer they moved in.

“I’m hoping Rette comes around before I leave–”

“As she will,” Henry assured him. Rette and Johnny were as true as love could be in Henry’s eyes.

Johnny sighed before he continued. “Well, if she does, then I need you to help her keep her mind off me. She’s going to worry herself into a tizzy and she needn’t. She can’t do anything to control it, but she’s going to try.”
Henry furrowed his brow and sat back in his seat. The Colonel continued sipping his coffee silently.

Johnny ran his thumb through the coffee ring his cup had left on the table as he said, “Geller told me Helen wants to volunteer at the war office.”

The Colonel sighed.

“Rette is sure to end up doing the same—”

“These girls think they can find out anything just by sidling up and rubbing elbows with men that think they’re making big movement decisions that will give them insight into your well-being, but all they will be is errand girls.” The Colonel huffed and sat back in his seat. Henry and Johnny both considered his words and nodded in agreement. Neither could disagree.

“Try to keep her mind off it. Rette likes to be in control—”

“Don’t I know—” Henry muttered, which made Johnny smile.

“She’s likely to be miserable no matter how often I can get letters to her.”

“It’s not as if you can really disclose much in those either,” the Colonel offered, leaning back onto the edge of the table, his shirt sleeve dangerously close to his own coffee ring.

Johnny passed him his own napkin before it could stain. “Yes, well. If she doesn’t come around. Sorry, pop, but she may not want much to do with you or momma for a while, but I need you,” he looked to Henry, “to make sure she gets out, stays busy, and doesn’t isolate herself. If what I’ve done is irreparable—”

Henry huffed and shook his head.

“If she can’t forgive me,” Johnny continued with a firm look. “I need to know that she is alright. I’m not asking you to spy on her and send me full reports, but just after a few months, so my heart can be at ease, write to me, how she is, even if she’s with another man—”
Henry huffed again, and his cheeks began to flush at the thought. He vehemently shook his head.

“Will you do that, sir?” Johnny couldn’t help the pleading tone in his voice. He didn’t want to beg, but at this point, if it ensured his peace of mind, it wasn’t completely off the table. Henry was visibly flustered, but he quickly reassured him, “Of course boy, but you must know that she loves you. You just caught her by surprise, that's all. You know Rette and surprises.”

Johnny smiled to himself. He and his mother had planned a surprise party for her sixteenth birthday two years ago, and all Rette could do at the party was worry about how the ingredients she ensured her mother bought for her birthday dinner wouldn’t get used.

“Heaven help you when you two have children,” the Colonel muttered. Henry laughed at that, imagining his own daughter overwhelmed with all the surprises that could come with parenthood. The Colonel joined in; Henry’s belly laughs were too infectious to resist. Johnny chuckled to himself, but he didn’t feel as though he could fully understand, not knowing the first thing about parenting, only remembering his own surprises he had brought home for his mother. Particularly those with six legs.

The door to the diner chimed, and Johnny looked up just in time to see Rette pausing at the sight of them. Johnny sprang to his feet. She met Johnny’s gaze for a moment, then took in their fathers laughing together. “Daddy?”

Henry and the Colonel both looked over at her before standing. “Hello, Rettie. Is it time for your shift already?” Henry checked his pocket watch.

Rette looked between the three of them with hurt and suspicion in her eyes. “I came in early,” she said slowly, now avoiding Johnny’s gaze.
“We were just talking about you,” Johnny said cheerfully.

She didn’t look at him when she gave her flat reply, “How nice.”

She walked past their table, and Johnny made to follow her. “Rette, wait.”

Rette stopped, Johnny nearly running into her. She turned and looked past Johnny to her father. “See you at home, Daddy,” she said then turned and walked to the back of the diner into the kitchen, leaving Johnny standing there.

Rette wasn’t sure she wanted to see Johnny off, but she knew she owed it to him if nothing else, as a friend. Rette fretted over her outfit that morning, settling on a brown dress she thought suited her quite nicely, but as she made her way down the stairs, her mother gaped at her.

“That’s how you want Johnny to remember you?”

Rette looked down at herself and smoothed her skirt. “I like this dress.”

“Sweetheart, she’s beautiful,” Henry rose from the dining table to greet his daughter.

“You’re beautiful, Rettie.”

Rette accepted the complement with a shrug. “I don’t care if Johnny remembers me.”

Her mother scoffed. “Yes, you do. Even if you did give him that ring back, you still care. It’s written all over your carefully pinned hair.”

Rette’s hand flew to her hair. She had settled on something a bit more elaborate than her usual hairstyle, but she didn’t think it was too out of character for her as her mother suggested.

“You’re beautiful, Rettie.”

Rette accepted the complement with a shrug. “I don’t care if Johnny remembers me.”

Her mother scoffed. “Yes, you do. Even if you did give him that ring back, you still care. It’s written all over your carefully pinned hair.”

Rette’s hand flew to her hair. She had settled on something a bit more elaborate than her usual hairstyle, but she didn’t think it was too out of character for her as her mother suggested.

“You’re beautiful, Rettie.”

Rette accepted the complement with a shrug. “I don’t care if Johnny remembers me.”

Her mother scoffed. “Yes, you do. Even if you did give him that ring back, you still care. It’s written all over your carefully pinned hair.”

Rette’s hand flew to her hair. She had settled on something a bit more elaborate than her usual hairstyle, but she didn’t think it was too out of character for her as her mother suggested.

“You’re beautiful, Rettie.”

Rette accepted the complement with a shrug. “I don’t care if Johnny remembers me.”

Her mother scoffed. “Yes, you do. Even if you did give him that ring back, you still care. It’s written all over your carefully pinned hair.”

Rette’s hand flew to her hair. She had settled on something a bit more elaborate than her usual hairstyle, but she didn’t think it was too out of character for her as her mother suggested.
When they pulled up to the bus station, crowds of people were embracing. Rette wasn’t expecting to see so many of the young men she grew up with leaving. Their mothers all tearily wiped their eyes and straightened their ties as their gals stood nearby, some crying relentlessly, others just squinting against the mid-morning sun.

As Rette stepped out of her father’s car, she spotted Frank and Helen embracing, Helen’s parents standing solemnly only a few feet from them. Johnny conversed with his parents not too far either. Henry offered his arm to Rette who took it, and he guided her toward where the Carvers were conversing, preparing to say their own goodbyes.

The Colonel spotted them first, raising a hand to tip his hat at them. Lynette glanced over next, and she gave Rette a pitying glance that caused Rette to immediately shift her gaze to Johnny who turned to look at her just as they walked up.

“Rette,” he said simply.

Rette’s knees shook, but she tightened her grip on her father’s arm. “Johnny.”

They stared at each other for a moment. The Colonel cleared his throat, and at one point, Rette’s mother muttered, “Oh for heaven’s sake,” under her breath.

Suddenly great exclamations and squeals of delight sounded from beside them, and when Rette turned, she found Geller rising from the ground and Helen throwing herself into his arms in a passionate embrace.

“Well, I’ll be. Herr and Frau Lehman must have given him their blessing,” Henry muttered beside Rette.

Frank and Helen were engaged.

Rette’s heart clenched in her chest as she remembered her own joy that night only a few weeks ago. It seemed like a lifetime ago now. They had embraced much the same, their only
witnesses were Frank and Helen. Rette looked back to Johnny. He smiled sadly at them and
looked down at the gravel beneath his shoes.

“Good for them,” Johnny said with as much joy as he could muster.

Rette sighed as their parents turned their attention back onto them. Neither Rette nor
Johnny said anything more.

Lynette sighed. “Alright, children. Us adults are going to be over here discussing how
childish this current silent treatment is and how much we will adore our future grandchildren.
You two aren’t leaving these spots until you figure this out.”

Lynette grabbed the Colonel’s arm and motioned to Rette’s parents, both of whom went
willingly to converse a few yards away.

Rette looked up at Johnny. She sighed. Things certainly couldn’t get any worse.

“Marry me,” Johnny said.

She blinked at him.

“I should have told you. I tried. I wanted to. Please believe me.”

“This wasn’t just your choice to make.” Her voice was firm, strong, surprising herself.

“I can’t give you what you want.” He held his empty hands up, staring down at them in
disgust.

Rette’s brow furrowed at the apparent change in subject. “What do you—”

He shook his head. “I can’t guarantee when I will be home, when I will write, when it
will begin, or when it will end. I don’t know when we will marry.” He had to pause to take a
breath. “But I can’t imagine leaving, facing the next few months or years—”
A warm breeze blew a lock of Rette’s hair out of its carefully pinned coiffure. Johnny stepped toward her, closing the distance between them, and brushed the lock of hair back into place. Rette wanted to speak, but she couldn’t find the words that felt right.

“However long it takes. I can’t imagine facing it all without having you as my wife, my love, to come home to.” He took her hands in his and held them together between them, raising them to his lips. He looked at her over them. “Please Rette. Even if it’s five years from now, ten even, I’m yours.”

Rette wanted to give in. She wanted to throw herself into his arms as Helen did to Frank, but she couldn’t let herself. She had to say her piece. She took a half-step back and leveled her gaze at him. “You hurt me.”

He dropped their hands and his shoulders sagged. “I know, love.” He was so defeated, Rette almost gave in right there, but she persisted.

“You made a choice for our future alone. You didn’t even ask.” Her voice broke and she cleared her throat to fight off the tears a bit longer. “If you had just talked to me, explained it, I could have seen your side.”

Johnny met her gaze again, but it was sad. The bus honked behind them, signaling the start of boarding.

Rette gave a little laugh. “I could have made a different plan.”

Johnny laughed too, it was half-hearted, but Rette considered it a little victory when he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and peered down at her. “Be mine, Margarette Louise?”

The pins in her hair poked into her scalp and she adjusted her gaze to relieve the pricking pains. “If you’ll be mine, Jonathan Andrew.”
He bent his head, their lips met, and Rette made the most of it, knowing this could be their last.

Chapter Five

When the bus pulled into the fort, a hushed silence fell over the recruits. Johnny tucked Rette’s photo inside the cover of his notebook and buried his notebook beneath the clothes that he had neatly folded into his duffle the night before.

The bus slowed, and the brakes screeched, rocking Johnny forward in his seat.

Then the clamor began.

Suddenly, sergeants rushed the bus, mounting the steps and flying to the back of the bus before Johnny could take a breath. The yelling began and did not stop until Johnny was ordered to fall-out and promptly fell into his cot, gratefully welcoming the ease of his dreams. He had hoped for memories of Rette, feeling her curls brush against his shoulder or her cool fingers intertwining in his, what he got was anything but.

Rette stood there, staring at him with unhappiness and unease clear on her face.

“Rette? What’s wrong?”

She stared back at him—through him.

“Rette, love, please come here. Let me fix it. Whatever it is.” He held his arms out to her.

“Come here,” he begged, his voice cracking at the anger in her eyes.

She shook her head, turned, and walked away.

“Rette! Come back!” He followed her, but he couldn’t catch up. He chased her, running as fast as he could, but she kept walking at the same pace away from him and always out of reach. His chest burned, and he stopped. Rette kept walking, never quite growing too small to
see. Johnny was forced to watch her walk away all night, following at a leisurely pace behind her, unwilling to turn and go his own way.

Johnny ran after Rette with renewed energy, but trumpeting echoed through the blank space. He searched for the source but saw only darkness. He spun around, but when he looked back for Rette, she was gone.

“Rette?” His voice scraped through his throat.

“Recruit!”

Johnny’s feet came out from under him as the surface he had run on all night began to rock. He fell backward and gasped, ripping his eyes open.

He was on his feet in the chilly morning air as the onslaught of day two began.

The mess hall bustled with the sound of clanking utensils on tin plates. Johnny had just shoveled the last few bites into his mouth and washed it down with water from his freshly issued canteen when a booming voice commanded all recruits to their feet. The benches scraped along the floor and nearly toppled over in the tussle.

The owner of the booming voice was Sergeant Hyde, who helped direct each of them to a line of stools yesterday where their hair was buzzed to a uniform length. “Good afternoon, soldiers. Welcome to day two. Yesterday, you were issued your kits and properly documented and integrated into the US Armed Forces. Today, you’ve already undergone some rigorous physical fitness. We will be working on building each of you into the fighting machines that you will become.” He surveyed the group of men. Someone coughed, but Johnny remained focused on Sergeant Hyde.
Wood 74

His tone dropped as he continued. “We don’t know what the future holds, but we know we need to be ready. Take your training seriously and do not fall behind, or you may very well find yourselves on kitchen duty.” Someone in the crowd scoffed and tried to pass it off as a cough, but Sergeant Hyde peered at the section the response had echoed from. “We’ll see how Delta Company feels after spending their hour of free time this evening peeling onions!”

Johnny darted his eyes over at the group, a few of which sagged under their quick group-wide sentencing.

“You are no longer John Smith of Small Town, North Dakota. You are a soldier of the US Armed Forces. You belong to your company, and your company to your unit. When one of you makes a mistake, you all answer for it—as Delta Company will soon be discovering.”

Sergeant Hyde shouted more orders to the company commanders who turned and shouted different orders simultaneously at their prospective groups.

Johnny followed the man in front of him in picking up his food tray from the table and filing out of the mess hall to begin their afternoon physical training—a five-mile run.

As the sun anchored down to the horizon that night, Johnny and his company returned to their barracks with half-hearted waves, and a few stabs at Delta Company who trudged their way to the mess hall for their kitchen duty. Most of the men scrambled to gather their toiletries and shower first, but Johnny settled onto the edge of his cot, careful not to dirty his bed.

He ran his hands over his brow which was crusted with sweat and dirt. He took a deep breath but immediately regretted it at his own stench. He needed a shower. He stood and went to his footlocker, opened it up and dug deep beneath the freshly issued supplies and gear he received yesterday. Most of their personal items at arrival were turned in, but they were allowed
a journal, their Bible if they brought it, and any photos they happened to sneak in between the pages.

Johnny thumbed through his journal until he came across the pristine portrait of Rette. She wasn’t smiling the way she did when she laughed at one of Geller’s jokes, but it was a smile he often saw on her face as she watched the sunrise from his front porch, or when he poured her a cup of coffee after her early breakfast shift at the diner, or when they were driving together in his father’s Buick with the windows down in early summer and she got to soak in the first warmth of the year. It was a happy smile. Content. A smile that he yearned to put on her face again one day, but it was one he feared was gone forever.

He laid Rette’s photo on the foot of the bed beside him, pulled out a piece of stationery he was issued and began to write.

Dearest Rette,

The last time I wrote a letter to you was that summer you spent visiting your aunt in Manhattan. A lot has changed in three years. I hope you and your parents are well. Pass along the same to mine. I’ll be writing to them soon.

So far things are going well. We’ve only just begun, but there is so much to learn. We went for a run today after lunch. It was a very long run. Most of us lost our lunch along the way, so chow time in the evening was quieter than usual.

I miss you so dearly, my love. I kept your portrait in my journal, I wanted it safe from prying eyes and hands. Some of the young men here came from very rough beginnings. You can see it on their faces. I consider myself one of the lucky ones. At least Pop knew how to prepare
me for all of this. Many of the others are having to learn through their errors. Better they learn now than when they’re more costly.

While I’m gone, I want to hear all the news of home you can send. Luckily Olly’s is never short of good gossip. More than anything, I just want to know everyone is well. Color your letters in all the details you’re willing to provide. There’s not much entertainment here otherwise.

“Oh, what’ve we got here?” Johnny couldn’t look up to identify the speaker before he watched Rette’s photo get snatched from the foot of the bed.

Johnny threw his writing pad and pen to the bed and stood quickly, advancing on the thief. “Give it back.”

“Oh, she’s a looker. Looks a bit unhappy to me. Must not be fully satisfied.” The man jeered and turned with the photo in his hand.

Johnny recognized him as the young man who had shouldered past another recruit in the mess hall that morning. Johnny thought back to the fresh name tape he’d seen on his issued gear.

“Bruckner, right?”

The man stopped and peered at Johnny. “Who’s asking?”

Johnny held out his hand. “Carver. Johnny Carver.”

The man looked him up and down then to the photo. “Carver, huh? I heard about you. Your daddy’s that colonel. Apparently, there was some talk about them pushing you on through because you ‘knew it all anyway’. That right?”
Johnny blanched. He never imagined his father’s name would follow him to his own military career, but he supposed he should have expected it. “I joined up just like the rest. I’m training just like the rest.”

Bruckner looked at Rette’s photo again. “You know, I don’t got a girl back home. Just my ma and pa.” He looked up at Johnny with a sickening smile. “I think I’ll keep this.”

Johnny advanced. It was all he had of her.

“Down, Bruckner.” Another man chuckled from behind Johnny. “Give the poor guy his gal back.”

Johnny turned partially to face this new voice, not quite willing to put Bruckner out of sight until he had Rette’s photo back.

The new man tossed his toiletries onto a bunk two down from Johnny’s then closed the distance between them, holding out a hand. “The name’s Mills. Teddy Mills.”

Johnny shook it, still eyeing Bruckner. “Johnny Carver.”

“Bruckner, give it back, man. No one wants your dirty paws on their gal, even if it is just a photo,” Mills quipped.

Bruckner scoffed, shrugged, then threw Rette’s photo down to the floor a few feet from Johnny. “She ain’t that pretty anyway. My imagination’s much better.”

“That’s all you’ll have,” Johnny grumbled under his breath then bent to pick up the photo. He dusted the dirt off then promptly returned it to his journal, wedging it into the binding at the middle.

They all returned to their respective bunks, and Johnny gathered his toiletries, debating whether to take his journal with him to the showers. Ultimately, he decided it was safest tucked deep into his footlocker rather than unaccompanied in the showers.
By the time Johnny finished in the showers, he was the only one left, and by the time he got his things packed back into his footlocker, signed off on his letter to Rette, sealed and addressed it, Taps were playing, signaling lights out.

Chapter Six

Rette and her mother walked down Main Street. The cold air that snuck in throughout the month fully settled in as they passed yet another festive store front.

“So many businesses decorated this year,” Rette observed, noting the pharmacy’s elaborate pumpkin display. “It’s nice to see with so many of the young men gone already.”

“They’re trying to draw business is all.” Her mother waved off the festive decorations. Leave it to her to look at morale boosting as a marketing ploy.

“I could imagine many people are in need of business too, Mother. There are so many unknowns.”

Mother scoffed. “There will always be unknowns dear. It is a part of life.”

Rette caught a chill and pulled her coat tighter around her. “Yes, well, best to prepare,” she responded as they approached the dress shop.

“Goodness, it’s busy today. It’s a Thursday, for heaven’s sake!” Mother sidestepped as a mother and her two daughters came bustling through the door.

“Not a single white gown in sight! We’ll have to visit Manhattan tomorrow,” the mother exclaimed as she pulled the younger of the two along.

Rette and her mother exchanged a glance. Seems they weren’t the only ones on the hunt for a wedding gown today.
When Rette entered the store after her mother, she paused to take a final breath of the cool autumn air outside. Inside it was stifling. There were women milling about everywhere. The only man at first glance was Mr. Thurgood who couldn’t seem to leave his tie alone and was quite red in the face.

However, their arrival quickly attracted Monsieur Lemaire who, Rette knew from serving him his usual of grits and soft-boiled eggs, only ever spoke in his horrific attempts at a French accent when he worked his dress shop. He arrived in Attabury as a child when he came to live with an uncle who needed help working his farm. The only French he knew was what he learned in the streets of New Orleans, which wasn’t really French at all.

“Bonjour Madame and Mademoiselle. Welcome to Lemaire’s. For what are we looking for today?”

Mother regarded Monsieur Lemaire with her usual distaste before she glanced around once more. “The same as everyone else, I hear. My daughter will be getting married.”

Monsieur Lemaire peered around Mother at Rette and smiled broadly. Rette nodded in return. “Oh, my dear, what a joy! Now I must ask, is there a date set?”

Rette figured he knew the answer. It was common knowledge that Johnny had left weeks ago now. She was in the same predicament as the rest of the ladies whose men had left—no one was sure of their return.

“Ah, no. No date as of yet, but we must be prepared at a moment’s notice!” Mother replied. Rette fought the urge to scoff.

Monsieur Lemaire looked between Rette and her mother sadly. “Unfortunately, my dears, all gowns we had have been purchased or claimed for those who have dates. Even so, we were not able to provide for all Lemaire’s usual customers given the high demand.”
Rette sagged. They had already visited Manhattan earlier in the month and faced similar problems. All gowns were on order or were out of the fierce price range Rette’s mother limited them to.

“Please, do put your name on our waiting list at the counter. We would be happy to fit your needs when the available stock does come in. For now, we have some lovely sets available in the back that you’re welcome to peruse. Though, sadly we are completely out of white, ivory, cream, and all derivations of such. There is a lovely yellow set however!”

Rette grimaced, and Mother whipped her gaze back to Monsieur Lemaire and studied him. “Yellow is sickly and makes my daughter look as though she is on her deathbed. Not quite the bridal glow we’re looking for.”

Monsieur Lemaire held his hands out and gave a little bow, backing up and turning to help another customer.

“Yellow,” Mother scoffed. “He’s lucky his wife places a majority of their orders. It’s not as though he could tell ivory from cream if you laid them in front of him.” She began pushing through the crowds, and Rette followed closely behind, the heat closing in around her.

Nearly an hour later, Rette’s name was pinned to a deep blue dress and matching pill hat, and her name was scrawled out next to number fifty-one on the waiting list. If nothing else could be found, Rette would purchase the blue ensemble to wear for her nuptials as she felt if benefitted her complexion the most.

Mother left while Rette was waiting in line to sign the waiting list to pick up Rette’s father’s medication from the pharmacy on the corner. So, when Rette spilled out into the refreshing October air, she reveled in the silence and let the crisp breeze wash over her
moistened brow. She didn’t see the Lehmans until they stopped right in front of her. Helen stood beside her mother who held hands with Mr. Lehman, a tall soft-spoken man who clearly adored his wife and daughter.

“Oh hello, Rette!” Helen called cheerfully. She peered around Rette at Lemaire’s. “Is there anything left?”

“Helen! Mr. and Mrs. Lehman, I didn’t see you.” Rette greeted them warmly and wiped at the dew that was left on her brow. “Sadly, all derivations of white are spoken for, but they do have a waiting list. It’s much the same everywhere else though. It’s quite hot in there though.”

“Hallo, Fräulein Rette,” Mr. Lehman greeted her in German. His English was broken, but Rette understood him well enough. “A wedding for you too, what joy! Any word from Johnny?”

“Hello, sir.” Rette pulled her coat tighter around herself and squinted into the sun to see his face. “No, I haven’t heard from him yet. I spoke to the Colonel though and he said it’s normal when they start a fresh batch for the mail to take a bit. I’m sure he and Frank are getting along very well.”

Helen brushed her hair back, and her small diamond ring sparkled in the sun. “I would have married Frank right when he asked if Mama and Papa had let us. I don’t need a fancy ceremony. I only want to be his.” Helen got a faraway look in her eye and stared sweetly at something or someone Rette knew wasn’t there. Mr. and Mrs. Lehman exchanged a glance, and Rette recognized an edge of concern in the way they looked at each other over their daughter’s hastiness.

Frank Geller grew up with Johnny and Rette. He lived across town from them, yet he always rode his bike home with Johnny and stayed at the Carvers’ until the sun was far gone. He didn’t spend much time at his own home, and Rette was sure neither she nor Johnny had ever
been to his house. She would never understand the bond Johnny and Frank shared, brothers not by blood, but rather by circumstance and proximity.

“Schatzi, we’ll be inside,” Mrs. Lehman told Helen quietly. They nodded to Rette and entered Lemaire’s behind them.

Helen sighed, looking back at her parents then to Rette before smiling sheepishly. “I can imagine you feel the same way, though you and Johnny have been in love much longer than my Frankie and I.”

Rette waved off her comment. “Love is love, no matter how long. Your ring is beautiful. It fits you perfectly.”

“Oh!” Helen looked down at her hand. “Yes! Lucky thing too! It was his mother’s—” Helen’s voice trailed off quietly as though she had said something she wasn’t supposed to. She glanced around as a family passed them.

Rette nodded to the family. She didn’t know them by name, but they often brought their children in for milkshakes on the weekend. “Have you met Mr. and Mrs. Geller? I don’t believe I’ve ever seen him with them in all the years I’ve known him.”

Helen gaped at her. Then, she pulled Rette’s elbow, so they were standing close beside one another. “You don’t know?”

Rette was uncomfortable. It wasn’t often, between Mother and the girls at school, that Rette was not privy to information. “Know what?”

Helen glanced back at the family who had passed them. No one else was around. She dropped her voice to a near impossible volume. “His parents were killed when he was eight. They were murdered. His grandfather raised him.”
Rette stared at Helen, trying to mask her horror. How had she not known? Why didn’t Frank tell her? Why didn’t Johnny tell her? Surely Mother must have known.

“It is quite a sad story. People don’t talk about it much, so it doesn’t surprise me that you don’t know. I thought Johnny or your mother had told you at least.” Helen pulled back suddenly and put a hand to her cheek, her eyes suddenly swimming with tears. “Oh, I hope Frank won’t be angry with me.”

The bell of Lemaire’s rattled behind them and Rette glanced to see Mr. and Mrs. Lehman exiting. Before Rette could respond to Helen’s worries, Mr. Lehman approached them and rattled something in German to his daughter who replied faster than Rette’s limited vocabulary could understand.

“We must be getting home,” Helen told her, extending her arm for a quick hug. “I hope you have a good day. Oh, and don’t forget about our volunteer plans!”

Rette had forgotten about the War Office. “Yes, just let me know when you’d like to start! I must find Mother anyhow.” Rette let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding.

“Good day, Mr. and Mrs. Lehman.”

“Auf Wiedersehen, Fräulein.” Mrs. Lehman gave her a kind wave before they all turned their backs to walk away. The bright morning sun gleamed off the white Yamaka on the crown of Mr. Lehman’s head.

When Rette found her mother, she was shaking her fist at the pharmacist who stared back at her boredly. Rette took the bag of medications the pharmacist offered her and quickly counted out the bills and coins her mother had been bartering with him over.
“It’s ten cents more this month than it was last month. Robbery!” Rette’s mother scoffed as they braced themselves against the growing chill on their way home.

Rette linked her arm through her mother’s, increasing her pace. Hoping to get them both home before one of them caught a chill.

When they arrived home, Mr. Gerrells was mounting the steps of their house, wrapped in his winter post gear. “Good morning, ladies! Miss Margarette, I have something quite special for you, I believe!”

Rette released her mother’s arm, leaving her to carry herself home and closed the distance between her and their home too quickly to be considered lady-like.

“Margarette Louise,” Mother scolded from the sidewalk.

“Is it him?” Rette asked eagerly, stripping her gloves to take the envelope Mr. Gerrells held out for her. Her breath came in short quick bursts, creating a cloud of fog in front of her face she waved away to see the name on the envelope.

“See for yourself,” Mr. Gerrells said as he moved past her down the steps. “A good day to you, Miss.” His smile in his voice was obvious.

Rette’s heart hammered in her chest as read the return address, PVT Johnathan Carver.

She tore the envelope open, her fingers fumbling in the cold, and finally set her eyes upon his scrawling handwriting for the first time in weeks.

“Come in out of the cold, Rette. We don’t need you catching a chill.” Mother muttered as she pushed past into their home. Rette followed her absentmindedly, unable to stop reading.
Rette carried Johnny’s letter with her the rest of the afternoon, thinking up her own reply as she went about her day. When Mother called her down for tea a few hours later, Rette brought her writing supplies so she could pen her reply.

“So much for conversation,” Mother said hotly as she filled Rette’s cup with steaming tea and added milk just as she liked it.

Rette ignored the comment and set her pen to paper, her tea slowly growing cold.

Dear Johnny,

It is so good to hear from you. I’ve waited each day for word to the extent that I believe Mr. Gerrells was more excited to see a letter from you than I was. I suppose I can stop pestering him. For now.

Rette fought off a chuckle to herself. She felt so light and free for the first time since discovering Johnny had enlisted. She leaned into it and continued writing.

Things are well here. Your parents are doing well, but obviously miss you. Your momma has asked me over nearly every day since you’ve left just to sit with her. Your father has been called in to work a lot, so I have not seen much of him the past few weeks. We went to Lemaire’s today to find a wedding dress to have on hand when we can finally get married, but couples are coming out of the woodwork engaged! Lemaire’s was bustling with every outfit in any variation of white either purchased or spoken for. Even little Jodi Thurgood was there in the market for a dress. I didn’t get a chance to stop and ask who her beau was. She was two grades behind me in school, surely that’s far too young even with the current circumstances.
It’s not just an Attabury concern either. Mother and I went to Manhattan a couple of weeks ago after the first visit to Lemaire’s, and everything was gone there as well. Every place has orders in or are working hard to make them themselves, but the waiting lists are so long that it could be months. Mother and I briefly considered making mine, and it’s not off the table, but frankly there’s not the time. Olly has me working extra shifts because Larry who usually busses tables in the afternoons shipped out last week. Joan has taken over his shift plus half of her own, so I’m having to pick up the rest. It keeps me busy though, which I’m sure you’re happy to hear.

Helen still wants me to volunteer with her at the War Office. I’m not sure how I’ll squeeze it in unless Olly takes on someone to replace Larry.

Rette’s pen hesitated on the page. Helen. She thought back to the information she learned that morning, and a hand seemed to grip her chest. Johnny must’ve known. He’s been Frank’s best friend since before Rette and Johnny even met. Before Frank’s parents died.

Helen mentioned something about Frank’s parents today. Why didn’t you ever tell me about what happened? Why didn’t anyone tell me? I felt quite the idiot not knowing something so big about such an old dear friend of mine. Did you know what happened to them?

Rette lifted the page and read over her words. She couldn’t put that on him. He had so many other things to worry about. She moved to crumple it and start over, but something stopped her. She had deserved to know, hadn’t she? As Frank’s friend? She decided to leave it, wrote off some final well wishes and promises to write more often, scrawled her signature, and sealed it. After writing the address across the front in careful letters, she added it to the stack of
correspondence that had accumulated throughout the day to be posted. By the time she finally sipped her tea, it was cold, and before she could ask anything of her mother, she stood and emptied her teacup in the sink, leaving to read in the front room.

Chapter Seven

“Geller!” Sergeant Carwood called out, thumbing through the envelopes in the stack he was holding. It was only their second Mail Call since they’d arrived. “Pfeiffer! Mills!” Johnny didn’t hold his breath. His name hadn’t been called the first round, and he expected Rette’s response or any word from his mother to take longer to get to him.

Geller took his envelope from Sergeant Carwood and returned to his cot across from Johnny’s. He held his envelope, weighing it in his hands. Johnny could tell from across the barrack that it was thick with words. How Johnny craved to pour over Rette’s words as he knew Geller would with Helen’s.

“And Carver! That’s it! Lights out in ten!”

Johnny continued staring off at Geller.

“Carver!”

Johnny looked up at Sergeant Carwood who waved an envelope at him. “Look sharp, soldier.”

Johnny stood and took the envelope from the sergeant. Miss Margarette Murphy, the return address read. Johnny’s chest warmed, and he returned to his cot. He laid down on his cot and held the envelope to his chest for a moment. It wasn’t nearly as thick as Geller’s, but it was his. Rette had taken the time to put her thoughts down, and that wasn’t something Johnny would ever take for granted.
As the others settled into their own cots, Johnny felt his opportunity waning, so he carefully peeled open the envelope, and soaked in Rette’s words.

The next day was Sunday. The men were called to morning mess before chapel, and Johnny found himself in a daze. All night he had tossed and turned, seemingly falling asleep just before Reveille sounded. He was tempted to muffle out the piercing trumpeting by burying his head beneath his thin pillow, but he knew someone would be sent to retrieve him sooner or later.

Johnny dressed grumpily, as Geller tucked Helen’s textbook-length letter into his pocket to show it to anyone who gave him the chance. He was on cloud nine. His cheeks were pink, and all he’d been able to say was how much he loved Helen, missed her dearly, and couldn’t wait to make her his wife.

Johnny was jealous. Rette’s letter had done just what he had asked, but the sense of her betrayal with her discovery of Geller’s parents was potent throughout the remainder of her letter. It ended quite abruptly, and Johnny couldn’t get the feeling out of his chest that he had hurt her in some irreparable way.

It wasn’t Johnny’s story to tell. That’s all. That’s why he had never brought it up to Rette. Johnny only found out because an officer had shown up at his house that summer Rette was away visiting her grandmother in Lincoln before she had passed away, looking for Geller. He was of course there at Johnny’s house, and after Momma had discovered what had happened, she argued with the officer for an hour before he allowed Geller to stay with them until a better situation could be configured. They were only eight. What was Johnny to do? He barely understood it himself. Geller never talked about his parents anyhow, and he especially didn’t
after all that. Johnny figured it was something best left forgotten. Was it his fault Rette never thought to ask? He didn’t think so, but why did he feel as though he had betrayed her?

Johnny glanced down the mess table at Geller who jovially waved the stack of a letter at yet another recruit. His eyes glittered in a way Johnny had never seen them.

Johnny sat through chapel, half listing to Chaplain as he rattled on some message about strength in the face of a Goliath. Johnny heard the story a million times over growing up, and it was not speaking to him any differently this morning. He was confident in his ability to face the challenges. What he lacked was his confidence in being able to remain true to himself and those he loved in the process. After facing such a giant as that, how could David have possibly remained the same person. Surely such an experience changed a person.

Rette agreed to marry Johnny. Rette never even wanted Private Johnathan Carver. The military had never been on his radar in all the time they’d known each other. He’d felt called to it, sure, but what could one expect from a boy growing up hearing of his own father’s heroics?

How could he guarantee that the man meeting Rette at the altar in whatever color she chooses–he wouldn’t even mind if she married him in the gardening trousers she kept hidden in her wardrobe–was the same man who proposed to her months ago?

She deserved so much more, but at the very least, she deserved to marry the man who had proposed to her. He wanted to ensure that that was who he brought home for her.

After Chapel, as the rest of the men fell out to their free time for the rest of the day, Johnny lingered near his chair. He watched as the last of the men ambled out of the building, already embracing the spirit of their free time.

“You seem lost in thought, private.”
Johnny looked back and found Chaplain straightening the chairs that were jostled in the urgency of a promised free afternoon.

“How did David do it?” Johnny blurted. It wasn’t his first thought, but he supposed it was relevant enough.

“Slay Goliath, you mean?” Chaplain furrowed his brow at him slightly.

“Yes.” Johnny hesitated. “Well, actually, no. Sort of. How does one go back to life after such a challenge? How does he return home to his family the same man? How does that experience not color every aspect of him?” Chaplain opened his mouth to answer, but Johnny continued, the words falling out of his mouth. “How do I bring home the same man who proposed to my fiancée?” Johnny’s chest ached and he realized it was rising and falling rapidly. He was out of breath but hadn’t moved from his spot. He stared at Chaplain, his eyes wide.

Chaplain stood with his hands clasped in front of him and smiled kindly. “Would you care to sit?” He motioned to the front of the room where there was a small seating area off to one side.

Johnny sighed, nodded, and followed Chaplain. Before he sat, Chaplain held his hand out to Johnny. “Chaplain Ernest Albright, but folks ‘round here call me Chap.”

Johnny returned the handshake. “Johnny Carver.”

Chap motioned for Johnny to take a seat and he followed suit, relaxing back into the chair. Johnny sat straight, unable to settle. “Johnny,” Chap sighed. “Are you familiar with this particular trial of David’s?”

Johnny swallowed and nodded.

“What makes you think David wasn’t changed by his victory over Goliath?”

Johnny ran a hand over his face. “I’m not sure, Chap.”
“Think about it this way,” Chap replied brightly. He adjusted his body more upright to match that of Johnny’s and began motioning with his hands. “David was a shepherd boy and a good one at that. In fact, it’s recorded in the Bible that he fought off several beasts to protect his flock; bears, lions, other bloodthirsty animals looking for easy prey to devour.”

Johnny nodded, rubbing his face absentmindedly.

Chap continued, “David defended his flock from them all. David’s life didn’t change until he was willing to accept the next call on his life.”


Chap smiled. “When David accepted the call to fight Goliath on behalf of his people when no one else would, he knew he would never be the same.”

“So going into it, he knew he couldn’t help but be changed?” Johnny asked.

“Yes,” Chap replied, sitting straighter and holding his hands out as though it were obvious. He leaned in closer. “But do you think that stopped him from completing his task?”

Johnny looked up at Chap. “Obviously not.”

Chap pointed a finger at him. “Exactly. And do you think that even though David slaying this Goliath of a man was a miraculous feat, did it change who he was as a person?”

Johnny was taken aback. “Well, you said yourself he went into it accepting that a change would be inevitable.”

Chap shook his head. “No, I mean much deeper.” He put his hand to his chest. “Did it change what his morals and virtues were?”

Johnny blinked at him; it seemed so simple now. “I guess not,” Johnny replied.

Chap smiled. “You’re right.” He sat back in his chair once again. “Regardless of who or what was in front of him, no matter how big or small, he was a defender.”
“A defender.” Johnny stated. “A defender before, and especially a defender by slaying Goliath.”

Chap pointed another finger at him. “You’re a defender, Johnny. Your fiancée knows you are. You signed up because you’re a defender of the free people of this country.”

“I suppose,” Johnny muttered.

Chap leaned closer once again, and Johnny studied him. His eyes were wide, and he spoke with such conviction that Johnny had a hard time considering there could be any other interpretation.

“The question is, Johnny Carver, are you willing to go from fighting the lions and bears to taking on the Goliaths of the world?”

Johnny stared at him, and they sat in silence. Chap’s words seemed to echo through the room and through Johnny’s mind. He heard them over and over rolling through his thoughts.

Chap cleared his throat. “Many of the young men here joined up to seek out and fight every Goliath they could get their hands on, and each of you will face a Goliath. I hate to say it, but it is inevitable, what you’re up against.”

Johnny swallowed and wiped his palms on his trousers.

“What makes you different is not that you don’t want to face them, but rather you want to be the same defender you are now when you have to face them over and over again.”

Johnny sighed. “My pop is a Colonel. There are many men back home who still face their ghosts of the trenches.”

Chap clasped his hands and nodded solemnly. “Yes. War does change us in other ways sometimes.”
Johnny swallowed again. He felt something rise in his throat and he couldn’t shake it.

“After everything I’m about to put her through, Rette deserves a *whole* man, not fragments of who I am.”

Chap clasped his shoulder. “That, dear boy, is up to God. All you and she can do is pray. The rest is out of your hands.”

Johnny stared out the still open door of the building at the blinding sun and took a shaky breath. *God, keep me whole.*

When Johnny left the Chapel, the Mess Hall was already bustling with the lunch crowd. Though he didn’t have much of an appetite, he decided to retrieve his writing pad from their barracks and return to the Mess Hall.

Sunday lunch was left much more casual, and the men were able to come and go as they wanted, so the room was half as empty as it usually was. Johnny found an empty section to sit down, and he began writing his reply to Rette.

_Dearest Rette,

First, I want to address your concerns about Frank. We were eight, you were gone that summer that it happened, and Frank has never spoken about it. If he were not at my house when it happened and hadn’t stayed with us for the days after, I never would have known. It simply wasn’t my story to tell. I’m sorry if this hurt you, but it never seemed like something that needed said. Had it come up, had you asked, or had Frank mentioned it, I would have told you everything. Frankly it was terrifying as a child to know such things could happen, and as an adult, I did not wish to burden you with the knowledge. I love you, Rette. I’m sorry that this caused you to feel ignorant. It was not my intention, and I can guarantee that was never Helen or_
Frank’s intention either. We all love you so dearly and would never do anything to make you feel that way.

Thank you for the insight to the ins and outs of Attabury, but I want to know more about you. Tell me your thoughts. What’s on your heart? Share it all with me as though I were sitting there right next to you as you write, as I so wish I was.

I spoke to the chaplain here today. He’s a nice enough fellow. Very wise. Though I suppose you’d have to be to take on such a role.

We only have a couple more weeks left here. We’ve begun more strategic training, and they’re beginning to make plans for us on where we go from here. This may be the last letter you get from me here. Continue writing to this address until I get you a new one. Your letters will find me.

As Johnny was about to sign off, the door to the mess hall burst open, and Johnny glanced up, as close as he was to it. Others looked too, but once they saw Sergeant Carwood, they returned to their conversations and luncheon. Johnny watched Sergeant Carwood search the hall. His face was frantic, and Johnny felt his pulse rise. He half stood, ready to help, but Sergeant Carwood took off past him to where Sergeant Hyde stood in conversation with one of the other sergeants. He gripped Sergeant Hyde’s arm and spoke to him in a low voice. Johnny couldn’t make any of it out, but Sergeant Hyde jerked away quickly, shock clear on his face. He looked out at the Mess Hall, surveying the recruits, and Johnny watched his face shift from panic to worry to resolute.

Ready or not, Johnny thought, our Goliath is here.
Chapter Eight

After church, Rette sat in the Carver’s dining room. Though she had spent years moving in and out of this room, she was only just beginning to notice the ornate style of the entire room. The paneling that defined the lines of the walls created a warmth and sophistication, and the large oak table dominated much of the room. Rette ran her hand over the cushion of the seat she sat on and observed the other five high-backed chairs that surrounded it, all but one—the one beside her—filled.

Rette’s mother and father sat across from her while the Colonel and Lynette took a seat at either end. Johnny’s seat beside Rette remained empty.

Rette sipped her water and rearranged the carrots, potatoes, and stringy roast beef on her plate. It was swimming in au jus, and usually with Lynette’s pot roast, Rette had to remind herself to take lady-like bites of food as her mother sat staring across from her. However, today, she was more content to push her food around on her plate, taking miniscule bites of carrot every couple of minutes to avoid anyone addressing her.

They sat in silence for a while, the Colonel and Henry exchanging the usual shop talk, but nothing more of consequence. Rette continued playing with her food.

“What about you, Rette, dear?”

Rette glanced up from her plate and looked around at her and Johnny’s parents. “I’m sorry, what?”

Lynette took a small bite of pot roast and raised her eyebrows at Rette. “I said, Pastor Phillips’ message this morning made me think of Johnny. Have you heard anything from him?”
Rette put her fork down and sat a bit straighter. “Just the one, but none in the past few weeks.” She tried not to let it bother her, but looking down at her plate, she had the urge to excuse herself.

“The pot roast is delicious, Lynette,” Henry mumbled through a mouth full of pot roast.

Lynette glanced again at Rette then turned to Henry with a kind smile. “Thank you, Henry. I tried some new seasoning this time, and it seems to have really brought out the sweetness of the carrots.”

Henry nodded exuberantly. “Yes, yes! I was thinking the same thing.” He returned to his plate but looked up at Rette and winked.

Rette’s mother looked between them all. She stirred in her seat, discontent clear. “I have to say, I thought Pastor Philips’s message was inappropriately patriotic.”

Rette hunched a millimeter lower into her seat. If she could disappear under the table, she would.

They all stared at Rette’s mother who sipped her water hotly. “I simply cannot believe that man would discuss such matters in a church. For heaven’s sake, it’s not as though we’re at war!”

The Colonel and Rette’s father exchanged a look, and Henry turned to his wife, placing a hand on her arm. “Now dear, let’s not—”

Rette’s mother took a deep breath and smoothed the tablecloth beside her plate then straightened the napkin in her lap.

“This may very well be the last roast we get before rationing begins again,” the Colonel announced before taking a carefully balanced bite of roast, carrots, and potatoes.
Rette’s mother lifted her glass to her lips. She stared over the cup at a spot on the wall behind Rette’s head, and Rette felt the sudden urge to duck.

Rette watched as the Colonel sighed in his seat, clearly enjoying his Sunday luncheon. Why couldn’t he just leave it be?

“Any other news?” Henry asked in a quiet tone.

Rette’s mother choked on her bite of roast, and Rette sunk still lower into her seat.

Henry reached a hand out and patted his wife’s back, but he did not turn his attention from the Colonel.

“Not much,” the Colonel answered, putting his fork down and sitting back from the table.

“But I know this neutrality isn’t going to last much longer.”

Rette looked between them. She didn’t want to hear it but couldn’t stop at the same time.

“Europe needs to sort itself out,” Henry responded, punctuating his reply with a large bite of roast.

“I agree. There’s not a need for us to become involved in matters that do not concern us.”

The Colonel picked up his fork and continued eating.

Rette glanced between the two men and the two women she sat with. Everyone, aside from Rette, had lived through the Great War in different ways with different experiences. They remember what it was like.

Rette thought back to the tearful conversation she’d exchanged with Helen the morning after she’d discovered Johnny had enlisted. The worry about her family was so potent. How could that not concern us? Were they not humans with morals and a sense of right and wrong just like all those innocent people facing the war in Europe? Did they not have a duty to protect the victims? Rette couldn’t stand it. She had to say something.
“What are we to do then?” she asked from her slouched position. She sat straighter, thinking of the weight of what she was about to say. “What about those we love who may not live here? Helen’s family whom she hasn’t heard from in months. Are we to just let them die? Are we going to just let the Nazi’s run rampant? Who’s to stop them from coming here?”

Rette gasped for breath, realizing she’d said all of that with one breath. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, her heart racing.

She stared around at the adults around her. Her father had stopped chewing, and the Colonel wiped his mouth with a napkin, Rette recognized a small smile behind it. She looked to her mother and found her face beet red.

Her mother folded her napkin flat and tossed it to her plate before rising from the table. “Come, Rette, let’s let the men discuss. Why don’t you, Lynette and I clear up?”

Rette looked to Lynette who looked between Rette and her mother then wistfully back down to her own plate with food still remaining on it. She stood.

Rette’s chest burned with gratitude. As her mother stormed off to the kitchen and Rette stood to gather her own plate, she knew whatever her mother was about to say would be best weathered in the company of witnesses.

Rette placed the dishes she was carrying in the empty porcelain sink, followed closely by Lynette. Rette’s mother stood at the stove, beginning to scrub food from its surface.

“Margaret,” Rette’s mother began, and Rette turned slowly to face her. “You and Johnny are to be married.”

Rette was about to make a comment about her mother’s obvious statement, but she bit her tongue. Lynette made eye contact with Rette and offered a small smile of support before returning to the dining room to retrieve more dishes.
“Do you see Lynette or I making war talk with the Colonel or your father?” Rette’s mother asked, scrubbing harder on the stove. At this rate, Rette feared for the finish of Lynette’s stove.

Rette went to the radio that sat in the corner of the kitchen and cranked it on, hoping the noise would help to tune out her mother. A jaunty song was playing.

“When you marry, Johnny’s opinions will become yours, and yours will cease to matter,” her mother continued. Rette turned the music louder, closing her eyes and listening intently to the music.

“Now, Carol, you know that’s not completely true.” Lynette had returned in time to hear Rette’s mother’s declaration.

The jaunty music stopped followed by silence. Rette opened her eyes and inspected the radio. What had happened? Static began to play, and Rette adjusted the tuning. A man’s voice began speaking.

“We interrupt this program to bring you a special news bulletin.”

“Things are different now,” Lynette told Rette’s mother behind her as she placed the dishes she was carrying in the sink. “When we were married—”

“The Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii by air,” the broadcaster continued.

“Times change, but this remains true, Lynette,” Rette’s mother hissed in return.

Rette hushed them both and turned the volume up so they could hear. “Listen.”

“The attack was also made on all naval and military activities on the principal island of Oahu. We will give you later information as it comes available, but now we will return to your regularly scheduled programming.”
Rette’s heart hammered in her chest, and she turned to look at her mother and Lynette.

“What do we do?”

“I’ll get the Colonel,” Lynette said swiftly, and she flew from the room.

“It’s begun,” Rette’s mother stated simply, as she stared at the radio.

Rette’s mind whirled. Johnny was in training on the east coast. He was not anywhere near Hawaii or within reach of the Japanese. Yet, a small voice in the back of Rette’s mind muttered, and she clutched her arms to her chest, goosebumps rising over every inch of her body.

Rette descended the steps the next morning, already dressed for work. Henry sat at the small dining table in his usual spot, his cigarette lit, his cup of coffee steaming, and the newspaper spread out before him.

Rette passed behind him and paused to lean down to kiss his cheek. “Good morning, Daddy.”

“Morning,” he grumbled in response. Rette read the headlines over his shoulder.

DEVASTATION AT PEARL HARBOR.

U.S. AND JAPAN AT WAR.

OVER 3,000 DEAD.

Rette turned quickly to the stove where her father had left the coffee pot warming. She retrieved a mug and shakily poured coffee for herself. She returned the pot to the stove and leaned against the counter, sipping her coffee.

Was it official then? Was a new war finally upon them? Rette couldn’t stand it.

“So? Is that it then?”

Henry looked up from the paper and turned to look at her. “What’s that?”
“Are we at war? What happens next?”

Henry sighed, folded up his paper, took a pull from his cigarette, and lifted his mug to his lips and sipped.

Rette shifted her weight and crossed the kitchen to take her usual seat at the table. She watched her father as he returned his cup to the table and ran his thumb over the edge of it.

“I don’t know what will happen,” Henry replied. His voice was quiet, and he spoke slowly.

Rette matched his tone, leaning over her own cup of coffee. “What was it like? Last time?”

Her father picked up his cigarette and leaned back in his chair, taking a long smoke before he spoke. “I got lucky being so young. I was pulled in late in the war. I’ve spent every day since trying to forget some of the things I saw.”

Rette lifted her mug to her lips to mask the shiver that went up her spine. She hoped the warmth of the coffee would soothe it, but the goosebumps remained.

Her father continued, “It won’t be pretty, I’m afraid.” He sighed and tamped down his cigarette into the ashtray.

Rette thought about Johnny having just joined at the start of it all. Every hair rose on end as she thought about all he may have to face. “Do you think it will get that bad?”

Her father looked up at her, studying her face. Rette watched him as he studied her. Sadness, worry, and ghosts of all he had seen reflected back at her, and she had to fight the urge to look away. “It’s already that bad, Rettie, and it’s going to get so much worse.”
Chapter Nine

Johnny fell asleep that night with Sergeant Hyde’s words echoing over and over in his mind. Mobilization...specialized training...immediate need...call to arms...this is it, soldiers.

There would be no leave granted, no special requests made. It was time, and they needed to move quick. With the enlistment numbers anticipated to triple, their remaining training, which should have taken the next three weeks were being chopped up into pieces and lumped together over the next five days. They were to receive their new assignments next weekend when they would be promptly mobilized to their next location. No one was to notify families of this change until they were in their new location. Only at that point could they notify families of the change. All mail was to be addressed to the group they were assigned. No locations. They were to treat this as a time of war until it became official.

Johnny thought of Rette, where was she when the news came around? Did she know yet? Surely, she did. Surely the Colonel knew if no one else, and he would have told her, wouldn’t he?

He thought of his requests made to his own father and Rette’s before he left. Had he asked him not to share any of that information with her? He should have.

His dreams that night were riddled with bright white explosions that appeared from nowhere. Every time an explosion would render his vision lost, he saw white instead of black, and a singular red dot appeared in the middle and grew and grew until all he saw was red.

He woke the next morning to Reveille in a pool of his own sweat. The underthings he slept in were stuck to his flesh, clinging to him. He couldn’t breathe. He looked around at his bunk mates and for the first time since they’d arrived each one rose from bed, dressed and laced their boots in silence. Each one carried a look of stern determination, even Geller. As Johnny
laced up his boots, he watched him tuck Helen’s letter into his breast pocket of his fatigues.

Geller looked up, met Johnny’s gaze, set his jaw, nodded at him, then marched out of the room to report at morning muster.

Johnny hoped, as he walked out of the building himself, the sun not risen yet and only beginning to lighten the sky from its midnight black, that he was able to mask the fear and terror that riddled through his body with the same mask of determination as the others.

Rette followed her mother and father out of the chapel into the frigid night air. Snow was falling and a storm was coming. She could smell it. Music from the chapel echoed out into the night air, a Christmas carol, but Rette didn’t want to hear it. Johnny should be here. He should be walking with her hand in hand out of the chapel just as both of their parents had done ahead of her.

But the draft laws had changed. As of a few days ago, even if Johnny hadn’t enlisted yet, he would be required to report for immediate service. He would be leaving anyway. Rette sought solace in this. Every young man she knew had either left or would be now. Those who remained struggled constantly under the onslaught of criticism and interrogation into their lack of enlistment.

Rette thought of Johnny again—enlisted and training with a goal and mission in mind. How she envied him.

She looked up at the dark sky. She wished she could see the stars. Maybe then she could find comfort in the fact that Johnny could be looking at the same night sky. But her sky was dark, blank, and Rette knew if it were light out, she would find thick dark clouds blanketing their entire town. It would hang low and close to them. Some might consider it comforting, a blanket
cast over them to shield them and keep them safe, but Rette felt suffocated, muffled beneath the weight of it. Though she couldn’t see it, she knew it was there, she was breathless beneath the load.

Johnny glanced up at the sky. Something called him to it, and he counted the stars. Infantry training had only just begun a few days prior, and they were all already feeling the immediate effects of having to maintain the combat mindset. Their down time was spent ferociously trying to unwind from the stress and pressures of their training time.

Each of their strengths began to show, but their weaknesses were put on fierce display. Johnny considered it their sergeants’ way of keeping them all humble while also filling the gaps their weaknesses created, but if Johnny couldn’t tighten his groupings with his rifle, he feared he would be put an entire week back before his first week was even completed.

The sky was so clear that night, but the chill raised goosebumps on his arms. Christmas carols still echoed from the rec hall Johnny had just exited. Bruckner, surprisingly skilled musically, was playing jovial arrangements of each one while the rest sang along loudly—some passionately in tune and others carelessly poor.

Johnny had sung with them, arms slung around each other’s shoulders and swaying wildly until, breathless and overheated, he had excused himself for the night to bed.

Christmas though it may be Johnny and the rest of the men had risen at the break of dawn for a normal day of training. The only difference in the day being a more elaborate meal at the mess hall and an extra hour to their curfew for the night.

Johnny hadn’t written to Rette since before the news of Pearl, and he couldn’t bear not knowing any longer. So, he decided to return to his cot for the night.
My Dearest Rette,

Merry Christmas, my love. I wish I were there with you to hold and sing quiet carols just as we have done all the years before. I sang carols today with the men, but it was quite... different to how we did growing up. I suppose we needed a way to unwind and have some silliness and joy after a few grueling days.

We’ve moved on to infantry training now. We’re all slowly discovering that the strengths that we worked so hard to develop in basic mean nothing here. We’ve been split according to our weaknesses, and those are the basics that we’re starting with. It should come as no surprise to you that I’ve spent the past three days in the shooting range with my aim under constant scrutiny. Now I wish I had taken your father up on those hunting trips when we were growing up. He probably could have taught me a thing or two.

Unfortunately, there will be no leave granted for the foreseeable future. We are all in full combat training mode to mobilize within the next six-eight months. There will be no time between trainings to come home as I had wished. They want us moving quickly to our next stationing to reduce the amount of down time. Though, if I’m being honest, we could all use a bit more down time. There’s not enough time for us to unwind compared to the time we spend training and honing our skills.

I supposed you’ve heard about the attacks at Pearl by now. If not on the radio, then surely pop has told you. Though I’m sure you’ve seen very little of him. His obligations at the war office would be in high demand by now.

I know you intend to volunteer there with Helen. I won’t waste my breath (ink?) asking you not to, as I know you wouldn’t listen anyhow. However, please be gentle with your heart.
You may find more there than you could possibly anticipate and not all of it good. In fact, very little of what you might learn there will be good. War is messy, my love, as you very well know. Just protect yourself as I might if I were there to do so. It will bring my heart peace.

We continue our training tomorrow, so I must begin to turn-in. I love you so much, my dearest one. You are brighter than every star in the sky and worth more than I could ever imagine providing for you but try I will.

With all my love, forever & always.

Johnny

Johnny sighed as he folded his letter up into its envelope and scrawled Rette’s address across the front, as familiar to him as his own.

“Writing to Rette?”

Johnny glanced up. It was Geller, returned from the festivities in the rec hall. “Yeah, I am.”

Geller looked away and straightened the linens on his bed. “Does she write often?”

Johnny furrowed his brow. Wasn’t he there at every mail call since their training had begun? “Just the once.”

Geller nodded. His shoulders sagged. He looked to Johnny as though he carried the weight of a thousand men, and he supposed he did—they all did. “I wish Helen would write more,” Geller stated quietly. “It would make it all much more bearable.”

Johnny tucked the sealed envelope into his footlocker to put in the post the next day and met Geller at his bed. “Come now, you’ve got me!” Johnny clapped Geller’s shoulder and tried to catch his eye.
Geller smiled slightly and peeked up at him. “Sorry, Johnny. You’re no Helen.”

Johnny held his arms up. “Come now! I’ve got it all! You need brute strength?” Johnny held up two fists. “I could give you a good punch to the face like I did when we were twelve.” Johnny put his fist to Geller’s cheek.

Geller laughed and turned away. “No,” he sighed. “What I need is a wife. I just want to live life with my girl.” Geller looked back at him, and Johnny had to fight to keep eye contact with him. The hurt and longing in his face hurt. “You get it, right?”

Johnny sighed, trying to fight off the thoughts that began edging into his mind. “Yeah, Frankie. I do. More than you know.”

They both prepared for bed and were tucked in before any of the other men returned, and by the time they did, Johnny had to pull his blanket up over his face as the hurt and longing for Rette, for his own wife, finally sunk in.

Chapter Ten

A knock sounded on Rette’s door, waking her from a dream. “Rette?” Father called.

“Helen is here to see you.”

She’d dreamed of a large field filled with birds. She stood amid the birds unmoving. She stared around at the land with a sense of rightness, belonging, but she was alone. She’d felt so alone.

“Coming,” Rette mumbled from beneath her quilt. Typically, Rette was up early most days, but after a late shift the night before, Rette needed some time to catch up.

Rette rose from her bed, dressed, and readied herself for the day. She wasn’t sure what brought Helen there that morning, but she knew she would probably end up spending a good part
of the day with her since she had nothing better to do. Plus, it meant getting away from her mother’s constant questions and criticism.

“Good morning, Helen,” Rette said as she peered out onto the front patio. Everything outside was coated in a layer of frost, and Rette’s breath escaped in puffs of warmth. “Come inside.”

Helen shook her head. “Get your coat. I want to go to the war office today to see what we can do.”

Rette sighed. With everything else she’d taken on since Johnny left and all of this began, volunteering at the war office had been the least of her concerns. Though, she knew it was constantly on Helen’s mind. Rette felt herself a terrible friend by not prioritizing her friend’s needs and requests, but frankly it had all been a bit much for Rette to handle.

“Give me just a moment,” Rette mumbled and retreated inside.

Henry sat at the dining table in his usual place. Rette passed him on her way to the coffee pot on the stove. She found a mug and poured a small cup of coffee.

“You’re going to the war office, aren’t you?” Henry asked. Rette looked up at his tone. He sounded strange—off somehow.

Rette took a large sip of the coffee and winced as it burned its way down her throat. “Yes,” she croaked, breathing through her mouth to try to soothe her scalded flesh.

“Rette, you should know. It’s not what you ladies think it is.”

Rette took one last gulp of coffee from her mug before dumping the remaining in the sink. “I have to go, Daddy, Helen’s going to freeze out there.” She began walking back toward the front door.

Henry’s chair scraped back from the table. “Rette, wait—”
Rette turned to look at him. “Daddy, I don’t think Helen’s going to be able to find the information she’s looking for anyhow, but she’s asked me to go many times, and I’ve been putting it off until now.”

Henry opened his mouth to say more, but Rette continued.

“I don’t plan on staying. I don’t have time to be there volunteering. Between Mother and Olly’s, I’m being run into the grindstone.” She stared at her father. He just looked back at her, letting her speak. “I want to help the war effort. I do. Please don’t think me unpatriotic. I gave the love of my life to the war effort for heaven’s sake, but that is all I can handle at this moment.”

Her father studied her then closed the distance between them without another word. He wrapped his arms around her and held her in a way he hadn’t since she was a child.

After a moment, she lifted her arms and returned the embrace. He may not always know what to say, but he still knew what she needed.

Rette pulled back and swiped at the tears that had brimmed in her eyes. “Helen,” she stated simply. “I love you, Daddy.”

Henry held her shoulders for a moment longer. Rette watched his gaze study every inch of her face. “I love you, Rettie. More than you will ever know.”

Rette gave him a half smile, patted his arm, grabbed her coat, and headed outside.

When Rette and Helen arrived at the recruitment center, the line was out the door.

“Excuse us,” Helen said at the door.

One of the young men Rette had never seen before hurried to open the door for Rette and Helen.

“Why thank you…” Helen hesitated. “I’m sorry, I don’t think we’ve met.”
“Irving Folsom,” he said, holding a hand out to her.

“Helen,” she answered, returning the handshake. “This is my friend Rette.” She motioned to Rette who nodded her hello.

“Nice to meet you,” he nodded to them both.

Helen and Rette stepped inside the building, and before Rette could say anything, Helen held her arms open wide and said, “We’re here! How can we help?”

Rette fought off a groan. She wasn’t any surer of what she was doing than Helen was, but she was sure they couldn’t just walk into a place and force their help upon them.

The silence that followed Helen’s proclamation led Rette to sidestep behind Helen slightly if nothing else but to direct the spectators’ gaze onto her.

An older woman held up a finger to the young man she was taking information from and stood from her desk. “Now ladies, it’s not often we see you all here. How can we help you?”

Helen turned to try to make eye contact with Rette but didn’t find her where she had been. Helen turned to face the woman again and squared her shoulders.

“We would like to help you,” Helen stated. “Wherever we can be useful.”

The woman looked between Helen and Rette. Of everyone in the room, Rette didn’t recognize a single one of them. It was very different for her. Typically, anywhere she went in Attabury, she was able to recognize most people, sometimes even remember their usual orders—if there’s one thing waiting tables taught Rette it’s that people are predictable. But she knew nothing about these people.

The woman cleared her throat. “Well then, clearly, we could use it. Why don’t you both take a seat and I’ll have Major James come speak with you.” She motioned to two empty chairs at the back of the room behind the desk she had stood from.
Helen nodded to the woman and walked to the back of the room. Rette followed close behind and settled into the seat beside Helen.

“See?” Helen said brightly. “That was easy.”

“Right,” Rette said slowly, settling back into her chair. They hadn’t done anything yet, and as Rette watched the older woman settle back into her desk and address the man she had paused before, without ever talking to anyone else or going into the back offices Rette and Helen sat in front of, she had a sinking feeling that they would be there for a while.

Rette watched the line of young men come and go, and slowly Helen began to lose steam.

“I think she’s forgotten about us,” Helen whispered to Rette. Rette nodded and looked at the doors they sat outside. Behind those doors was what she imagined would be the war office, the place where Helen might be able to find her true answers.

Rette stood from her seat, her muscles and joints aching from sitting for so long, and before she knew what she was doing her hand was on the knob and it was opening—from the inside.

Rette released it. There stood Major James shadowed by two other men. Rette recognized them but found she could not recall their names.

“Miss Murphy?” Major James asked, shock clear on his face as Rette’s suspicions were confirmed. “Are you alright?”

Rette looked between him and Helen and looked back at the older woman sitting at her desk mid-conversation with yet another young man. She met Rette’s eye and smiled sweetly at her.

“Good morning, Major. My friend, Helen Lehman, and I were just—”
Major James stepped out of the back offices followed by the two other men and spotted Helen still sitting. “Dear me. Frank’s gal, am I right?”

Helen stood and came to Rette’s side. “Yes, sir, his fiancée now, actually.”

Rette watched Major James’s gaze shift to Helen’s left hand then return to her face with a smile. “Of course. There’s quite a lot of that going around.”

The two men behind Major James chuckled unkindly.

“Now ladies, you know as much as I do about your men, so I can’t get you any information. Your best bet is to write to—”

“We’re not here about Frank or Johnny. We have another matter we were hoping you could help with,” Rette stated bluntly.

Helen nudged her. “Yes, and we were hoping to help where we could. We can see you’re all mighty busy, so we thought we would lend a hand.”

Major James looked between Rette and Helen. Of the two, he knew Rette best, and anyone who knew Rette knew she couldn’t lie. “What is the matter that brought you here?” He raised his eyebrows at them.

“We’re really just wanting—”

Major James lifted his hand to stop Helen. “Excuse me, Miss Lehman. That question was for Miss Murphy.”

Rette furrowed her brow at him. She wanted to get the point as much as any of them, but it wasn’t a cause to be ill mannered. “Helen has family in Germany—”

“Saarland,” Helen specified.

Rette looked at her then back at Major James, when she did, she noticed the realization dawn on his face. She continued, “She hasn’t heard from them in a very long time.”
“June 3rd was the last letter I had from my aunt.”

Major James nodded solemnly. The two men behind him muttered to each other.

“Unfortunately, we’re not receiving much communication from many of the areas in Germany.”

Rette looked at Helen who nodded knowingly—this wasn’t anything she hadn’t heard before.

“You’re not the only one who has lost touch with family members. We know the Jewish communities have been hit very hard by Hitler’s regime, but unfortunately, we don’t really know yet what’s going on.” Major James looked between Rette and Helen again. “I’m very sorry to have wasted your time, ladies.”

Helen brushed her hair back, and Rette caught Helen’s sly swipe at the moisture that had pooled on her cheeks. “Not at all, sir,” Helen insisted. “We would still like to help, if you’ll take us.”

The two men behind Major James protested, and Rette fought off her urge to glare at them. Major James raised a hand to silence them, and he smiled sweetly at them again. “Thank you, ladies, truly. Your patriotism does not go unnoticed. However, the Lieutenant, Captain, and I were all headed to lunch, so perhaps another day, huh?”

Helen looked disappointed and dismissed, but Rette filled with joy. Perhaps they could head back to Helen’s and enjoy some delicious lunch prepared by Helen’s mother. She really was one of Attabury’s best cooks. “Thank you, sir. We won’t bother you again, enjoy your lunch!” Rette waved them off as they excused themselves, leaving Rette and Helen standing there alone.

“‘*We won’t bother you again?’ Whatever do you mean?”
Rette looked at her friend, the hurt had been clear in her voice, and Rette realized in that moment she had utterly shut down her best friend’s singular and only request of her for the past six months.

“Helen, that’s not what I—”

“You know, I was wondering why you were dragging your feet, but I just thought between Johnny, your mother, and Olly’s you had a lot on your plate. I didn’t realize you just really didn’t want to do it.” Helen stared at her and shook her head slowly. The hurt in her eyes was so potent that any joy Rette felt about their upcoming free afternoon was squashed.

Rette spoke before she could even think. “You never asked.” She regretted it as soon as she’d said it as Helen’s face contorted in anger. “Wait—that’s not what—”

Helen began to walk away, by the time she made it to the door, she turned back, and shouted over the clamor of young men answering questions and completing forms. “Don’t worry, Rette. I won’t bother you again.” And she left.

Rette returned home that afternoon to Mr. Gerrells waving a letter at her as she walked up the sidewalk. She took it from him with gratitude and retreated inside.

Dishes were clattering in the kitchen. Mother was preparing her afternoon tea. Rette hoped the clattering caused enough raucous to conceal the sound of the door opening. She waited until her mother carried her afternoon tea to the front room before tiptoeing through the kitchen and up the stairs where she tucked herself into her room to peruse Johnny’s letter.

As she studied Johnny’s scrawled name at the bottom of the letter, her hand laid over top of the letter and began to ball it up. The war office had been a joke. Helen couldn’t find out
anything there she didn’t already know, and though they went to help, it was made quite clear that their help was not wanted. Rette wouldn’t force her time upon a place when there was very little of it to begin with. She glanced down at her fist, gripping Johnny’s letter, her knuckles white in frustration. She noticed the paper beginning to tear, a hole beginning to emerge right in the midst of Johnny’s scrawling script. *Not enough time*, she read, but the rest of the sentence was lost from her view, the sentence separated by frayed edges of the parchment.

They hadn’t gotten enough time. Any of them. Rette and Johnny should have been married by now as should Helen and Frank. Helen wanted to be starting their family by the end of the year, but it was already a month into 1942, and she wasn’t even Mrs. Frank Geller. Rette knew they weren’t alone. She knew there were probably thousands of other couples in the same situation as they were, drawn together by love, passion, destiny, God, whatever it may be, but separated by war. Rette thought of the growing casualty lists. Separated by death.

Rette hurried to smooth out the letter, trying to undo the creases and patch the hole together, but her efforts were fruitless. The paper was still crinkled and torn, though at least she could read the sentence once again. *There’s not enough time to unwind*. Rette felt as though she hadn’t been able to unwind since the night Johnny had proposed. Since then, it had been one thing after another after another.

Someone knocked on her bedroom door, and Rette sat upright, tucking the crinkled and torn letter beneath a book. “Yes?”

“Rettie? It’s me. May I come in?” It was her father. Rette stood from her bed and opened the door. He was pale.

“Daddy? Are you alright?” Rette’s pulse rose as he gave a weak cough and clutched the door frame.
He took a shaky breath. “Yes. It’s just this damn cough. I woke up with it and can’t seem to shake it.” He turned away from her as another hacking cough burst from his chest.

Rette patted his back weakly. “Would you like me to call Doc?”

He shook his head and winced. “No, no. I am meeting with him in two days anyhow.”

Rette nodded, continuing to rub his back. “Did you need me?”

He turned back to her and held a slip of paper out to her. “I knew a woman in my brief time overseas. She seemed to know everyone, and if she herself didn’t know whoever you needed, she knew someone who did.” He pointed at the piece of paper he’d given her. Ada Voigt.

“Write to her. She may be able to help you find Helen’s aunt.”

Rette could no longer see the words on the slip of paper. They had blurred in a frenzy of tears that burst from her chest. She put her hands to her face.

“Oh, Rettie,” her father cooed, and took her into his chest.

“It was horrible, Daddy. I was horrible,” she sobbed.

“Whatever could you mean?”

“Helen,” she pulled away and wiped at her face with one hand, keeping the slip of paper far away so she wouldn’t smudge the ink. “I’ve been terrible. There’s just been so much going on between Mother, the wedding, my extra shifts at Olly’s, and Johnny being gone. I just couldn’t take any more.”

“The War Office?”

Rette nodded. “It’s not that I don’t want to spend time with her or help the war effort— I do.” She emphasized this with a firm look at her father who nodded vehemently in reply. “But it’s just so much–too much for me to handle right now.”
Her father nodded and held her shoulders. He brushed her hair back from her face. “I understand, sweetheart. I see you and all your burdens. Let me take this. Let me help where I can.” He lifted her hand that held the scrap of paper containing his contact’s information and patted it.

Rette smiled at him. “Thanks, Daddy.”

He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “Anything for you, Rettie.”

Chapter Eleven

“Rette, the Thurgoods need refills, and Major James is asking for more coffee. Could you get that?” Joan asked quickly as she passed Rette, carrying a tray laden with food to a large corner table.

“‘Course,” Rette mumbled and swept behind the chrome bar top to retrieve the water and coffee pitchers.

“Pastor Phillips said we could have all of our paperwork squared away and ready to go whenever Gregory can get leave,” Mrs. Thurgood spoke quietly to Jodi. Jodi nodded quietly.

Rette refilled her glass. She looked so young. They had time, surely. There wasn’t a rush, was there? She turned to fill Mr. Thurgood’s cup.

“He just needs to make it home alive,” Mr. Thurgood muttered.

Rette’s pulse rose, and she glanced up at little Jodi who seemed to sink lower in her seat—timid and afraid. Her eyes welled and her cheeks flushed, and Rette glanced back at Mr. Thurgood’s cup in time to see the water cresting up over the brim, pouring out over and across the table into Mr. Thurgood’s lap.
“Good heaven’s!” he exclaimed, leaping from his seat, water dripping from his trousers.

“Watch what you’re doing girl!”

Rette smiled sweetly at him. “I’m sorry about that, Mr. Thurgood. Let me get you a towel.”

She turned and refilled Major James’s coffee mug. “And how are you today, Major?”

He looked up at her then back at Mr. Thurgood. “Much better than Mr. Thurgood it seems.” Rette watched him glance back down to his coffee, watching it fill.

Rette halted the flow of coffee just as it reached the brim and smiled sweetly at him as well. “Joan will be right with you to take your order.” Her tone was sickening, and as she walked away, she was brutally aware of eyes on her as she fought to keep her expression in line.

Mr. Thurgood, however, had been way out of line. To say that in front of his daughter, someone already so young and probably struggling to deal with her “fiancé” being gone—if one could call him that considering Jodie wouldn’t be seventeen until summer if Rette recalled. It was horrific. How could a father think to say such a thing?

Rette handed a towel to Joan as she passed her. “Mr. Thurgood is in need of a towel.”

Joan looked between Rette, the towel, and back at the Thurgood’s table. “Rette,” she hissed. “That’s not the way to—”

“It was an accident, Joanie!” Olly’s voice piped up from the kitchen. He peered out at Rette with a knowing wink. “Besides, he probably deserved it.”

Rette lifted her chin, and her chest ached with validation.

The bell on the door rang, and Rette turned in time to see Helen and her parents enter. They looked around the diner and spotted Joan busy on one side of the diner where every table
was full. The only two that remained open were on Rette’s side. Helen glanced at her, made eye
contact, then turned coldly to claim one of Rette’s open tables.

Rette turned back toward the kitchen to retrieve her notepad where she’d left it, and Olly
glanced up at her, eyeing the Lehmans behind her.

“Good?” Olly asked as he flipped a sandwich in a pan.

Rette sighed but nodded, turning with her notepad back toward her section.

“Good afternoon,” Rette said warmly. “What can I get you?”

Helen looked up at her, her jaw set, and her brown eyes cold. “We would like to request
for Joan to serve us today.”

Rette stood a little straighter and took a small step back. “Unfortunately, Joan’s side is
full, so I would be happy to—”

“Mama, Papa, I don’t think I have an appetite anymore. Why don’t we—”

“Helen,” Mrs. Lehman hissed.

Helen sighed. “We will take some water, and my father would like a coffee, please.”

“Of course,” Rette said and walked away.

By the time she returned to the table with three glasses of water, a coffee cup and the pot
of coffee, Helen was stacking dirty dishes at one of Joan’s tables and placing them on the chrome
top bar.

Rette sighed, took the drinks to their new table, and offered to wipe the crumbs from it,
which Helen promptly refused.

After work, Rette couldn’t stand the thought of going home yet, so she took a detour on
her walk home through Centennial Park. It was cold out, but the sun was shining. The mounds of
snow from their snowstorm at Christmas were still piled up in the shade. Everyone was saying they were due for another snowstorm soon.

Rette came to the gazebo that sat in the middle of the park. Inside were two benches. She sat down and reached into her deep coat pocket and pulled out her writing pad.

*Dear Johnny,* she wrote. *I’ve really messed things up.* She proceeded to tell him everything that had happened at the war office and Helen’s cold shoulder at the diner. *Father gave me a contact he met during the Great War who may be able to help locate Helen’s aunt.*

*That may be the only way I can get Helen back.*

The jump light’s eerie green glow illuminated at the same moment the red light went out in the plane. They were fifteen-hundred feet in the air going well over one hundred-fifty miles an hour, but to Johnny, he couldn’t tell how high they were or how fast they were going. He was about to jump from a U.S. Army airplane before his parachute would return him to the earth he left not even ten minutes ago.

Their infantry paratrooper training began instantaneously. In fact, Johnny struggled to identify where their infantry training stopped, and their paratrooper training began. His class contained seventy-four other men, only twenty of which their instructors promised would make it.

“Remember,” Sergeant McCarthy’s voice broke over the roaring engine. “It’s up to you whether you’re a part of those twenty men.”

The green light signaled the men to stand from their benches and to strap their carabiners to the static line to prepare for jumping. The deployment bag that all paratroopers wore contained the main parachute which was attached to the static line. When paratroopers fell out of the plane,
their weight caused the static line to become taut, pulling on the deployment bag and
automatically opening the parachute upon exit. Johnny had watched the films detailing how the
static line would open the parachute for them with a “ninety-five percent success rate”. Johnny
tried not to think about the remaining five percent.

Up the line, Johnny heard the jump inspection begin, each man in turn inspecting the
pack in front of them in line to ensure all was secure and in place as they were taught. “Carver,
okay!” Frank bellowed from behind Johnny.

Johnny took his turn, patted the pack in front of him and yelled over the engine roar,
“Bruckner, okay!” And up the line the barking followed until all packs were inspected, then all
that was left was the jump.

“Go! Go! Go!” The jumpmaster yelled over the roar of the engine and wind thrusting all
around them. He waved his arm repeatedly in and out of the plane signaling each jumper’s turn
until Johnny stepped up to the foot of the loading ramp. Terror set in like it had the previous
three times he had jumped. His first jump was entirely successful, but Johnny chalked it up to
beginner’s luck and the fact that the training information was fresh on his mind. The previous
two had had shaky landings but were wholly uneventful otherwise—just as a paratrooper wanted
it.

Johnny watched Brucker’s shoot expand with the force of the wind, and Johnny hesitated
a moment. As he missed his cue to jump. he felt Frank ram into him, used to their typical
rhythm.

The jumpmaster put a hand between them and barked. “What are you doing private?
Carv——”
But the voice trailed off. Johnny was falling out of the plane. Far too quickly. His chute hadn’t opened properly, and Johnny was in a tailspin, tumbling out of control. When Johnny didn’t jump and Frank moved forward as though he had, it caused their static lines to tangle. Johnny was in a free fall, and he began to pass up the others who had jumped before him in line.

“Your reserve! Pull your reserve!” One of them shouted to Johnny. He could barely hear them over the roar in his ears. The ground was coming closer. Johnny scrambled to remember his training, assumed the position he should have jumped in and searched for his reserve parachute line which constantly avoided his grasp as the plastic and nylon rope attached to his pack fluttered in the breeze. Johnny swore at it. His fingers finally grasped the plastic piece, and he pulled with all his might, sending his body in a jolt upward as his reserve parachute opened. He wasn’t free falling anymore, but the reserve parachutes were for emergencies only and were not outfitted the same way the main parachutes were.

The ground approached quickly as Johnny passed two more paratroopers on his way down. He hoped his landing would be far smoother than his initial jump, but he guessed he was three hundred feet from the ground. He had no way of controlling his direction. The main parachutes had a more familiar set of guidelines than the reserves which could be manipulated to steer his descent. The reserve’s lines were similar, but pulled differently on his body, which made his steering more erratic.

He counted off in his head as the ground approached far too quickly and remembered the steps to a collision landing. Tuck and roll.

Johnny’s left leg landed first, then his right as his momentum from the fall sent him barreling towards earth. The immediate crunch in his bones felt awful enough for Johnny to shout in pain, but he couldn’t focus on that. His speed was too high, and he couldn’t control his
legs well enough to stop him from running over one of the men who had already landed, unaware of the chaos happening behind him.

Johnny came to a stop in a tangle of chute and lines. He groaned and slowly checked to make sure everything could be felt and moved properly before he tried to stand.

“Carver? What happened, man?”

Johnny turned and found Hansen, a man who came from a different infantry camp who’d joined them specially for paratrooper training.

“It was a sour jump, Hansen. Sorry I took you down.”

Hansen brushed it off. “No bother. Are you alright? All your parts in their right places?”

Johnny patted himself and gave two thumbs up, wincing at the ache in his left leg. He had come down hard. He was lucky nothing was broken.

Johnny began gathering his chute as the rest of the men began landing in the field around them. There was a pregnant silence as the sun baked down on the grassy field. The only sound was an animal chirping somewhere far off, and the wind blowing against the blades. They brushed together in a soothing whisper. It would have been soothing, at least, in any other circumstances, but in its whisper, he felt as though even the grasses were discussing his shortcomings.

When they had all gathered their chutes, they walked a short distance to the convoy of trucks waiting to transport them back to their training area for debriefing. It was this debriefing Johnny feared the most. Each jump they took was carefully observed and documented for the selection process, and up until this point, most of the jumps had been clean. Their group had already been cut in half through the drills they were put through and failures to retain form. They didn’t put anyone in the air who couldn’t master it and make safe, successful jumps.
As Johnny waited behind Frank to enter the truck, he looked up at the bright clear sky. There were only a few brushstrokes of clouds today, the rest of it flooded in a refreshing blue. He drank in the sight and watched their jump plane begin to make its descent back at the flight line. That was Johnny’s last jump. He knew it. He would be washed back to the infantry company who had arrived the previous day. At least this time, he would be able to zero in his rifle sights better.

Johnny settled onto the bench beside Frank and watched as the remaining trucks in the convoy started up behind them and began to follow. He hugged his bundled-up chute to his chest, and watched the dirt rise in swirling clouds behind them.

“Where is your head, Private?!” Sergeant McCarthy bellowed in Johnny’s face. Spit flew and sprinkled across his cheek, but Johnny didn’t flinch.

He didn’t know what Sergeant McCarthy wanted, so he settled for the literal. “On my shoulders, Sergeant!” Johnny answered and hoped he hadn’t made matters worse.

Sergeant McCarthy chuckled and shook his head. “Good thing, too. You could have lost it out there, you realize that, right?”

Johnny swallowed. “Yes, Sergeant.”

Sergeant McCarthy leaned up against the Commander’s desk. When they had returned to their training area, the men had assumed their formation and were promptly released for dinner. According to Johnny’s watch, a whole hour early. Johnny, however, was ordered to the Commander’s Office followed closely by Sergeant McCarthy.
Commander Falk had sat silently at his desk while Sergeant McCarthy reamed Johnny for his jump performance. He spoke now, his voice higher than Johnny was expecting from his large frame. “You’re being made Squad Leader, Private.”

Johnny looked between the Commander and Sergeant McCarthy. “I—I don’t understand, sir.”

“The decision was made before today’s jump. You are to receive a promotion as well.”

Johnny stared at him as he rose from his desk and came around to stand in front of him. He held out a hand to Johnny. “Congratulations, Corporal.”

Johnny hesitated. The Commander’s eyes were sincere as he maintained eye contact with Johnny. He lifted his hand from his side and grasped the Commander’s hand firmly. “Thank you, sir.”

The Commander let go and turned to lean against his desk beside Sergeant McCarthy. “It is well deserved after all.”

“Sir?”

“You came to us with natural talent, that’s the only way to describe it. Sergeant Carwood and your basic training instructors all had glowing recommendations for your promotion and leadership opportunities.” The Commander shrugged. “I was against it myself. Typically, when we build squads, it is not from one training company, but this may be the exception. The rest of the men speak very highly of you, particularly Privates Bruckner and Geller.”

Johnny did a double take. Bruckner? That was the last person Johnny expected a recommendation from.

“Being squad leader does not mean you’re the most skilled,” Sergeant McCarthy assured him. “It just means the rest of the men trust to follow you in.”
The Commander pulled a piece of paper from his desk and began to read from it.

“Private Carver came to me as, we later found out, bombs were raining on Pearl, to express his fears and uncertainties to stay true to himself. However, in him coming to me, I found that he was possibly one of the most capable, honorable, and true soldiers in his battalion. He is an asset to his men, his company, and to the United States Army. Chaplain Ernest Albright.”

Johnny swallowed. A lump had risen in his throat, and he found himself unable to respond.

“Chap is a close personal friend,” the Commander said, laying the letter back down on his desk in an open file. “Trust me when I say that he does not say things like that lightly. He is a kind man of God, but he is also brutally honest and is not afraid to put anyone in their place. Congratulations again, Corporal. You’re dismissed.”

Johnny saluted and turned from the Commander’s office.

Corporal. He’d skipped an entire rank. What would the others think? They can’t know.

It’s not fair to them. Was this special treatment?

Johnny entered his bunk to find the thirty-five remaining paratroopers packed in, waiting for him.

“What—” Johnny stared open-mouthed from Geller to Bruckner and Hansen.

“So?” Geller asked, his eyebrows nearly to his hairline. “What’d he say?”

Johnny hesitated. Which part should he tell them? “I’m still in,” he stated quietly.

“Are you our squad leader or not, Corporal,” Bruckner asked with a jeering grin.

Johnny looked at him trying to keep his face blank. “How—”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake man, Sergeant Carwood and McCarthy have been talking about it for weeks. Haven’t you noticed?” Hansen asked.
“You all know?”

“Yes!” They all exclaimed, and Johnny looked from one smiling face to the next. He was lucky enough to have grown up close to people that he would do anything for, but this—this was so much more. As he stared from Geller’s big nose to Bruckner’s always angry looking face, he found he would do anything for any of them. He knew fifteen of them would be gone by their training’s end, but they wouldn’t be far. Their paths would cross again, and when they did, Johnny knew he would do anything to bring them home safe.

By the time Johnny made it back to his bunk after dinner and their raucous evening at the rec hall, there was not much time before curfew. As he gathered his things to prepare for bed, he noticed a letter left on his bed. It was from Rette.

As the other men came into the barracks still singing and dancing, Johnny excused himself with his things and his letter and settled onto the bench outside their barracks.

Rette seemed so lonely. Johnny’s heart ached as he thought about the camaraderie and brotherhood he felt daily, and especially that evening as they threw their arms around each other’s shoulders and sang jauntily with abandon. It wasn’t fair. Rette deserved all of that and more. She deserved to be surrounded by people she loved, but Helen had turned on her. Helen, who knows what it is like to have Frank gone. She wasn’t the only one who knew how Rette felt, but for heaven’s sake, they should have been in it together.

When he returned to his bunk, his hair still dripping, he pulled out his writing pad and pen, but couldn’t find the words. He was still riding the high of his own friendships and joy from the day that he couldn’t empathize with her, and he knew Rette wasn’t writing to him for his
pity. He tried to find the words, and hoped with his whole heart that they were exactly what she needed to hear.

**Chapter Twelve**

The next morning, Johnny woke and dressed, feeling light. The atmosphere of the men—his men—was refreshing. The cut to twenty had been looming over their heads. It was still on everyone’s minds, but there was an air of acceptance around it, and Johnny found comfort in that.

“Ready for number five?” Geller clapped him on the shoulder as Johnny laced up his boots.

He cinched the knot tight and tucked in the laces before he stood, a bounce in his step.

“Absolutely. You?”

Geller grinned at him. “When I said I wanted to take to the skies, this wasn’t what I imagined, but at least I get to be up there with you. Proud to be with you, brother.”

Johnny threw his arm around Geller’s shoulders. “We’ve been together this long. There’s not much that can separate us now!”

They joined the rest of the group outside as they made their way to their training grounds.

“Today is your final jump, men!” Sergeant McCarthy yelled over the early morning breeze that whipped between the men standing in formation. “Make it clean, make it safe, but be prepared for anything. You have trained for this. You are ready for this, and by the grace and will of God, you will all meet me back here on the ground in ninety minutes for our final selection. Let’s gear up!”
They gathered their gear, got suited up, and before Johnny knew it, they were benched on the plane as it taxied down the runway, gaining speed.

Their process was the same each time. Johnny held a new place in line at the front as squad leader which meant Hansen would check his pack and he would sound off to the jumpmaster that the squad was ready to jump. As the orders sounded, and each of them tethered into the static line, the inspections began, and Johnny reveled in the voices he could hear over the cacophony of engines and wind.

“Carver, okay!”

“All okay, jumpmaster!” Johnny bellowed.

They stepped to the opening of the plane, each step careful, calculated. The jumpmaster signaled, and Johnny jumped. The torrent caught his chute quickly, jerking his body into position, and he sighted the horizon, watching as he and the sun passed one another like passing ships in an open ocean.

He couldn’t glance up to check on his men, as his open chute blocked his view, but they were all still above him.

He spotted their landing target, and pulled on his tethers, adjusting his body into the wind, and made a gently running landing. That was it. He was done. He laughed loudly and fought off the urge to pump his fists.

But then he heard a thud.

He looked behind him. It was a reserve pack.

One of his men was in the air and had no reserve chute. He should see seventeen chutes. As the plane could only carry up to twenty-eight, their remaining thirty-five had been split for two jump cycles.
Johnny covered his eyes against the sun as Hansen landed a few yards away. One. There were three others coming down in a line, four. Six were staggered in the air, making their descent, ten. Then he saw it.

Someone was scrambling in the air. Without an open chute. He was falling. Fast.

“Pull your reserve!” Hansen bellowed.

Johnny picked up the pack from the ground and held it between his hands. “It’s gone,” Johnny muttered.

As the next three men landed, they all watched in horror as their brother in arms collided with the grassy hillside.

Rette picked up the teapot from where it sat between her and Mother at their dining table. Henry sat across from Rette, perusing the day’s paper, a cigarette smoking from where it lay on the edge of the ash tray in the middle of their table.

“Pastor Phillips said he could marry as many as four couples in an hour if he had to with so many trying to get married before the men are skipped out.” Mother tapped her pen against her notepad in a furious rhythm.

Rette sipped her tea, father folded the newspaper over to the next page, and Mother droned on, debriefing anyone who cared to listen on the day’s development of wedding plans for a wedding day with no date.

The day began at Guthrie’s in Abilene where, unsurprisingly, every white dress was either purchased or spoken for. Like at Lemaire’s, Rette put her name down on a list in case any more were made before Johnny returned home. She was number sixty-one, but Mother had tacked Rette’s name onto a deep blue dress, jacket, and skull cap ensemble in the case that she
could not get an alternative. The outfit was much more expensive and sophisticated than Rette was ever able to afford. Which is why, Mother had stated, it would be suitable for a marriage ceremony.

In stature, Rette took after her father’s side of the family. Rette would love to wear Grandma Mary’s wedding gown that lay folded and dusty in Mother’s cedar chest at the foot of her parents’ bed, but Rette knew the gown would never fit her frame.

“Helen will stand with you for the ceremony, and Frank as well, if he happens to be home at the same time as Johnny. Then, Lord willing, Mrs. Lehman has agreed that Helen and Frank will be married immediately following you two, so you will be able to stand with them. If there is not a spot available for them, Pastor Phillips and Mrs. Lehman have both agreed that we can have a joint ceremony for both of you at the same time.”

Rette chose not to bring up her current conflict with Helen, as Mother would only see it as an opportunity to take matters into her own hands, and that was not what Rette needed. Father grunted as he folded his paper down and leaned forward to tap his cigarette in the ashtray in the middle of the small dining table.

Mother flipped the page in her notebook where she was recording notes of everything they had accomplished for the day. She continued, “Once you’re wed, your life will truly begin, children will come, and I’m sure the Colonel and Lynette have made arrangements with Johnny to have a suitable home for you two once you are married. You’ll finally have a home to keep and a place to raise all my beautiful grandchildren you’ll have.”

Rette studied the handle of her teacup and ran her thumb over the old chip in it. Mother tried getting rid of the cup long ago to replace it with something better, but Rette found its
imperfection comforting. The tiny sunflowers on the side reminded her of the ones that grew in Johnny’s yard when they were children.

It was all Mother’s plans. None of the day would be her own. No dress of her dreams, no big ceremony with all their friends and family there to celebrate them. Instead, it would be a nice dress on a nice day shared with their nice friends, some of whom didn’t consider them “friends” at all, and at least twenty other nice couples. Rette took a deep breath. It all sounded very nice, but it wasn’t hers. Rette knew marrying Johnny was all that mattered, but within a matter of days— or hours— of them becoming man and wife, Johnny would leave again without any idea of when he’d return.

“Rette?”

It would be like not getting married at all.

“Margarette.”

Rette tore her gaze from her teacup and met her mother’s scowl.

“Are you listening to me?”

Rette pushed back from the table, rattling the teapot, and stood to place her cup in the sink. “Yes, Mother.”

“I know this is not how we planned it, but it will have to do. You two are so in love, and wartime weddings are so fashionable now.”

“I don’t want to make anything official yet, Mother.”

Rette turned on the faucet, hoping to discourage any more conversation.

All she wanted was to be able to marry Johnny and have it feel like her life actually changed. Was it too much to ask? She did not want to wake up the day after their wedding, wishing for a honeymoon, only to have to say goodbye to him and carry on with her present life.
She wanted a new life. A life with Johnny, a house, and a few children to fill their arms and rooms.

“Honestly, you need to make decisions now or nothing will be done if Johnny does come home.”

Rette sighed, the water still running, failing to drown out Mother’s comments.

“You are asking too much of her.”

Rette looked up at her father, fearing she spoke her thoughts aloud, but he was looking at Mother.

Mother shook her head and looked down at her notebook, flicking to the next page.

“Henry, honestly, this is best left to—”

“To Rette and Johnny when they are ready. Can’t you see how exhausted she is? You’ve had her running all over town all day.”

“Well, I just—”

“Mother, I need some time to process all the changes. That’s all.” Rette pacified her mother in a way she had been accustomed to all her life. If Mother was unhappy, they all were. But then again, Mother was almost always unhappy.

Mother slammed a fist down on the table, making Henry jump, ashes falling from the end of his cigarette onto his newspaper, which he brushed at quickly to avoid scarring.

“You don’t have time, Margarettte!” Tears welled in Mother’s eyes and fell onto her notebook, splotching the black ink. Mother snapped the notebook shut, presumably ruining a few pages in the process, and swiftly carried herself up the stairs, leaving Rette and her father alone in the kitchen.
Father stood from the table and joined Rette in amiable silence before he turned to the cookie jar behind him to retrieve two lemon cookies—his routine snack after his afternoon cigarette. The sounds of her mother’s steps still echoed above them. Rette studied her engagement ring as her father stepped closer to her, offering a cookie. Rette shook her head politely.

Father took a crummy bite, bits of cookie clinging to his graying mustache. He stepped closer and took her hand in his. “You don’t have to do everything all at once. You can slow down. She means well, but you and Johnny should plan the day as you want it.”

A lump formed in Rette’s throat. “I know.”

Her father scooted closer and pulled her into his large chest. Arms wrapped around her, and she felt as though she could finally breathe. He smelled like tobacco and lemon. After each cigarette, her father enjoyed a lemon cookie, and Rette always considered the combination comforting.

He stroked her escaping curls as Rette heard the muffled *thu-thump* of his heart beneath her ear. “It’ll be alright, Rette. You’re one of the strongest young women I know. You’re more like your mother than you know.”

Rette pulled away and gave him a skeptical look. She tried not to sound offended. “Really?”

He gave her a half smile and wiped a tear from her cheek, much like he used to when she was little. “She’s never told you how we met, has she?”

Rette shook her head.

“Well, if she hasn’t by now, she may never, but you should know, your mother hasn’t always been this way, Rette. She was very young and heartbroken when I met her.”
“But you two didn’t marry until she was much older.” Rette was confused. She knew her mother was practically a spinster by the time she and Father married. It was one of the reasons, Rette thought, that Mother always pressured Rette and Johnny to marry young.

“You’re right, but we met many years before we were married. I was home for a short time toward the end of the Great War to resolve some affairs with my father’s lawyer. I paid a visit to my mother’s best friend, your Great Aunt Florence in hopes of catching my mother there. That happened to be the day your mother received news that her husband, Nicholas, had been killed.”

Rette knew her mother was a widow of The Great War, but she’d never asked about her first husband. Rette studied Father, the distant look in his eye as he continued reliving his own memory.

Rette studied Father’s face as his brows furrowed, and his eyes crinkled in concentration—or was it pain? “Your mother loved another before me, you know that. She still loved him when we met. I’m sure a part of her still does.”

Rette brushed a hand on her father’s shoulder, hoping it might soothe some of his pain. He gave her a gentle smile, then looked past her.

“I found her crying over the letter. I watched her clutch her aunt’s letter opener. Between sobs, she told me of her intent to end it all, so I pried the letter opener from her hand and sat with her. I didn’t know who she was. I knew Aunt Florence had a niece who was very young and newly married, but I figured she would be in a house of her own.

“I was the first person she told that her husband died. She told me years later that I saved her that day. A million scenarios had gone through her mind in the moments after reading that letter, but none of them included living.”
Rette shook her head in shock. “I never knew.”

“How could you? That was years before we were married. Sometimes, I think your mother sees you and Johnny as her second chance at a happy ending.”

“But you and Mother still love each other, right?”

Father sighed. “Our love developed over a very long time, and I wouldn’t say it was particularly passionate. It was convenient, and we had a deep friendship.”

A knock sounded from the front door startling Rette. Henry jerked too, standing straighter and walking past Rette to investigate. Rette followed and watched as he pulled the door open. Over his shoulder, Rette recognized a young man from a few grades behind her in school. He was dressed in the telegram messenger uniform.

“Is there a Miss Murphy home?” he inquired of Rette’s father.

“I’ll take it.”

The young man handed him the telegram. He thanked the messenger and closed the front door.

“You may read it,” Rette told father as he was already screening the yellow paper for information. If it was bad news, Rette wasn’t sure she could bear it. “Who is it from?”

Father handed her the paper with a smile. “See for yourself.”

COMING HOME TWENTY FIFTH MAY. PERMITTED ONE WEEK RR. NEWS UPON ARRIVAL. LOVE TO YOU YOURS AND MINE. JOHNATHAN CARVER

Chapter Thirteen
Rette sprinted to Johnny the moment she set her sights on him at the bus station. He stood dressed in his Army uniform with a look of relief on his face. The long skirt on her thin dress flew around her. She likely gave the crowd a peek at her unmentionables if they glanced over at the right moment, but she didn't care. For a short time, he was home.

Johnny embraced her, holding her in his arms with her feet high off the ground. That first breath she took when he set her down on her feet was as if she had been living with only one lung and now finally had two.

Rette felt alive. Every nerve in her body stood at attention just by being near him again. She pressed her hand to his cheek, taking stock of the state of him. When he leaned into her hand with his eyes closed, pain was clear in the crease of his brow. Her heart sank into her gut, and she knew.

“Who?” Rette asked.

“Geller,” he croaked. He closed his eyes. The pain was visible.

Rette’s eyes closed to fight off the tears. “Oh, Johnny. I’m so sorry.”

“Me, too.”

That’s why he was able to get leave. He was tasked to escort his best friend home.

Special arrangements had been made to transport Frank back home. Johnny had the unfortunate responsibility to accompany the military chaplain that was sent from nearby Fort Riley to notify Frank’s grandfather. Johnny then went immediately to the Lehman’s house where he notified Helen. Rette met him there but stayed on the sidewalk out of view of the patio. She didn’t want Johnny to have to walk home alone. Helen had been near inconsolable. Rette could still hear her screams.
The town rocked with a level of grief it had not seen since the Great War. Whispers leaked from behind closed doors and through cracked windows, but no one dared speak of it in the aisles of the grocer or along the sidewalks. Sorrowful glances and pitiful sighs followed Rette and Johnny everywhere they went. The whole town knew why Johnny had returned, but no one wanted to admit it was real.

Johnny spent the following day at the funeral home, helping Frank’s grandfather and the Lehman’s make Frank’s final arrangements.

“Thank you for being here,” Johnny told Mr. Lehman, shaking his hand as they parted ways that evening. It was nearing dark, and Momma would be wanting him home for dinner.

“He was our son,” Mr. Lehman said plainly. Helen could not attend these meetings. According to Mr. Lehman, she had not eaten in two days and her sleep had been riddled with nightmares. She was not doing well.

“We have one more meeting tomorrow morning for the final decisions, if you’d like to join us,” Johnny informed him more of courtesy than necessity. Mr. Lehman was there more for moral support and to offer sound judgment, as Frank’s grandfather was not in very good health.

“I’ll be here. I would rather be here than at home listening to the pain of my daughter over and over again.”

Johnny wanted to hug him. It was hard enough watching a friend die or watching a friend go through that kind of grief, Johnny couldn’t imagine watching his own daughter going through that.

When Johnny walked into his parents’ dining room to the sound of laughter and the smell of his mother’s meatloaf.
“Johnny!” Rette exclaimed, standing quickly to embrace him.

He returned the gesture with a small pat to her back.

“We were going to wait dear,” his mother apologized.

“No, no. That’s fine.” Johnny looked around the table at Rette, the Colonel, Major Murphy, Rette’s mother, and his own. Their cheeks were all pink, and there was a wine glass in front of everyone's place setting aside from Rette and Johnny’s. It was a happy night. Rette’s mother, Carol, was in a rare, good mood, and Johnny wanted to take advantage of it, soak in these people he loved, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. “I’m just going to head to bed if that’s alright. I’ve had a very long day.”

Rette looked up at him then down at the napkin, smoothing it uncomfortably.

Major Murphy cleared his throat. “Of course,” he said gruffly. “My is that the time? We should be getting home, ladies.” He stood from the table and Carol followed him.

“Dinner was lovely, Lynette, thank you.”

Lynette waved a hand at her. “Of course, Carol. Any time.”

Rette watched her parents say their goodbyes, but she hesitated, looking between them and Johnny.

“Do you mind if I stay a moment?” she asked her parents as they stood in the doorway expectantly.

Carol frowned at her. “Don’t overstay your welcome, Rette. It’s time to go.”

Lynette spoke up. “I could use the help cleaning up actually, Carol. I can send her right over as soon as she is done.”

Carol looked between her daughter and Lynette. “Very well.” She pointed a finger at Rette. “Ten minutes. Then you better be home.”
Johnny watched Rette’s parents leave, the door rattling closed behind them. Johnny looked back into the dining room, preparing to say his goodnights and excuse himself.

His parents both stood from the table and began to stack dishes. When Rette moved to help, Lynette stopped her. “No, dear.” She gestured between Rette and Johnny. “You two have ten minutes. Make the most of it.”

Rette smiled at her. Johnny’s chest ached at that smile, but he fought off a groan. He was exhausted, and honestly, he didn’t have the energy to be a dutiful fiancé in that moment.

Rette took him by the hand and pulled him toward their front sitting room. Johnny threw a pleading look at his parents.

His mother just smiled at him and waved them off.

Johnny followed Rette into the front room where she pulled him onto the cream settee. She threw an embroidered pillow out of her way and swept her hair over her shoulder. The way she looked at him—oh how he’d missed her.

He sat beside her and leaned in. She was sweet. Floral. He studied her face. Her large brown eyes searched his as she tried to read him. He was unsurprised when her smile faded, and her voice carried a note of concern.

“Will you talk to me, Johnny? I know you’re going through so much. It’s all over your face.”

He sat up straighter and tried to fix his expression, but she just laughed.

“You hide it well, but I know you, Johnny.”

Johnny reached over and took her small hand in his. He felt her dainty fingers and silk skin. He stroked the palm of her hand with his fingertips, causing her fingers to lengthen and tremble at the light ticklish touch. “I should have checked his gear.”
Rette closed her hand around his fingers, trapping his hand in hers. “It’s not your fault.”

“I should have noticed that something wasn’t right.”

Rette scooted closer, the side of her thigh now pressed up against his. She put one hand on his cheek and lifted his face to look at her. He didn’t want to burden her with this.


He gave her a small smile because he knew she needed it, and he leaned into her hand. There was so much more Johnny could have done to prevent what had happened only a few days ago, and he would live with it for the rest of his life.

Johnny raised a hand to Rette’s cheek as well, and he couldn’t tell who pulled in whom, but before he knew it, he was kissing her as though she were oxygen, and he was drowning in a torrent ocean. He drank it in, knowing their days were numbered.

“Mother wants us married,” Rette gasped between kisses.

Johnny growled, and he stopped—surprised at himself—to meet Rette’s eyes. “For good reason,” he laughed. He felt lighter already. He hadn’t realized Rette was exactly what he needed as though he hadn’t noticed a burn until it was soothed.

Rette’s expression turned solemn, and her eyes closed. Johnny leaned his forehead against hers, but before he could kiss her, she spoke again. “We can’t get married now.”

Johnny pulled back. “What do you mean?”

Rette opened her eyes, and her fingers ran over the back of his hand nervously. “We were planning on getting married the next time you came home, but we can’t possibly. Not now. Not like this.”

Johnny nodded. “I understand. It was honestly the last thing I expected to happen when I came home for this.”
“Mother has mentioned it at least five times in the past three days.” Rette stared at him, and he could see the burden of this on her shoulders. She usually held herself poised and strong, but her shoulders sagged and caved over the rest of her body, protective.

“I can speak with her if you’d like. I can tell her it's my wish that we wait to make a happier occasion of it,” Johnny offered. He knew encountering her mother was difficult for her, especially when she had to speak against her mother’s wishes or plans.

But Rette shook her head. “No, it’s all right. She’s my mother, I’ll handle her.”

Johnny put his forehead against hers again and stared into her eyes, hoping to elicit a smile from her. He loved when she smiled. “She’ll be my mother-in-law, you know.”

Rette raised her eyebrows and made a face at him. “I know that very well. There has not been a day that has gone by without her talking about or taking me out to do something relating to the wedding. Honestly, I’m quite sick of it all.”

Her expression turned serious, and Johnny stroked the back of her hand, hoping her smile would return soon.

“I know something neither of us could grow sick of,” Johnny stated stoically. He eyed her with a silly expression, and she laughed, shook her head, and leaned in for yet another kiss.

With this being the first casualty in their small town, everyone was out of practice as far as military funerals went. Rette even heard whispers that Frank didn’t deserve full military honors since he didn’t even make it out of training alive.

At the funeral the next day, Johnny was clad in his Class A formal military uniform along with the men from the war office and the Colonel. Some of the other young men in the community who were still a year too young to enlist were there as well to pay their respects.
As Rette entered with her parents, she was astounded to find Helen in attendance. She was pale and expressionless. She nodded at Rette as she did everyone else but didn’t say a word.

“We’ll be in the third row,” Johnny told her, taking her hand and pointing it out. “Did you see Mr. Geller outside?”

Rette looked at him with a raised brow. “He’s not here?”

Johnny sighed. “I haven’t seen him since this morning. He left to change but hasn’t been back. He should be here by now. People are asking for him.”

Rette patted his hand. “It must be terrible for him. He’ll be here. Just give him time.”

Rette looked out at the chapel. Frank’s portrait rested at the base of the flag-draped casket, surrounded by white lilies and an abundance of sunflowers. The chapel was slowly filling ahead of them, as Rette’s parents said their greetings to the Lehmans and Johnny.

The front row of the chapel pews was empty—noticeably so. Rette listened as Johnny helped Helen and her parents greet every obliging townsperson. Without Geller’s parents, they were the funeral hosts.

Seeing as Rette never met Frank’s parents, the only face she could attribute to Frank’s family was the scruffy, confused one of the raggedly dressed Mr. Geller, Frank’s grandfather. He was a known shell shock sufferer, and he continually struggled to remain present, despite Frank’s patient care.

Rette glanced around the small chapel but saw no signs of Mr. Geller. Johnny met her gaze and gave a small shake of his head.

As the last few people took their seats, Johnny took his seat next to Rette. Everyone in attendance was aware of that empty front row pew. Helen and her parents chose to sit toward the
back of the chapel in case Helen needed to excuse herself, so when the minister began making
his way to the front, Rette’s patience with the murmurs and glances expired.

“Johnny,” she whispered, tugging on the sleeve of his uniform. “Why don’t you move up
there? Frank’s family is more than blood.”

Johnny blinked as he absorbed the shock of her words. The situation sunk in, and he
stepped into the aisle, cutting off the minister. Johnny’s ears burned red, but he set his jaw as he
stepped forward in front of him. “Pardon me.”

The Colonel and Lynette watched open mouthed as their son signaled the other men in
uniform and the young men who had yet to serve. The Colonel remained seated. The service
men’s shoes clipped in a uniformed march that had become a habit. Rather than an empty pew,
Frank’s brothers in arms filled the gap. Major James and Lieutenant Hughes assumed their posts
on either side of the casket, staring straight, their piercing gazes declaring their duty and
allegiance to protecting their fallen brother.

“Where is he?” someone roared from the back of the chapel.

Rette turned and saw Frank’s grandfather stumbling in. His old uniform hung from his
frame. He white-knuckled his cane alongside his right leg, his right shoulder shoved closer to his
ear from the effort of each step. As he searched the pews on either side of him, the devastatingly
distant look in his eyes raised the hairs on Rette’s arms.

Johnny rushed to Mr. Geller’s side and spoke quietly. Rette couldn’t make sense of his
words, but Mr. Geller nodded. He allowed Johnny to walk alongside him, with one hand aiding
his balance, toward his grandson.

They passed Rette’s pew where she sat with the Colonel, Lynette, and her parents. Mr.
Geller faltered. His right foot turned too far inward. His cane-arm trembled beneath the weight of
trying to remain standing. Johnny wouldn’t be able to keep him upright alone from where he stood, Rette knew that, and she braced herself for the impact. An audible gasp filled the room as the ghost of a young soldier came closer and closer to the floor.

But the Colonel was on his feet, catching Mr. Geller’s other side. “Steady now, Floyd.”

Mr. Geller grunted and looked up at the Colonel. “Thank you, Stephens.” His eyes were glazed, and Rette knew the person he saw wasn’t the Colonel. “I just want to see him. I still can’t believe it. I was right next to him. It should have been me.” His gaze was transfixed on the casket, and Rette could see his mind working against him.

“He thinks it’s George Freedman’s funeral,” Father muttered to Rette. “They were in the Great War together.”

Rette’s heart pained for the old man. He had fought with all he had, and after coming home, still couldn’t escape the trenches.

Neither Johnny nor his father corrected him. They continued guiding him forward toward Frank’s friends seated in the front row.

“Oh.” Mr. Geller sighed. Rette saw the haze leave Mr. Geller’s eyes, and suddenly he was present—terribly present.

Rette maintained a neutral bearing until Mr. Geller dissolved—held on his feet only by the strength of the two Carver men.

“Oh—oh no,” he moaned. “Oh—my Frankie—oh Frank!” Tears streamed down his crinkled face as he approached his grandson’s enlistment photo.

The Colonel continued speaking to him, explaining the situation with a gentleness Rette had not seen from him since she was a girl.
The rest of the attendees sat in a suppressed silence. The atmosphere was heavy with muffled whimpers and sniffles.

Johnny stood there, attempting to maintain his own composure. His lips moved in silent prayer. His eyes squinted shut and a tear escaped each, making their way down his cheeks and staining his jacket.

Rette wanted to go to him, but something held her back.

Johnny was her focus because he was her heart. The rest of the room was focused on Mr. Geller. Rette knew it was a focus Johnny didn’t want on himself.

Mr. Geller needed the strength of the younger men physically, but also the strength of their reality.

The minister spoke quietly to the Colonel, and he nodded in answer.

“Now Floyd,” the Colonel said louder, “We have a place for you right here.” They guided Mr. Geller to an empty space on the front pew, surrounded on either side by young men yet to be in uniform.

The service proceeded, full of Scripture Rette wasn’t sure brought anyone solace. There was an uncomfortable weight in the air Rette wished she hadn’t noticed. Gazes flitted over the pew full of men, and Rette felt the hairs on her neck rise. Everyone knew this was only the beginning, and everyone wondered who would be next. Death was coming, for them all, in fact—some, Rette feared, more prematurely than the rest.

Chapter Fourteen

Johnny’s bus idled in front of the dimly lit bus station. The driver stood at the doors, checking his pocket watch every minute or so.
“I’ve got to go, Rette. I love you.” Johnny adjusted the strap of his duffle on his shoulder. His woolen uniform was stiff beneath the weight of his belongings. He kissed her forehead, wrapped his free arm around her shoulders, but was oblivious to Rette wanting more.

As he pulled away, the distance already growing between them, Rette fought to hide her fallen expression.

“Are you sure you must leave tonight? Why can’t it wait until the morning?” Rette still wore her black funeral dress, and her feet ached. Her mind and heart reeled from the day. Rette had hoped Johnny could stay long enough to help her process it.

The bus driver stepped up into the bus and honked the horn. The few other passengers had already said their goodbyes, their families having already left. Johnny and Rette stood outside the bus in the summer air alone.

“I already have my ticket, Rette. They’re expecting me at morning muster.” Johnny took a step away, his brief goodbye seemingly sufficient for him.

“But it’s already so late. Will you make it in time?”

Johnny watched the bus over the top of Rette’s head. “I’ll sleep on the bus. I’ll write to you, okay? I’ve really got to go.”

The bus honked twice. Last call.

Rette’s chest burned with frustration. Rette turned to the bus driver who peeked out the doors at them. “Wait just a moment more, please sir!”

The bus driver gave her a sympathetic half smile but tapped his watch. “Sorry, miss, we have a schedule.”

Rette tugged at Johnny’s sleeve, pulling herself to him. He wouldn’t budge. “I love you, Johnny. Be safe.”
She stood up on her toes to kiss him, and he pecked her lips.

“Love you. See you, Rette.”

Rette stretched for one last kiss as he tried to step away.

Johnny brushed her hands from his uniform. “Margarette, that’s enough. I’ve got to go.”

Their eyes locked for a second, but Rette wished they hadn’t. There was no boyish playfulness left in them. He looked ancient, haunted, and as though at any moment he could cry. He no longer looked like the Johnny she fell for all those years ago.

She released him without another word. He stomped away. Rette felt her face flush, and for the first time in her life she felt humiliated by her love for Johnny. She didn’t know if she would see him in a month or a year or—though she tried to ignore the inkling thought—if she would ever see him again. After Frank’s death, Rette felt as though no one was safe. Yes, Johnny was just finishing up his training, but Frank died in training. After that, Rette knew the places Johnny would be sent would be far more dangerous than that. Casualty reports were rapidly increasing and plastered all over the front page of every newspaper. Johnny was only beginning his time of service, and the danger he was facing assaulted her everywhere she looked.

Rette shivered in her winter coat and wrapped her arms around herself as the bus sputtered down the dark empty road.

The house was dark, cold, and silent. Her parents were long in bed by the time Rette arrived home, and she tried not to fault them for not waiting up for them. She didn’t want to face anyone tonight.

Rette sat down at the writing desk in the front sitting room. She took her father’s fountain pen from the groove where it always rested and felt the cool weight of it in her hand. Words
burned in her mind, and she could feel them brimming at the edge of her lips. Those words—like the tears that always felt ready to burst forth—had the power to end everything. Rette knew it. She knew by speaking them, by letting them come up and out, she would never be able to take them back. She also knew she would feel so much better by letting it out.

She pulled a single piece of paper from her writing pad, primed the fountain pen until the ink spilled out, and began to write.

Dear John,

I don’t know where to begin. I feel so lost without you here, and even when you were here, I still felt a little lost. Life hasn’t been the same since you left. Each day I look for you, and each day I am lost all the same. Even when you were here—oh I fear the words I want to write and the thoughts I find myself thinking.

I also do not know if these words are ones I actually want to write or words that need to be written—Oh my dear—I am so lost.

We can’t go on like this. I cannot last till the next time we meet on only the words and feelings of our last meeting for they were so few.

I must continue my life here as best I can, which means giving up the life we could have if you return. I love you, Johnny, and I hope you have a good life. If you make it home, come find me. I do truly hope I will still be waiting for you.

With All the Love I Have Left to Give,

Margarette L. Murphy
Rette wiped at her tears furiously, folded the letter with more care than usual, and addressed the envelope. She turned it over to seal it, but she paused, clutching it in both hands.

Her hands turned to fists, and she buried her face in her arm as she let out a furious moan. The way he’d left her. Rette sobbed harder, as she tore the envelope in half and shredded the remaining scraps over and over until she was surrounded in an explosion of confetti. Rette prayed it wouldn’t be the last.

Johnny awoke on the bus. He checked his watch. 4:37. He had about another hour until his stop, then it was about a thirty-minute walk from the station to the fort. He could have hired a car or taxi, but he wanted the time to think.

He ran through that morning over and over in his mind.

They had geared up, and Johnny had stood there joking with Frank and Hansen. Why hadn’t he noticed something was off on his gear? Wasn’t that his duty as a leader? Look out for his men and bring everyone home? *He had brought Frank home.*

Johnny sat up and rolled his shoulders back. They ached dully from slouching against the cool window. He had not left Rette the way he would have liked. As he stood there saying goodbye, he’d struggled to even look her in the eye. He was afraid if he did, he wouldn’t get on the bus.

Johnny closed his eyes and thought back to that night in the front room. The feel of her hand in his. The sweet floral smell that was uniquely Rette. Running his fingers through her soft curls as they pulled each other in closer. *Their kiss.*

He shifted in his seat and sighed. He would much rather be waking up in his own bed, looking forward to a day spent with Rette rather than his inevitable day full of training he was
about to enter. He wasn’t sure what they had left. Johnny had successfully completed his five jumps, as had most of the other men—though Johnny wasn’t sure about the second round.

Everything had come to a halt after Frank had—

Johnny rubbed his eyes. They were dry and sticky.

Had they selected the team of twenty? Had Johnny even made the cut? He supposed the squad who did were already well on their way to their first station. They weren’t his men anymore. He would be washed back, reconfigured into the infantry, and probably stripped of his promotion. Surely, they wouldn’t let him keep it after such a catastrophic failure on his first day.

Johnny scooted to the aisle and stood, stretching his legs. He reached his arms up and felt a few joints in his back pop. His body felt so heavy.

“Headed home?”

Johnny looked behind him where a man around his father’s age was staring out his window, his jacket draped over him as a blanket. “Pardon?”

He looked at Johnny, and Johnny took a step back. A massive scar marred half of his face, running through his left eye which was just—not there. “Are you headed home?”

Johnny cleared his throat. “No sir, I’m headed back to my fort. I—” he hesitated. He didn’t want to share why he had been home. “I was home for a few days to see to some matters.”

The man nodded, looking away back out the window. “Did you enjoy it?”

Johnny brushed at his uniform jacket and pulled at the sleeves. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. It could be your last.” The man pulled his jacket up and settled against the window, closing his eyes.

Johnny’s hands went clammy, and he ran them along his jacket tail.

He sat back down in his seat and tried to ignore the tremor in his hands.
“Corporal!” Sergeant McCarthy exclaimed as Johnny ambled onto their training site. They were alone. No one had gathered for their morning muster. “Glad to have you back. Everything squared away?”

Johnny sat his duffle down in the dirt and took Sergeant McCarthy’s outstretched hand. “Yes, Sergeant.”

“Good. Good.” Sergeant McCarthy motioned for Johnny to follow him to the company’s barracks. “The rest of your men have gathered in New York City where they will port out to Scotland in two days. Once your bunk is cleared, we’ll get you on your way to meet them there.”

Johnny stopped. “Sergeant?”

“Your squad, Corporal. Your training is due to begin in two weeks. Your company will be partnered with the RAF.”

Johnny looked at him. He felt silly needing the reassurance, but he asked anyway. “My squad, Sergeant? I made the cut?”

Sergeant McCarthy smiled at him, and Johnny recognized a kindness in his eyes he had not expected. “Private Geller had a horrific accident. It was not your fault—”

“But Sergeant, I should have—”

Sergeant McCarthy came nose to nose with him, his face stern. “Are you arguing with me, Corporal?”

Johnny was breathless. “No, Sergeant,” he responded quickly.

“That’s what I thought.” Sergeant McCarthy turned and continued walking into the barracks. “Now, gather your things. Your bus leaves after morning mess.”
Johnny stepped into their bunk room. All the beds were stripped, all signs of the rest of his men were removed, and he still wasn’t sure which of them he would be meeting in New York.

He opened his footlocker which was tostled and disorganized from his scramble to gather his things when it had been decided that he would be accompanying Frank home.

He pulled out his gear and laid it out on his bed and began to repack it all into his trunk, folding and placing each item carefully into it. He unzipped his duffle and pulled everything out as well, carefully refolding it and repacking so he knew everything was accounted for.

Johnny came across a thick cream envelope and cursed. It had come for him in the mail while he was home, and he had tossed it into his duffle without thinking. He pulled it and his writing pad out, placing them in a neat pile and scrambled to pack away the rest of his things. He didn’t have long, but he knew he needed to send this home before he got on the bus.

Dear Momma,

I wish my visit had been under happier circumstances, but it was very refreshing to see you all as short as it was. I’ve taken the deed with me by mistake. Please ensure it is safely secured somewhere in the case that Rette may need it. She still doesn’t know. I’m hoping it will make a nice wedding gift when our time finally comes.

With love. Your son,

Johnny
He folded his letter in half, closed, and latched his footlocker, slung his duffle over his shoulder, and took off for Commander Falk’s office. Johnny knew he could get it where it belonged.

Johnny left his bag outside and knocked on the Commander’s office door.

“Enter.”

Johnny opened the door, stepped in, and saluted.

“Corporal Carver. It’s good to see you back. At ease, soldier. What can I do for you?”

Johnny relaxed and spoke to the Commander directly. “I brought this with me by mistake. It is a deed to some land I’ve purchased for my fiancée, and I would hate for something to happen to it, so I need to send it back home to my parents for safe keeping.”

The Commander held a hand out. “We’ll take care of it.”

Johnny handed the letter and envelope over. “Thank you, sir.”

Commander Falk placed them on his desk and folded his hands beneath his chin. “Land, huh?”

Johnny nodded. “Yes, sir. I’ve been saving since I started working as a boy. I was an intern banker before I enlisted, so they helped me make some sound investments.”

The Commander nodded. “Good move. Have you known your fiancée long?”

Johnny smiled. He couldn’t help it. “Since I was nine. She moved in next door and wouldn’t leave me alone.” He thought of Rette’s pointed looks and the way she could read his mood with only one glance. “She still doesn’t.”

“Sounds like you’re a lucky man.”

Johnny nodded. “Yes, sir. I like to think so.”
The Commander pushed back from his desk and picked up Johnny’s things. “Well, if it means anything at all, I think she’s lucky to have you as well. I hope you two are blessed with a long, happy life together once this is all over. You deserve it, soldier.”

Johnny smiled as the Commander began making his way to the door and Johnny followed. “Thank you, sir. I hope so too.”

Chapter Fifteen

Johnny arrived at Camp Kilmer a week later and the sticky summer air of New Jersey clung to his brow. As he stepped off the large bus full of other soldiers, he tried to ignore the damp handkerchief stuffed in his back pocket.

He and the rest of the men due to make their way across the Atlantic had been reassigned to Camp Kilmer now that construction was complete. It was there they would stay until their departure in just a few days. In that time, he didn’t plan on leaving the camp. New York City was only a few miles Northeast of Camp Kilmer, but one of the men on the bus informed everyone that the drive from the camp to the city took over an hour. Johnny knew his time would be best spent doing other things–like finally finishing his letter to Rette.

After the way he’d left Attabury, Johnny knew Rette would be angry. He knew she deserved a proper goodbye, but Johnny also knew he didn’t have it in him to give it to her. He didn’t want to think about it as an actual goodbye. So, he’d left with the assumption that they would get more time, somewhere in the future, and now he felt ignorant for it. Casualties were already rolling in, and the war was only beginning for the U.S.. Johnny knew it would only be a matter of time before he began recognizing names on the list.
Johnny slung his duffle over his shoulder and followed the group of men ambling toward the barracks. A few of them were discussing how they’d be spending their last few days in the area.

“Yeah, if you wanna go to Brooklyn, ya best bet is to take the trams on in,” one of the others said with a heavy accent Johnny heard from a lot of the locals. Johnny remembered he was a fellow Corporal with a large caterpillar eyebrow above each deeply set brown eye. “If you try to take a cab, you’ll be spendin’ more time getting through traffic than you will actually doin’ anything in the city.”

Johnny recalled overhearing this Corporal–Sanders if Johnny recalled correctly–gathering a group to take out on the streets for a bit of fun. Johnny glanced up as they neared to barracks to find his own, only to catch Sanders turned around looking at him while walking backwards.

“Carver! You plannin’ on doin’ anything before we jet?”

Johnny smiled. “I’d ruin all your fun. I’ve got a girl back home who’s got my heart, and I’ve got a letter to finish and post before we leave.” He tried for a nonchalant tone, but he knew it still came out tight. He’d witnessed this group trading magazines with scandalously posed women on the covers numerous times over the past week. They weren’t his scene, but he didn’t want to say as much. They all had to find ways to cope with what they were about to face.

“You’re ruinin’ the fun by not joinin’ the fun, my guy! You’re comin’ with us. Tonight, we take on P & G’s!” An ensemble of three or four other soldiers near Sanders chimed in agreement, one of which patted Johnny on the shoulder, shaking him back and forth in excitement. Johnny smiled back and wiped his forehead. One night. He deserved that much, right? He rolled his shoulders beneath the weight of his duffle. He could use some fun.

But first, he had to finish the letter.
When he claimed his bunk, he tore through his duffle and found his writing pad with a half-finished letter dated a week ago staring him down. He read it over, raking his hand through his regulation-length hair.

_Dear Rette,_

_I am so sorry for how I left. You must know, I never meant to hurt you. Simply the thought of having to say goodbye to you fills me with so much anger and sadness that I simply cannot stomach at a time like this. I’d rather we forgot about that parting, and instead look forward to our reuniting, when—hopefully—I can make you my wife. In all senses of the role. I have had so many moments since we parted when I’ve thought of that time we stole away in my family’s front room, and each time I am grateful to my mom for sparing us the opportunity. I wish I could feel your skin again. Something about it sets my nerves on fire, and every time I hold your hand, I want to feel more of it—I _need_ to feel more of it._

He’d stopped there. There was only so much Johnny could take at a time thinking of Rette. He missed her. More than he would miss water as he dies in a desert, but he wasn’t sure how she would respond to such a letter. He hated being away from her. As much as he loved getting letters from her and writing to her, there was only so much he could find of her in their words. He couldn’t read her, or witness how his reply was taken, and it left him little opportunity for correction if he said something _slightly_ wrong. No—he had to get this one right.

He tore the letter from his writing pad and crumpled it, thrusting it deep into his duffle so no one would dare pull it from their barrack’s waste bin.
“Pent up frustrations there, Carver?”

Johnny glanced up. It was Sanders again, lingering at the foot of Johnny’s bunk. “Just can’t seem to get the words right today, Sanders.”

Sanders put a boot up on the foot of Johnny’s bed, and Johnny stared at it and the dirt he was sure was rubbing off onto his clean bed linens. “That’s ‘cause gals prefer action.” The action Sanders proceeded to make with his hips and wiggling eyebrows was one that Johnny wished he could scrub from his memory.

Johnny leaned back against his pillow, trying to feign nonchalance. “She’s different, Sanders. I’ve known her since we were kids. We don’t work like that.”

Sanders guffawed. “Ya not doin’ it righ’ if ya ‘don’ work like that’.”

The way Sanders quoted Johnny set his teeth on edge. He clenched his jaw, stopping himself from the snark that wanted to escape in response.

When Johnny didn’t reply it seemed to egg Sanders on. “Been limitin’ your options far too long, Johnny. Sounds like it’s ‘bout time ya expanded your palate.” He wiggled his eyebrows again, and Johnny briefly thought about trying to rip them off to see if they were fake.

“I’ve got a meeting this evening,” Johnny lied. “So, unfortunately, I won’t be able to tag along.”

Sanders finally took his boot off Johnny’s bed and backed away, still facing Johnny. He pointed at him and squinted one eye. “You’re goin’, and that’s the end of it. It’s ‘bout time you pulled out whatever’s up ya ass and let loose.”

Johnny rolled his eyes, and he couldn’t help but groan. This wouldn’t end well. He could feel it in his bones.
He turned back to his writing pad and sighed. If nothing else, he needed to write to Rette, get it off his chest and into her hands as soon as possible.

Dear Rette,

I’m sorry for the way we left things. There is no excuse for it other than the fact that I’m an ass, and I left under the false assumption that we would have more time. I was dealing with a lot all at once, but I should have leaned on you for the comfort and support that you are, rather than adding you to the list of something to “deal with”. It was inexcusable, and I want to erase it from our memory. I hope you’ll consider forgiving me.

We leave in just a few days for overseas. I didn’t find out until I made it back to training. I’ll let you know what I can, but our time between letters is going to get longer. Please consider writing to me, even if you haven’t gotten a reply. Any news from you is good news and a welcome distraction from the stress that I’m sure is to come.

The guys insisted I go out with them tonight and take in New York City for all it’s worth. I’ve seen it from across the Hudson, and it’s no joke. It makes our Manhattan look like a children’s toy. I don’t really care to see it myself. We’re leaving so soon that I’d rather stay put and relax while I can, but I suppose they’ll need someone to keep them out of trouble and ensure everyone gets back in one piece.

I love you, Rette, and I’m sorry, again, for how I left us. I hope to make it up to you next time we’re together.

Forever, All My Love,

Johnny
A few hours later, the letter to Rette was addressed and posted, and Johnny was freshened up, brushing a stray hair off his freshly pressed uniform. He tucked his hat under his arm and grabbed a clean handkerchief from his duffle. He knew better by now that the heat and humidity didn’t let up once the sun went down, especially if they were headed to a stuffy bar. Johnny pulled at his tie just thinking about it.

“There he is! I thought he was gonna flake on us!” Sanders shouted as Johnny approached the group waiting by the front gate of the camp. As Johnny turned the corner, he realized the four other men were admiring a sparkling red convertible Cadillac sitting by the curb outside of Camp Kilmer.

“Whose car is this?” Johnny asked.

Sanders clapped his hands together and stood in front of it. “It’s my cousin Vinny’s. He’s letting me use it while we’re here. Said I could give it back before we leave!”

Johnny hesitated, looking at the cocky expression on Sanders’s face. “Are you driving?”

Sanders pulled a key from his pocket and threw it in the air without warning. Johnny barely had a second before he realized it was headed straight for his face. He caught it in his fist, the metal cutting into his palm. He studied it.

“You’re it, Carver! There’s no way you’ll be able to resist lettin’ loose in this beauty.” Sanders turned and ran a hand along the front fender. He looked back at Johnny with a sneer. “That is if you think your Kansas driving skills can match up to New York City?”

Johnny paused for a second. His dad’s Buick was a tin can compared to the Cadillac sitting in front of him. He wasn’t sure when—or if he’d ever get an opportunity like this again.

Johnny tossed the keys up in the air before catching them again, joining the group with more pep in his step. “I suppose I will, then.”
As daunting as Sanders made the drive from New Jersey to New York sound, it was not nearly as bad as Johnny was anticipating. The vehicle responded with ease when he pushed the accelerator, and the brakes were smoother than silk when coming to a stop. The convertible allowed for a steady breeze to circulate throughout the car, requiring Johnny to pull his hat down tighter to avoid losing it.

“Turn here, it’s just down the street.” Sanders directed Johnny.

Johnny made a left turn down a bustling street with illuminated signs highlighting every building offering a different service than the next. Premiers, luxury shops, eateries, and finally a bar with a line out the front door with a neon P and G Cafe and Bar sign posted on the marquee.

“Here it is boys! Pull up right there, Johnny.” Sanders had been surprisingly cordial in his directions the entire way there, so maybe he wasn’t all bad. “Don’t mind the line, they let us servicemen in before the regulars.”

The men leaped out of the car as Johnny put the shifter in park and opened the door by the handle. Johnny looked at the line waiting outside the bar, a bizarre mix of young ladies and men his father’s age who were forced to wait their turn because the bar let all servicemen in first. He briefly thought about sitting back in the car if it meant letting one of those who truly wanted in an opportunity to find out what lay behind those doors, but then his stomach gave an obnoxious growl and he realized he’d missed supper. So, he’d go in, grab a bite to eat, then wait out the night keeping watch from Vinny’s convertible. There could be worse ways to spend his evening.
Johnny followed the other four men as they passed the line outside. Most of the men gave them sour looks, but the women standing in line flashed smiles and looked Sanders and his crew up and down, making Johnny uncomfortable.

The *P and G Bar* was noisy and smelled like cigarette smoke and bad perfume. The others instantly found men to greet or pat on the back and women to pull in for intimate embraces. Johnny wasn’t sure what to do with himself, and his entourage was of little help in acquainting him to the place. Johnny hesitated in the doorway until he decided to start with the bar for a bite to eat.

Johnny hesitated at the bar top, squeezing between two couples, one locked in a hushed conversation making eyes at one another and the other sharing a drink with two straws and flirting overtly sensually.

“Barman?” Johnny held up a hand and the couple in deep conversation gave him a dirty look for interrupting. “Sorry,” Johnny muttered.

The slim salt and peppered man nodded at him and finished topping off a drink.

“What’ll ya like?”

“Could I get a cafe menu, please?”

The barman shook his head and pointed behind Johnny. “Bar only, soldier, but you can order some grub down below.”

Johnny looked behind him. From where Johnny stood at the long bar, he could see the rest of the room opened to a lower level filled with booths, tables, and couches, most of which were already taken. One corner booth in the back of the room was open.

Johnny turned back to the barman. “Thanks.”
The barman waved him off, returning down the line to someone else calling for his attention.

Johnny headed straight for the open corner booth. He plopped himself down, waving at a waitress carrying a tray to a small table. “I’ll be right with you, sir.”

Johnny waited patiently until the waitress dropped a menu onto the tabletop. “I’ll be around, just let me know what you’d like.”

“Thank you,” Johnny replied earnestly, giving her a smile before turning to the menu, ravenous.

With the menu up in front of him, his view was blocked, so when he heard a plop, he expected to see one of the others had joined him. When he flattened the menu again to make a comment about the selection, he found a curvy blonde with large plum lips smiling at him.

“Well, hello there, soldier. What’s a tall drink of water like you doing here this evening all by yourself?”

“Uh, I’m sorry, I’m with some of my–” Johnny looked around the crowded bar but couldn’t find any of his “friends”. His mind raced for a moment as his eyes scanned the room. Had they left? There was a sprinkling of servicemen throughout the entire establishment, and now that Johnny thought about it, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to pick out anyone aside from Sanders from the crowd.

The blonde in front of him stirred the ice remaining in her tall glass, the clattering of the ice bringing Johnny’s attention back to her. She gave him a sly smile. “Oh, that’s okay, I can keep you company if you’d like. I’m Rachel. Rachel Evans.” She offered her hand to Johnny. “And you are?”
Johnny shook her hand but didn’t respond immediately. He considered giving a fake name or feigning some violent mysterious illness, but the promise of food was too near and the name tape across the left breast of his uniform would give him away.

She raised her eyes expectantly, her plum lips pursed, probably questioning whether he was worth the effort.

Johnny blinked and cleared his throat, realizing he had still not answered her question. “Johnathan Carver.” He smiled at her politely and released her hand, she held on for a split second.

She slapped her hands to the table, making her ice clink and Johnny flinch. “Well, Johnathan Carver, wanna get a drink?”

Johnny fought off a laugh, reaching behind him to rub the back of his neck. He looked around for the waitress, who was nowhere to be seen. “No, I don’t—”

“Look, Johnny,” she cooed. She slid her glass across the table and pulled his menu down from in front of him. She blinked rapidly at him. Her blue eyes glittering in the low light.

He glanced around at the other tables again, searching, hoping for the waitress to appear.

“I don’t know where you’re from,” she began, leaning into his searching gaze and giving him a smile. “I don’t know what lucky lady has her teeth in you.”

Johnny fought off the urge to roll his eyes. He’d never had an advance like this and had little practice having to let anyone down. Small towns meant everyone knew each other's' business which meant everyone knew Johnny and Rette were a pair. No one messed with it.

She was relentless. “But you’re here in New York and I’m just looking for someone to have a good time with.”
The waitress appeared, her arms laden with plates of food. The steam coming off it made Johnny’s stomach rumble. He waved her down, then jumped, looking back at Rachel quickly. Her foot had found his leg beneath the table.

He pulled his feet up under him as far as they would go and scooted to the edge of the booth, preparing to bolt, even if it meant going hungry. “I’m sorry, I really don’t think–”

“Just one drink. Please?” Something in her voice had changed, and he looked back at her. “I could use a friend.”

Johnny settled back into his seat. She’d lost the desperate and flirtatious tone.

“Just one,” Johnny agreed.

She smiled, settling back into her booth, and her face relaxing into a more natural expression. When she wasn’t trying, she was quite beautiful.

Johnny spun the menu around for her and turned to catch the waitress’s attention, unwilling to let her escape this time. He spotted Sanders then, leaning in and kissing the neck of a young woman in one of the booths. Johnny huffed, made eye contact with the waitress, and smiled as she finally made her way over.

“Sorry ‘bout that. What would you like?” She pulled out a notepad and brushed hair out of her face.

Johnny looked to Rachel, who was still perusing the menu. “Do you know what you want? My treat.”

She waved him off. “Go ahead, I’m still looking.”

Johnny hesitated but smiled back at the waitress who glanced around at the other full tables impatiently. “I’ll take an old fashioned, and a burger please.”

“You got it. Miss, what can I get you?”
Rachel laid the menu down on the table. “I’ll just take a martini, please. Dry.”

The waitress sighed. “Anything else?”

“Not hungry, thanks.” Rachel smiled at the waitress, her face pinching in a way that made Johnny’s burger he’d just ordered no longer sound appetizing.

“Right,” the waitress sighed. “It’ll be right out.” She gathered the menus and went on her way to another table.

“There he is!” Johnny looked up just in time to see one of the men–Johnny glanced at his name tag, Holt–tripping toward him, his face flush.

“Excuse me,” Rachel said suddenly, rising from the table. “I need the ladies room.” She took off toward a dark corner.

Holt slid into the booth beside Johnny, ramming his shoulder into Johnny’s until Johnny scooted over to make room for him. “Carver! Who’s that lovely looking lady you’ve found yourself?”

Johnny looked over the tables toward where she’d disappeared. “Oh, um, I’m not really sure.” Johnny coughed. “Her name’s Rachel, I think.”

“Rachel, eh? Well, she sure looks like a keeper to me there Johnny.”

“Oh, no, I’m not interest—”

“Relax,” he reached over and gripped Johnny’s shoulder too tight and shook it. “You don’t gotta explain yourself to me, you rascal! Enjoy yourself!”

With that, Holt was gone, and Rachel was on her way back, her fake flirtatious expression plastered on his face. Johnny wiped his forehead with his handkerchief, quickly replacing it in his jacket pocket before she arrived.
She slid back into her spot in the booth. Johnny noticed two extra buttons on the front of her dress were undone, and he quickly returned his gaze to her face and glued it there. “So, Johnny, tell me about this woman of yours back home. You got one, don’t you?”

Johnny hesitated. What was her angle? Clearly, she was flirting with him. Her dress, the batting eyelashes, the pursed, kissable lips, and the way she leaned toward the table so that in his peripheral he could catch a glimpse of what he was trying so hard to avoid.

“It’s okay, she’s not here, you can talk to me.” Rachel put a hand on Johnny’s. Johnny winced and pulled his hand back, sitting back in his booth to put more distance between them, looking around—once again—for the waitress. He could use that Old Fashioned.

“What’s her name?” She pulled her glass from earlier over and slurped at the water from the ice that had melted in the stifling heat.

Johnny found the waitress, but her back was turned, a tray in her hand bearing a squat glass of amber liquid, and a tall martini glass. “Her name is Rette.”

“Rette?”

“Yeah, it’s short for Margarette.”

Rachel snorted. “Pretty.”

The waitress finally turned to bring them their drinks. Johnny watched the condensation fall on the side of his glass as it quickly approached. He wiped at his brow again.

The waitress deposited their glasses on the table without a word and took off before Johnny could thank her. He took a large sip of his drink, feeling the cool liquid slide down his throat, then winced at its burn. He’d never had an Old Fashioned and wasn’t sure what to expect.

Rachel sipped her own martini, her eyes continuing their earlier onslaught. “Tell me more about her.”
Johnny took another large drink and was disappointed to find only ice remaining when he was done. He hoped it would hit soon to make Rachel more bearable.

“She –” but Johnny was cut off by the sound of breaking glass coming from near the bar.

“GET OFF OF ME!” It was Holt. He was on the ground, wrestling with another man, with a crowd beginning to form. Sanders, whose face was flushed from kissing the woman in the booth, jumped over the railing separating the two areas and pulled the man off Sanders.

“Get out of here! All of you!” An older, portly man shouted from behind the bar.

“This guy here started it!” Sanders responded.

“Yeah? Well, I’m finishing it! Out! All of you!” Johnny assumed the man was the bar owner.

“Are those guys with you?” Rachel asked.

“Yeah, they are. I guess that’s my cue.” Johnny stepped down from the raised booth. “It was nice to meet –” Rachel stepped down to join him.

“You stay safe over there, Johnny.” Before Johnny could move, Rachel’s lips were on his. They were warm and much larger than Rette’s, but something pulled in the pit of Johnny’s stomach that kept Johnny from pulling away. Before he could stop them, his hands were at her waist, and he was—he was pulling her in. Her hands were on his face, and as one moved to the back of his head, he pulled away, his breath heavy.

“Hmm.” Rachel smiled. The noise of the room echoed and distorted in his ears. Rachel looked up at him with a sly smile. “If this whole Rette thing doesn’t work out, you know where to find me, Carver.”

Her mouth opened slightly, and Johnny looked down at her lips. He wanted to pull her in again. He wanted to–
Someone yanked on his collar, pulling him away from Rachel. “Let’s go, lover boy!”

Johnny stumbled and struggled to find his footing before Holt pushed him out of P&G’s ahead of them, out into the thick night air.

Rette was the only being awake for miles. The silence and stillness spoke to her, and she sighed into the darkness of her bedroom. Her legs ached. A clamminess frosted her skin, and she kicked her sheet off in frustration. The air in her room stuck to her—suffocated her—even without the sheet, she couldn’t escape it.

She went to her window and wrenched it open, praying for a cooler breeze. But it was June, and Rette should have known from the silence that engulfed her inside her room that there would be a drowning stillness outside.

She squinted into the darkness. The new moon betrayed her, offering no illumination into the night, but she closed her eyes and listened. Crickets. Literally. That’s all she heard. No grasses moving—no breeze. She yanked the window shut and groaned in frustration.

She went to her dressing table, flicked on her lamp, and found the slip of paper her father had bestowed upon her weeks ago. It still sat there beside her writing pad, a constant reminder of the inexorable conflict remaining between her and Helen.

She picked up her pen, gave it a few taps to get the ink flowing and began to write.

Dear Ada Voigt,

My name is Margarette Murphy. My father, Major Henry Murphy, knew you for a brief time when he was a young man serving in the Great War. He has told me that you are quite connected. I was hoping there was something you could help me with.
Rette provided all the details she could that could help Ada find out information about Helen’s family. Their names, where they lived, and worked. As she spelled out all the details, she briefly contemplated her choice. Could this be dangerous? Could she be giving up valuable personal information that could mean life or death for Helen’s family? It was life or death, Rette realized. Helen wouldn’t say it, and Rette never wanted to consider its possibility, but that’s what they were all afraid of. No one truly knew what it was like for them, where they went or what was happening. For all she knew, Helen’s family could be dead.

Rette hesitated. Would that be beneficial for Helen to know? Truly? After Frank, Rette wasn’t sure Helen was ready to handle something like that. She needed good news. It was better that Rette was writing to Ada rather than passing along the address to Helen herself to write to her. At least this way, once Rette had the information—if she got the information—she could decide what would be best to do with it. Mr. And Mrs. Lehman at least deserved to know, and they could then make the decision of whether to tell Helen.

Rette sat back in her chair and rubbed at her eyes. She felt the hour catch up to her, and she yawned. She folded her letter into an envelope and addressed it according to the information her father had given her. Rette hoped at the very least that this Ada still lived at the same address. It had been over a quarter of a century since her father would have been in contact with her, and those times—well, they were different. So much had changed in just the past year, and Rette was sure they had been changing much longer for Ada.

Rette sat in her usual seat at the dining table, nursing her cup of weak coffee. Rationing had yet to begin, but Rette’s parents knew it would only be a matter of time. Her eyes ached as
she tried to wipe the sleep from them. The raw, crusty edges of her eyelids made her regret the
time she spent crying after Mother came in to check on her.

“Honestly, Rette,” she had said. “It’s been over a week. Get on with it.” Her voice was
laced with impatience and scorn. Rette spent hours after Mother had closed her bedroom door
replaying her words for a trace of concern, but she found none.

An empty mug sat across from Rette. She hesitated in filling her father’s mug, unsure
how long it would be before he joined her at their usual morning spot. He was usually up by the
time Rette sagged into her own chair. Rette had been restless all night. She finally gave up her
futile attempts at sleep an hour earlier than usual and accepted her extra early morning.

The stairs that led down into the kitchen creaked. Rette looked up. Her father appeared,
carefully ambling down the stairs.

“Morning,” her father grumbled. His usual morning sunshine was absent. Instead, his
face was pale and drawn.

Rette stood from the table, scooping up his empty mug and preparing to fill it.

“Looks like it was a rough night for you, too.” Rette tried to shake off her bad mood. The
light coffee sloshed into the mug, steam rose from it, and Rette relished the warmth on her face.
The scent filled her senses and reminded her of every morning that came before this one. Rette
was looking forward to a quiet start to her day with her father.

He grunted in response behind her. Rette heard the chair scrape back from the table. She
turned with the best smile she could muster to see her father falling to the hardwood floor.

“Daddy!” Rette dropped the mug on the stove, hot coffee splashing back at her as she
rushed to him. He was face down, moaning. Rette pulled on his arm with all her strength, trying
to roll his large body over so she could see his face. It was purple, his eyes were bulging, tears
were streaming from them. Fear and pain were foreign on his usually jolly face. Rette’s heart
hammered. She scrambled up, slipping in her stockings to the phone in the hall.

“Mother!” she screamed, willing her mother to wake.

Rette’s fingers fumbled on the rotary dial, the operator’s voice echoed sweetly in her ear.

“Operator, how can I–”

“Doctor Johnson, please! It’s an emergency!”

The phone rang through, and Doc answered within the first ring.

“Hello?”

“Doc, please, it’s Rette Murphy. Please hurry, it’s my father, something is wrong!”

“I’m on my way. Get Johnny’s dad.”

“The Colonel?”

“He’s been bringing your father to his appointments, just go get him. He’ll understand.”

Rette hung up the phone and rushed up the stairs, bursting into her parents’ bedroom.

“Mother! It’s daddy, come quick!”

In a flurry of blankets and dressing gown, Mother flew out of her bed and followed Rette
without question.

Rette turned and took the steps two at a time back downstairs. “Stay with Daddy,” she
yelled behind her. “Doc is on his way. I’m going to get the Colonel.”

“Margarette, no, it’s too early!”

“Doc asked for him specifically.” Rette rushed to the patio without her shoes. They took
too long to get on. The sticky night created a sticky morning, and Rette slipped slightly on the
condensation that had pooled on her patio. She had the way to Johnny’s home memorized, so her
feet carried her without thought. Rette knocked once on the Carvers’ front door before throwing it open.

“Colonel! It’s Daddy!”

Rette heard a shuffle of feet on the floor above her head. The Colonel and Lynette were both light sleepers. Rette spotted their shadows descending the steps and didn’t wait for them as she sprinted back out into the sticky morning.

Rette watched Doc’s car slide to a stop in front of her house. He ran up the steps of her home and was inside tending to her father by the time Rette made it back to the stifling warmth of the kitchen.

Doc knelt beside her father, injecting something into his arm. Mother sat at his head, brushing back his thinning hair from his now pale face.

The front screen door slammed, announcing Lynette and the Colonel’s arrival.

“There, now, Henry.” Doc capped the needle then returned it to his black bag.

“Will he be alright, Doc?” Lynette clutched the Colonel’s arm, both still in their nightclothes.

Doc looked up at the Colonel and Lynette then back at Rette’s mother. “I’m afraid he’s getting worse. It won’t be long now.”

It won’t be long. No. He still had most of Rette’s lifetime to spend with her, right? Rette shivered at the thought of all the trials she had already faced in her life and how important her father had been to her in getting through them. The thought of what laid ahead, without him…

Rette turned and sprinted from the kitchen, grabbed her shoes, and darted out the front door. She was halfway to Olly’s Diner before she slowed to a walk and wiped her face on her
apron. Her chest ached, and she could barely see the sidewalk in front of her. No one was out. It was so early, Rette wasn’t sure Olly himself would be in the diner’s kitchen.

She slipped her shoes on, ignoring the destroyed feet of her stockings. Her mother would faint at the sight.

Rette wasn’t sure what had afflicted him. She didn’t even know he had been seeing Doc. She knew he had looked increasingly ill and tired the past month, but hadn’t they all with everything that was going on?

Rette folded her arms across her chest, shivering despite the warm, sticky air. She sniffled. She should have known. She should have called Doc sooner. She should have done something sooner.

“Rette?”

Rette looked up from her reverie. Olly stood in front of the diner. He held a broom in one hand and the day’s newspaper in the other. A bike chimed down the road as the paperboy continued his route.

“Are you alright? You’re early.”

“Fine.” Rette pushed open the door to the diner, enveloping herself in the silence.

Chapter Sixteen

Rette anticipated a dreaded phone call all day, but she was also left to wonder what she was coming home to by the end of her shift. Luckily, the usual lunch rush was later than usual and seemed to bleed into the supper rush. Before she knew it, Olly was standing in front of her, dirty rag in one hand, spatula in the other, and he was pointing his spatula hand at the diner door,
motioning for her to leave. Rette looked through the large window at the front of the diner and noticed the sky had darkened to a similar shade she had run to work beneath that morning.

She brushed off her apron, mumbled her goodbyes to Olly and Joan, and began her walk home.

The streets were quiet, most people in Attabury retreated to their homes around supper time, not to emerge again until the next morning. Unless, of course, Rette happened to look down one of those rows of houses where the neighbors met beneath their porch lights to sip iced tea and lemonade, yelling over their hedges at each other to catch up on the day’s drama. As Rette passed another street, she saw a group of kids riding bikes, carrying baseball bats, and wearing backwards caps. Otherwise, it was quiet–calm–in contrast to Rette’s pulse as she drew nearer and nearer to her own house.

She hadn’t heard any news all day, and surely that meant good news. They would have told her if something had–she gasped, having only then realized she was holding her breath as she was lost in thought–if something had happened.

As Rette turned onto Ash, the street she’d lived on since her family had moved to Attabury from just outside Manhattan where Rette was born, she realized two things: the Carvers’ porch light was off, which meant no one was home, and the Colonel’s Buick was still parked where it had been when Rette left that morning, meaning they were probably at Rette’s house.

Rette steeled herself, preparing her face into a neutral, yet tired expression, rather than the anxiety ridden one she had worn the whole way home. She rubbed at her forehead, sure the creases there had become permanent.
She let herself in. It was quiet—silent, and Rette glanced around as she slipped her shoes off. The front room lights were off, but a dim glow came from the kitchen. She followed it.

The Colonel was leaned back in the chair Rette’s mother typically occupied, his chin to his chest which was rising and falling in steady rhythm. Lynette pricked a stretch of white cloth pressed in an embroidery hoop. She looked up as Rette entered.

“Oh, dear, you’re home.”

The Colonel stirred and took a deep breath, looking around the dimly lit room before stretching his arms high above his head, joints popping in his shoulders, elbows, and up what Rette could only assume was his back—it reminded her of Rette. She’d seen him do the same thing so many times when she caught him nodding off, especially when they were studying or if Rette would read to him. “But your voice is just so soothing,” he would say, pulling her in to nuzzle his head onto her shoulder, his breaths rising and falling at an even pace.

Rette sighed. She wished Johnny were here. “I am,” she replied to Lynette, albeit regrettably.

“Your mother went up an hour or so ago. Your father is in bed.”

“Is he—” Rette stopped. She wasn’t sure what she wanted to ask.

Lynette looked to the Colonel who cleared his throat and spoke in a quiet, tired voice. “Your father’s heart is failing, Rette. It has been for some time. Doc has done well to keep him ticking for this long. He won’t have much longer.”

Rette’s own heart pounded in her chest. She could feel it echoing through her back and into her ribcage, making it hard to breathe. “What do you mean he won’t have much longer?! He still needs—I still need—”
She was breathless. No matter how she gasped, her lungs wouldn’t fill, and as she gaped at Lynette and the Colonel, she felt her eyes grow wide and her vision darken around the edges.

“Rette!” Lynette stood quickly, gripping her shoulders. Rette focused on her face, but the darkness closed in until all she could see were Lynette’s wide eyes. “Breathe—” but Rette couldn’t hear her. It sounded as though her ears were caving in upon themselves, and all she could hear were the very inner workings of her body, her pulse pounding, her head throbbing at the sound.

Rette’s cheek stung, her neck ached as her head was wrenched abruptly, and she saw white, glittering bright lights bursting in her sight.

“Lynette!” the Colonel’s voice was sharp, panicked in a way Rette had never heard.

The bright light cleared, and Rette could once again focus on Lynette’s face.

“Rette. Look at me.”

Rette trained her eyes on Lynette’s face. Her eyes were the exact shape and color as Johnny’s. The lightest blue of the washed-out sky in the midst of summer.

“Breathe.”

Air passed over Rette’s face and she felt the hairs that had once stuck to her forehead in the humidity dry and curl, tickling her skin.

“Let’s get you to bed, and in the morning, you can visit your father.”

Rette’s arm raised to her shoulder, and her knees shook. She realized in that moment just how sore her feet were. Her stomach growled loudly.

“Have you eaten anything today?”

Rette looked at Lynette who was supporting her from one side, her arm wrapped around her waist. “No— but I don’t—”
Lynette sighed and the Colonel swore. “Surely Olly knows to make you eat. You’ve worked yourself to the bone.”

“I don’t think I could—” a wave of nausea hit her, and her stomach churned relentlessly. But it was empty, and Rette knew she couldn’t be sick.

“You need to put something in your system.” Lynette began moving her toward the stairs. “Let’s get you to bed then I’ll bring you some broth and crackers. That’ll help settle your stomach.”

Rette didn’t argue. She knew Lynette would not rest until she saw Rette taken care of, and as Lynette helped her change from her smelly uniform, Rette was grateful. She pulled Rette’s nightgown over her head, and though it made Rette feel like a child, she let Lynette prepare her for bed. Lynette had, at times, been more of a mother to her than her own.

Lynette held Rette’s face in her hands and brushed her hair out of her face. Her eyes glistened, and Rette’s heart clenched at the sight.

“You’re my daughter. You know that, right?” Lynette brushed her fingers over Rette’s cheek again. “No matter what. You will always be a daughter to me, and whether you like it or not, I’m in your life. Forever.”

Rette’s chin quivered, but she wasn’t sure she had the energy to cry. She nodded, offering Lynette the best smile she could.

Lynette sat her down at her vanity and picked the pins from Rette’s hair. Rette studied herself. She was pale, drawn, and looked as though she had aged ten years in the past ten months. As Lynette ran Rette’s brush through her curls, Rette’s eyes closed unwillingly at the sensation. It had been a very long time since someone else had brushed Rette’s hair for her, and she’d
forgotten how much she loved it. Her head tilted to the side slightly, and she had to brace her hands on either side of her seat to prevent herself from falling over.

Lynette hummed to herself, a tune Rette heard her hum anytime she was lost in thought, and she recognized it as one of the hymns they sang at church.

There was a soft knock and Rette’s door creaked, and Rette opened her eyes to see the Colonel enter with a tray. A steaming bowl of broth, and a small plate with crackers lay carefully arranged. He placed it on the dressing table in front of Rette, and she mumbled her thanks. He stroked the top of Rette’s head and leaned over to place a kiss there before kissing Lynette’s cheek and leaving Rette’s room.

Rette looked at the steaming bowl of broth and her stomach growled again, this time gentler. She picked up a cracker and took a small bite. It was dry and stuck to her mouth unpleasantly.

“He feels the same way you know.”

Rette looked up and met Lynette’s gaze in the mirror. “What?”

Lynette nodded at Rette’s bedroom door. “The Colonel. He loves you as though you were his own. He may not say it, but he feels it.”

Rette nibbled another small bite of cracker as Lynette smoothed Rette’s curls down with her fingers.

“He and your father served together—did you know that?”

Rette nodded.

“No one knew how to explain it. They should have run in
different circles, but it was magnetic. The Colonel and I didn’t meet until after the war, but he told me about it.” Lynette sighed and stepped back to sit on the foot of Rette’s bed.

Rette sat forward and took a small spoonful of broth into her mouth. It was warm, but as it washed down her throat, Rette sighed.

“I didn’t know the extent of your father’s condition until today, Rette. I want you to know that. Neither did your mother. The only ones who knew were the Colonel and Doc–your father wanted it that way. He didn’t want anyone else worrying over him.”

Rette continued to drink the broth from her bowl and watched through the mirror as Lynette brushed beneath both eyes.

“On top of everything else, my dear. I’m so sorry life has put this on you too.”

Rette left her spoon in her bowl and sat back, no longer hungry. Her chin quivered again, and with the food in her stomach, Rette feared she would have energy enough to cry this time. She wasn’t ready for it.

Rette cleared her throat. “Every time I think I’ve figured it out–” Rette stopped. Her voice was quiet–almost too quiet for even her own ears to hear. She turned to Lynette. “Life yanks everything out from under me.”

Lynette sighed, fresh tears falling down her cheeks.

Rette’s face was hot, and her eyes burned as tears spilled onto her cheeks as well. Her ears rang again, and Rette took a slow, deep, shaky breath. “I feel like I’m drowning in the middle of the ocean. Wave after wave–” Rette’s throat closed up, and she let out a sob.

“Oh, dear,” Lynette muttered, and Rette felt Lynette’s hands take hers. She opened her eyes to see Lynette kneeling on the floor in front of her, peering up at her through her own teary
eyes. “You are so strong, Rette. Life can be so evil—so unfair. You are doing your best—” Lynette gave a little laugh. “Much better than I would have done in your shoes.”

Rette laughed a little too, but it was quickly followed by another sob.

“We are here, Rette. You don’t have to do anything alone. Please know that.”

Rette nodded. “I know,” she said, her voice quiet.

Lynette patted her hands and stood from where she knelt, brushing out her skirt. “Are you still hungry?”

Rette looked at the broth and crackers but shook her head. Her bed sounded much more inviting.

“Then I’ll take this downstairs. Let’s get you to bed.”

Lynette held a hand out to Rette, and she took it gratefully, her feet pounding from being on them all day.

As she settled into her bed, she couldn’t help but sigh, and as Lynette pulled the light sheet over her and turned off Rette’s lamp, Rette called out to her. “Thank you, Momma.”

Lynette looked back at her, and Rette could see her eyes glistening in the dim light. “You’re welcome, dear. Get some rest. We’ll be back in the morning to check on you all.”

Rette turned on her side and held her pillow beneath her head, her eyes already closed. She heard Lynette lift the tray of food, and the door creak shut as Lynette took her leave.

When Rette woke, the sound of voices wafted up the staircase and through Rette’s bedroom door. As promised, Rette heard both Lynette and the Colonel’s voices along with a quieter one that could only be her mother’s.
Rette rose from her bed and dressed quietly. When she stepped out into the hall, she could hear Johnny’s parents’ and her mother’s conversation continue, so she padded down the hall to her parents’ bedroom and knocked quietly on the door.

A quiet grunt followed, and Rette’s heart soared—he was awake.

Rette pushed the door open and peered around it. Her father laid in the bed. His covers were pulled up to his chest which rose and fell in slow bursts.

“Daddy?” Rette asked, her voice quiet and timid.

He grunted and lifted his head to see her. “Oh, Rettie,” he sighed, a low cough filling his chest. He clutched a hand to it. “Come here, sweetheart.”

Rette went to his side. He was pale, and the areas on his cheeks that were usually bare were dusted with a sprinkle of white stubble growing in. His hair was in disarray, and for the first time, Rette realized just how thin it was. This man, her father, who had once seemed so lively and young, suddenly seemed ancient and weak. Rette’s chest ached, and she put a hand to it, tears suddenly burning at the brim of her eyes. Her chin quivered.

“Dear, dear,” her father cooed, reaching a hand out to her. She took it—clung to it.

“Why?” Rette sobbed. “Why didn’t you—” She couldn’t finish. She didn’t know what she wanted to ask him, she didn’t know if she truly wished she had known or if it would have been too much all at once for too long.

Her father sighed and stroked the back of her hand. “I didn’t—” his voice gave out. He paused and cleared his throat. “I didn’t want to bring more down on your shoulders. There was no telling how long I would have. I’m a tough old man.”

He chuckled, but Rette couldn’t find anything funny. Her tears continued. “I still need you, Daddy. You’re supposed—”
Her father held up a hand. “Ah, sweetheart. What I am supposed to do from here on out is out of my control and—” he paused, looking at her sternly. “Yours. You cannot berate yourself or me by what was supposed to happen when this is what was meant to be all along.”

Rette’s tears fell hot down her cheeks. “But I hoped—”

He interrupted her again. “That hope will get you so far in life, Rette. It is not your hopes that hurt you. It’s your expectations for things that are simply out of your control.”

Rette sobbed and dropped her head to her chest. She shifted her weight from side to side, and her shoulders squirmed, trying to escape the inevitable pain that was encompassing her.

She felt his rough fingertips brush her cheek and push hair behind her ear. “You love so hard, my dear, and you hold high expectations for everyone around you—including yourself. But you can’t be so hard on yourself. Sometimes, you must let life happen as it should.”

She wiped at her face angrily. How could he say that? “So, this is what should happen?” She didn’t like the tone she spoke to her father in, but she couldn’t help it.

He smiled at her sadly. “I don’t know, but this is what is and what will.”

Rette groaned angrily, her frustration building. She felt as though her limbs were pulsing, and she couldn’t escape the discomfort.

“My dear,” her father sighed. “I remember the day you were born. The day I held you in my arms and wondered how so much potential could be housed in someone so small.”

Rette ground her teeth together as her father’s words pulled yet another wave of hot tears from behind her eyes.

“I was never meant—” his voice broke, and he cleared it before he continued, his voice now drowned by emotion. “I was never meant to be with you in this life forever.” As he spoke, his voice dropped to a whisper.
Rette’s chest heaved, and her knees shook. She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t do this. She couldn’t bear to hear it.

She leaned down, clutching her chest, and dropped a kiss on his head before walking out of his room, closing the door on her father’s weak sobs.

After news spread about Sanders getting into a bar fight with a local, their entire group was grounded to camp until their departure and placed on cleaning duty. Typically, the men in each barrack would share the responsibilities, but their commanding officer thought that full-time restroom duty was a suitable punishment for their actions. Worse than that, Johnny had to live with the gravity of the interaction he’d had with Rachel Evans.

Their sea-bound journey passed in a blur. Having been from central Kansas, where the largest body of water was a pond just outside the center of town, Johnny had no experience out on the water. He spent the following six days in and out of the ship’s infirmary, battling seasickness no one thought to prepare him for. The ship’s cuisine was similar to what they would get in the chow hall at training and Camp Kilmer, but Johnny couldn’t bear to step foot in there most days. The smell alone was enough to turn him green.

He fulfilled his daily chores and duties and spent the rest of the time in his bunk praying for stable, unmovable land.

When they finally pulled into the port on the Scottish coast, Johnny was the first to the deck, waiting with his duffle in hand to disembark. The others laughed at him, but he stared at the cliffs and hills of waving green grass with yearning.

It was a long wait, but as Johnny’s boots finally made contact with solid ground, he breathed a sigh of relief. He looked back over his shoulder as he waited his turn to load up in the
caravan of trucks waiting to carry them to their base. The ocean was gray beneath the clouds, the occasional white wave crashing against the side of the ship, barely making it move. Dread settled into the pit of his stomach as it churned at the thought of having to endure that once again, just to get home.

That night, as they all gathered in the mess hall of the British Troops’ camp, their commanding officer, Lieutenant Biggs delivered a message that did nothing to settle Johnny’s still queasy stomach.

“My men have come to know and expect what they could face out there. But our American friends: I ask you to prepare. If you have not done so already, ensure that there is a message tucked into your kit addressed home. Some final words, if you will, to send hope to those you leave behind should—” he hesitated, looking out at all the fresh faces. “Should something happen.”

There were sighs and a shifting of weight throughout the hall. Johnny swallowed and looked around at the growing exhaustion on the men’s faces.

“That is your assignment for tonight. Tomorrow, we begin our training, we are joint forces, and we will work as one. Enjoy it men, we’re not all friends out there.”

Johnny looked around at the mix of uniforms, the Americans, British, all together for this united effort. Johnny still wasn’t sure what their mission was, but by the looks of the numbers, it was something big.

When he retired to his bunk that night and retrieved his writing pad, he didn’t know where to start. He knew he wanted to write a letter to Rette and his parents in the case that
something were to happen to him. He’d put them in the same envelope and just address them to his parents. They would know to see to the rest.

_Dear Momma & Pop,_

_If you’re reading this, then you’ll know by now that I’m not coming home._

He sat back and read over the words he’d written. His stomach churned, and his eyes ached. He glanced around at the other men in his barracks, and they were uncharacteristically quiet. Most were writing, but some were staring off into space, clearly lost in thought.

It was hard for Johnny to imagine life without himself in it. It sounded strange, but he didn’t think it in a selfish way, rather he struggled to conceptualize what his mother would do with her time when she wasn’t worrying about him anymore, or what Rette would do with her life if she wasn’t making a life with him— that had always been the plan. Of course, no one plans for death at twenty, they were too busy planning the life they would get to live when all of this was over.

Johnny dreamed of the piece of land he’d purchased. Ten acres—nothing too large that is unmanageable, but enough space for them to make a livelihood and a home of their own. Johnny dreamed of the expansive blue sky, and the gentle rolling hills. At the edge of the property, there was a particularly high crest where one could stand and view the entire piece. Johnny had stood there, watching the shadows of the clouds slowly inching along the fields when he’d known that was where they were meant to be.
Johnny shuffled his parents’ letter to the back of his writing pad and began with a fresh page. Here he could dream. Here he could show Rette exactly what he wished their life would look like.

*My dearest Rette,* he began and wrote well into the night, until the last lights were turned off, at which point he carried his writing pad with him outside where he wrote by the light of the moon, dreaming of the life he would get when it was all done.

**Chapter Seventeen**

The normal breakfast rush was quiet that day, which left Rette with too much time to think about her father. She busied herself with refilling the salt and pepper shakers, but she had to stop when the pepper plume caused the patrons who were there to sneeze.

“Burger up for table two, and here’s the meatloaf for table six.” Plates scraped as Olly slid them along the metal bar top, signaling the start of the lunch rush.

Rette shivered at the sound and felt Olly’s eyes on her as she picked up the dishes, but she studied the meatloaf instead.

“This was supposed to be a side of peas, not corn.” Rette set the meatloaf back on the bar with a huff.

Olly gave her a look then referenced the order slip she had left for him on the counter. “Corn.” He pointed, and there in her scrawling, loopy handwriting it read: Corn.

Rette cursed. “Can I get a side of peas then?”

“Peas aren’t on the menu today.”

“Then I’ll let you explain that to Mr. Hughes. Take it yourself.” Rette whirled and nearly ran into Olly’s wife, Joan.
“Hey now, what’s this?” She stepped up beside Rette, putting a hand to Rette’s arm and turning her back around to face Olly. She wiped her hands on her apron and looked between Olly and Rette.

“Nothing. My mistake.” Rette grumbled and picked up the meatloaf. She turned, tears brimming in her eyes.

Rette navigated the bustling diner with the plates of food. She arrived at table two and delivered the burger to Mr. Warner, who was on his lunch break from the bank down the road.

“Thank you, dear.”

Rette resituated the plate of meatloaf to her other hand, turning to the table where Mr. Hughes and Mr. York, railroad executives from the depot downtown, were waiting for their food.

Rette placed the meatloaf down on the table in front of Mr. Hughes. “I’ll be right back with your sandwich, Mr. York.” Rette spun on her heel, walking away before Mr. Hughes could respond.

She distracted herself at the bar, her back to the railroad executives’ table. She wiped away spills and spots that were not there and polished clean silverware until she could spy her own reflection.

“York’s sandy,” Olly mumbled, sliding the plate down, dumping a fry over the edge.

Rette hesitated in lifting the plate from the bar. After the past three months of nurses coming in and out of their home and her father having unexpectedly good days then growing increasingly sicker, the last thing she wanted to do was face a disgruntled Mr. Hughes, who was gruff and curt when he was in a good mood.

A clatter broke Rette from her thoughts, and the sandwich was swept from her sight. Olly stomped away, sat the plate down in front of Mr. York, and exchanged a few words with Mr.
Hughes. Rette watched Mr. Hughes motion toward her. Mr. Hughes, Mr. York, and Olly all turned and glanced at her. Rette felt her face flush and she returned to her scrubbing. She tossed the lone fry into the trash, wiping away the grease left behind on the chrome bar top.

“Rette.” Olly approached her, moving into her line of sight on the other side of the bar. “What the hell—” the phone rang, and Olly cursed as he turned to pull it off the receiver. “Olly’s.”

Rette watched as Olly stood up straight at the voice on the line, then turned quickly to make eye contact with Rette. His harsh, chastising eyes softened as he listened.

“Yes, sir. She’s on her way home.” Olly clanged the phone back onto the receiver. He looked at her and motioned to the door. “Go.”

Rette wrung the bar towel between her hands. “Who was that?”

“Home, Rette. Go home.” Olly’s eyes pleaded with her.

Her hands shook, but she wrapped them in the rag. “No. Tell me who that was.” Olly huffed. “It was Doc. Now go.”

Rette’s chest tightened. “What did he say?”

“For Christs’ sake, Rette. Just go. Please.” Olly turned away from her to tend to the stove. “No. Tell me.”

Joan clattered a stack of plates into the sink. “What is going on?”

Olly threw a spatula down on the counter, knocking over jars of seasoning. “He’s gone, Rette.”

“Who?” Rette and Joan said together. Rette knew, but she needed Olly to say it. She didn’t know why, but she needed to hear the words.
He gave her a pleading look. She could tell he didn’t want to say it. “Your father, Rette. Major Murphy is dead.”

Rette looked at Olly. He held up his empty hands but could offer nothing else.

“Oh dear.” Joan turned to Rette, her face pale with shock.

Rette looked from Joan to Olly to Mr. York and Mr. Hughes, who turned away when they met her gaze. Others were watching too, and Rette could feel their gazes on her. Her skin crawled, and she rubbed at her arms, finding goosebumps.

Rette ran home, ignoring the glances from the people she ran by. Helen and her parents were walking out of Hooper’s Grocery when she flashed past it. Helen called after her twice, her parents calling out in their broken German. Rette didn’t stop to respond.

Rette arrived home as two men carried out a stretcher covered with a white sheet. They took careful steps down from the front porch, and slowly made their way toward a van parked in front of Rette’s home. Saline River Funeral Home, the van read.

Rette stopped paces away, unable to bring herself closer or to entertain the idea of what—who—laid under that sheet.

Rette heard a noise from inside her house, something so out of place in her world that it took her a moment for her to register that it was her mother—screaming.

“No! Be careful!” Lynette’s voice joined the cacophony of cries from inside Rette’s home. “Carol, please!” The telltale ringing shatter of porcelain put Rette into motion, and she ran past the van where the two men were loading the sheet covered stretcher.

Rette swept into the living room to see a table full of Mother’s prized porcelain figurines in pieces on the ground, along with the family portrait they had done three years ago. Pieces of
porcelain children and woodland creatures littered the ground. The family photo laid there scratched and torn beneath a fine layer of tiny shards.

“Let’s give her a moment.”

“Doc, I don’t think Carol knows—” Lynette and Doc stood at the doorway between the living room and kitchen. They stopped talking when they saw Rette trying to navigate the damage.

“I’ve tried everything. I just don’t want her to hurt herself.” Lynette held her hands out to Rette as though she wanted to offer her something but wasn’t sure what was left.

Rette crossed the room and held Lynette’s hands, squeezing them. “Thank you.” Rette packed as much meaning and earnestness as she could into the words, knowing she wouldn’t be able to say much else without breaking down.

“Rette, I think you should know that she’s been calling out for Nicholas as well as your father.” Doc raised his eyebrows and held a hand up to block Rette’s path into the kitchen.

Rette looked from his hand to his earnest expression.

“I don’t know how much your parents have shared with you, Rette, but I’ll tell you that your mother is in a very sensitive mental state.”

Lynette put a comforting hand on Rette’s arm. “She didn’t recognize me a moment ago, Rette.”

Doc nodded. “I don’t want to add to what you must be going through already, but she is experiencing some confusion about which husband she has lost today. I believe we may be seeing the seventeen-year-old Carol who was widowed for the first time, rather than your mother who lost her husband of twenty years.”
Rette took a deep breath and pushed her own emotions down. Rette investigated the dim kitchen. It appeared empty, but as she stepped in further Rette heard her mother before she saw her.

Rette’s mother sat on the floor, tucked into a dark corner, keening into her folded arms. She looked like a child with her arms wrapped around her folded knees. Her shoulders shook, punctuating the noises that emanated from her.

“Mom?”

The whines stopped, but Rette’s mother didn’t move. Rette crossed the small kitchen, squatting down beside her.

Rette tried again. “Mom?”

Mother didn’t budge, but Rette watched her shoulders rise and fall in a shuttering breath.

“Excuse me, Doctor Johnson, Mrs. Carver, we need a signature from next of kin.” One of the men who had carried her father from their home stood next to Lynette, holding out a piece of paper.

“Honestly, Freddy, you really think that is appropriate in this moment and in their state?” Lynette’s voice was void of its usual warmth and compassion.

Doc turned his gaze sharply to Lynette. “Mrs. Carver—”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. We can’t take the… Mr. Murphy for his final preparations until we have a signature from next of kin.” Freddy still held out the piece of paper, shifting from foot to foot.

Doc reassured her, “It’s protocol, Mrs. Carver.”

Lynette sighed and turned to the kitchen. “Rette, dear, I’m sorry. They need you to sign.”

Freddy coughed and gave a small shake of his head.
“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” Lynette cursed. She snatched the paper from the man’s hands. She knelt in front of Rette and her mother, her demeanor much gentler than the way she handled Freddy.

“Carol, dear, they need you to sign this. I’m going to hand you the pen, okay?”

Rette’s mother lifted her face from her arms, and Rette saw her face for the first time. Rette’s heart broke at the shadows that lingered beneath and in her eyes. Rette didn’t see her mother. She saw a much younger woman, the pain and emotion fresh and raw.

Lynette placed father’s personalized fountain pen in Carol’s open, shaking hand. Rette’s heart ached as she watched her mother’s scrawling signature fill the line beside the word: ‘Widow’.

Rette pulled two mugs down from the cabinet to the right of their stove. She wiped stubborn crumbs of sleep from her eyes and tapped her fingers on the counter. She listened to the coffee brewing on the stovetop.

Daddy wasn’t up yet. Rette planned on retrieving the paper from the front step before he made his way downstairs so it would be ready for his eager perusal.

She left the coffee on the stove, content to let it finish without her goading stare.

It was cold out, but Rette only had to take a few steps on the patio before she could reach the paper waiting on the top step. Jerry, their paperboy, had such a precise aim that he could land it on the front step every time without even stopping his bike.

Rette placed the paper in her father’s spot at the table, pairing it with his favorite coffee cup before retrieving the fresh coffee and her own cup. Rette poured coffee into her own first,
then hesitated, wanting it to be nice and hot when her father sat down to enjoy it. Should she go ahead and fill it?

Rette rubbed her eyes again. They were sore and raw beneath her cold fingers. She must have been crying in her sleep again.

Rette returned the coffee pot to the stove, content with waiting until her father made his way downstairs before pouring his coffee, but something made her vision spin.

She stared at her father’s black fountain pen sitting in the corner of their kitchen, far from Daddy’s place at the table where he usually kept it.

She saw her mother, curled in the corner of their dark kitchen. She heard the screams.

She saw the raw brokenness of a widow twice over.

Her father was gone. Rette gripped the countertop at the revelation, sweat making her hands slip. She turned to look at their small dining table, which now looked far too big for two. The paper and her father’s mug sat in their usual morning places. All that was missing was her dad.

Rette could have sworn she heard the pine planks pop as he stepped down the stairs.

But two small, bare feet appeared instead, followed closely by the rest of her mother, wrapped in Rette’s father’s robe. At first glance, her eyes were closed, but Rette noticed with a shock that they were swollen, puffy, and unrecognizable.

Mother snatched the empty cup from the table then shuffled to the stove and stared at the coffee pot. Mother had always told Rette coffee was unladylike. Mother never did anything that was remotely unladylike.

“Mom? Can I get you some tea?”
Mother seized the tin percolator from the burner and poured. The coffee pot rattled back into place, and Mother turned swiftly toward the table.

“Where did he start in the paper?”

Rette hesitated, watching in awe as Mother sipped the still piping hot coffee as though she had done it all her life. In all nineteen years Rette had known her, she had never once seen her drink coffee.

“Margarette.” Mother’s voice was desperate, stirring Rette from her stupor. She waved the newspaper at her. “Where. Did. He. Start?” Her eyes were wide, and her hands shook, causing one lone drop of coffee to crest the rim and streak a brown path down the side of the white mug.

Rette unrolled the paper, smoothing the creases before turning to the world news. Rette had watched the world news section grow larger and larger over the past almost two months of war, and it had nearly tripled in size since last year. She folded the paper back, as she had watched her father do every day since she was six. That was the age she discovered her mother’s dislike for mornings and her own affinity for the quiet start to her day with her father.

She pulled back her father’s old chair, and Mother sat, placing her cup down on the white tablecloth. That lone drop of coffee would make a stain for Mother to curse and scrub at. It would be a welcome distraction, Rette decided, choosing not to point it out to her in the moment.

Mother scanned the world news as though she was searching for answers. Her eyes desperately scanned each article, growing more wan with each shift of her gaze.

Rette settled into her own chair and watched her mother’s search. She flitted from page to page, her manic eyes moving much too fast to read or process any of the words. Finally, she stopped. She slapped the paper to the table, making Rette jump.
“How did he see it?”

“See what?”

“The world. How did he do it?” Mother’s eyes were wide and flitted between the paper, the mug, and Rette was unable to focus on anything.

“How? How did he do what?”

Mother lurched from the table and paced the kitchen.

“He showed so much care yet none at all. You loved him—” she stopped pacing to motion at Rette in exasperation, “I loved him, but I never felt like enough, but he was more. We were supposed to have children. We were supposed to grow old together. How did he—?” Mother shook her head, running her fingers through the mats and knots at her temples. “How can I—?”

Rette’s chair scraped the floor as she rose and caught Mother by the arm amid her pacing. Rette studied her face for a moment. Her eyes were wild, and she mumbled incoherently. Tears began to brim in her eyes, and Rette closed the gap between them, wrapping her arms around Mother. There had been so many times Rette had wished her mother would hold her this way, but she hadn’t. That made Rette hold on tighter, willing all the pieces to stay in place. They had to. Mother was all Rette had left.

Four months had passed, and Johnny had heard from Rette exactly once. The letter was dated a month and a half from the date Johnny had received it, and it was brief, lacking Rette’s usual color. It simply stated that her father was ill, but she did not go into details. The lack of information hurt so deeply that he’d written to his mother, pleading for any more information she could give, but that letter too had gone without response. Getting mail from one location to the other seemed impossible. It felt as though he was there in secrecy. Letters were a bit more
frequent for some of the other men. Their post time was still long, but they were at least frequent. Johnny tried not to let it discourage him. He knew their lives were busy, and frankly so was he. However, it didn’t make it hurt any less.

Something was coming. Johnny still wasn’t sure what. He knew they were preparing for an invasion by air somewhere along the coast of north Africa—an area he could have never fathomed from the reliable comfort of Attabury’s wheat fields. However, the date and detail kept shifting, changing as the days progressed.

In his role as squad leader, their company commander kept him in the loop the best he could, but even the commander didn’t know what the plan was. They drilled and drilled day in and day out, particularly at day out. There was a high probability of a night invasion, which required increased drills and logistics more than the daytime counterpart.

Whatever he was about to face, Johnny knew he didn’t want to head into it without writing to Rette, even if he hadn’t heard from her. He reclined on his bunk, writing pad propped up on his lap, and he tried to decide how to word his worries, anxieties, and dreams so he could bring Rette comfort if she needed it, but without increasing any already existing anxieties or pain.

_Dearest Rette,_ he began as usual. _The days are long here. Now that_ was an understatement. He rose each day well before sunrise, already being into his second round of morning PT before the sun made its full appearance, and he didn’t retreat to his bunk until the moon was high in the night sky. Even then, there were some nights their training took them into the night, the lack of sleep acting as an additional layer of preparation for the long mission that lay ahead of them.

“Carver!”
Johnny looked up from his writing pad, as did many of his bunk mates. The voice was accented, and though they had grown a very close camaraderie with the men from the R.A.F., their bunk was typically only occupied by U.S. soldiers.

It was Sergeant Gregory, one of the squad leaders of their neighboring barracks of the R.A.F..

Johnny stood and met him in the doorway. “Evening Sergeant. How can I help?”

“Let’s walk, Corporal.”

Having already changed out of his fatigues for the night, he retrieved the wool blanket from his bunk and wrapped it around his shoulders. He learned a month ago that autumn came and went much earlier across the Atlantic than back home. Sergeant Gregory waited for him outside, and as he pulled the door shut behind him, Sergeant Gregory began walking and talking without him.

“—retrieve you urgently.” Johnny caught the tail end of Sergeant Gregory’s statement as he locked step with his comrade.

“What is going on?” Johnny asked, the curiosity unable to wait.

“The commanders are gathering all squad leaders at the command center for a briefing.”

Johnny stopped. Sergeant Gregory stopped a few paces ahead and turned to look at him.

“What are you doing?”

“This is it isn’t it?”

Sergeant Gregory huffed and looked as though he wanted to roll his eyes. “I know as much as you do, chap. Now let’s go.”
Johnny knew he was right. He wrapped his hands in his wool blanket and pulled it tighter around his shoulders as he continued walking to the command center, hoping the blanket hid the tremble in his hands.

When they entered the command center, Johnny found that he and Sergeant Gregory were the last ones to get there. Thankfully though, Johnny wasn’t the only squad leader to have discarded his uniform for the night. Johnny recognized a couple of other squad leaders from his brother companies also in their issued sleepwear, though only one other carried his blanket with him. Johnny studied him. Corporal Thompson, a waif of a man. He looked as though one strong breeze would dissolve him to dust and scatter him to the wind. Wrapped in his blanket—not unlike the way Johnny was—he resembled a child, unable to hide his fear on his face, and clinging to the blanket for comfort as he awaited whatever the commanders had to tell them.

Johnny pulled the blanket from his shoulders and draped it over one arm. Whatever was to come, he wanted to be ready, though he felt anything but.

The commander cleared his throat and gave Johnny and Corporal Gregory a pointed look before he began. “Tomorrow at sixteen hundred, we will deploy from our airfields with a heading of Tafaraoui, Algeria. At this moment, there are continued talks with the Vichy French. We anticipate a hostile reception until we hear otherwise.”

Johnny glanced around and met the gazes of the other men. They had trained for this, but they had all hoped the Vichy French would provide much needed cover and assistance.

“Our mission is to capture airfields and choke off their supply lines. These airfields are a crucial part to the Nazi’s control of the Mediterranean and are equally as crucial to us in controlling them. As of now, our parachuters will perform a night landing. Additional support will be flown in and will rendezvous to their designated locations for stabilization. If this mission
is successful, it will be the first small step toward victory for the Allied forces. Get some rest then brief your men at morning muster, soldiers. Write home, but the usual discretion applies. We depart in less than twenty-four hours. Dismissed.”

Johnny turned from the masses, and being closest to the door, he began his cold trek back to his barracks. He needed to finish his letter to Rette as soon as he got back. Then he needed to sleep, but something wriggled beneath Johnny’s skin, telling him sleep would be as evasive as any chance of marrying Rette.

**Chapter Eighteen**

It had been over two hours. Johnny and his squad of nineteen parachuters were geared and loaded punctually at sixteen hundred as instructed, but they didn’t take off. For those two hours they sat waiting, and Johnny was growing impatient. They’d radioed to the other C-47’s, but no one had heard anything. They were not to depart until they got word.

“Advance Napoleon, Advance Napoleon,” a broken voice sounded over the plane’s radio.

“Napoleon?” Johnny asked the pilot, leaning into the cockpit, his gear preventing him from going any further.

“Plan B,” the pilot, Sergeant Gunther affirmed. “Take off delayed four hours. Morning drop. Two hours to take off.”

Johnny sighed. “Thanks, Gunther.”

He backed up and faced the benches of men lining the belly of the plane. “Plan B. Take off is delayed, and we’ll be dropping in daylight. Unload and be alert, we’ll disembark in two hours.”
The men grumbled, and Johnny wished he could make it happen according to plan. However, they had trained to be flexible, to adapt to any of the given scenarios they’d been told were possible, but Johnny knew the men were itching to be on the move, to handle the decisions as they came in the air, rather than sitting and waiting, as they had already been doing.

At twenty-one hundred, they were finally loaded and awaiting their turn in the line of C-47s in their convoy waiting to take off. As they began taxiing to the runway, Johnny’s knee began bouncing. He didn’t know much about what they were about to face. They were in radio contact with the commander who would give them intel and information as they needed it, as it would be ever changing as the situation evolved. He tried to trust the process, but this was the first Johnny and many of the men he was in charge of had seen potential combat. They knew to expect resistance at least in taking control of the airfield, but the possibility of so much more that could go wrong along the way made their stomachs turn.

Johnny felt the C-47 gaining speed, carrying Johnny and his men faster and faster, propelling them and the giant tin can they rode in higher and higher into the air. Johnny braced himself, clasped his hands together in his lap and did all he could do as he waited, he prayed.

My Dearest Rette,

The days are long here. From the moment reveille wakes me from my dreams of you, we are in motion–or at least our minds are. Planning, tactics, problem after problem, and heavens the logistics. I barely have time to eat. When I get a spare moment to myself, it is long enough to take a breath before someone else comes knocking with a problem to solve.
When they marked me as squad leader, I knew that would come with additional responsibilities, but I didn’t expect the demand to be so great. You know I consider this service to be a great honor. I consider it my God-given duty to serve others and our country in any way I can. But I selfishly yearn to be home with you and holding you in my arms yet again. You are my life, my love, and I cannot wait until you are my right now and my forever.

Plans are constantly changing when we’ll be moving or where we’ll be moving to. Just know that I’ll write to you when we arrive whenever and wherever, but I do not know when I can guarantee that you’ll get that letter. Mail may not always be postable from our locations, but I may be able to pass it off to a messenger if there is one available who can get it to a location to post.

I hope your family is well. Remind your father to look after himself. Pop said he was having some trouble earlier this year, so I do hope he is looking after himself for your sake and your mother’s. I don’t know what you and your mother would do if something happened to him. It would put you both in a real bind. Remind my mother that I have no time for shopping while I am away so any hope for a relic will be for naught. I’ll package myself up and post myself, and my return safely home will have to be souvenir enough.

I can’t wait until I’m your husband. Hopefully by then we’ll live in a world and country where it is actually possible to be there with you, fulfilling my duties as a husband in person. A world where I can wake up to you in my arms and kiss you goodnight. I want to give you children, but I want more than anything else to help you raise them, to be a father, to play ball with our son and tell our daughter she is beautiful every moment of the day. I would love to have two children—we both grew up without siblings, and I fear without you in my childhood, it would have been very lonely indeed.
My dear, I fear I must sign off for now. I write this to you by moonlight, but my eyes grow heavy.

I love you my dearest.

Forever. All my love,

Johnny

Rette thumbed the folded letter in her apron pocket, ruminating on Johnny’s words. Even if it was in the plans for her father to die, Rette wished Johnny could have at least been with her when it happened. But instead, he was thousands of miles away fighting a war he did not start. The letter was dated only a week and a half ago, surprisingly quick mail service compared to the past few months, something Rette was still unsure of whether she was grateful for.

“Order for table three, Rette.” Olly slid two plates across the counter to her, and she caught them just as they were about to tip off the edge.

She pivoted to the dining room, hooking the pitcher of water over a spare finger. She delivered the plates to Mr. and Mrs. Peterson at table three.

“Oh dear, thank you,” Mrs. Peterson cooed at her. “I have to say,” she began as Rette refilled their cups with more water, “I’m surprised you haven’t joined the Red Cross or USO like the other young ladies, what with your Johnny gone and all.”

“But it’s just her and her mother now, dear,” Mr. Peterson corrected his wife.

Rette took a deep breath, trying to focus on filling the cups.

Mrs. Peterson clasped her napkin to her lips and gasped. “Oh, that’s right, oh you poor dear.” Rette gave her a small smile and started to turn away when she saw Mrs. Peterson’s eyes begin brimming with tears of sympathy. Mrs. Peterson’s aged and wrinkled hands attempted to
grab Rette’s, but Rette walked away without a word to return to her duties — anything to take her mind off her “situation”.

Rette had taken about as much as she could. All morning it was one person after another. All the women wanted to hold her hand or offer a hug—which Rette politely declined—and all the men felt it was their place to give her advice on finances, something that had always been cared for by her father. Rette knew they meant well, but it seemed as though no one knew when enough was enough.

Rette stopped by table one where Mrs. Crane sat alone. Mr. Crane was a deacon at the church across the street, so Mrs. Crane frequently met her husband at Olly’s for lunch when he was meeting with the bishop. “Just you today, Mrs. Crane?”

Mrs. Crane lifted her gaze up to her, her face full of sympathy. “Oh, Margarette! What a surprise!”

Rette immediately wanted to leave and get Joan to cover table one. “What can I get for you?”

“Oh, you poor girl. I was so sorry to hear about your daddy. You know he and I were in school together. He’s always been a looker.” Mrs. Crane’s cheeks flushed.

Rette fought the urge to roll her eyes. “Water to start? Maybe some tea while you wait?”

“Oh, yes dear, that would be swell.”

Rette whirled away, catching Joan’s arm at the bar before she could take off with a load of plates. “Table one needs water and tea.”

Joan stopped and stared at Rette, waiting. “…so, get them water and tea.”

“If one more person—”

“They care, Rette.” Joan chastised her with a sympathetic smile.
“I know, but—”

“You have an hour left, then you can go help your mom with—”

“There’s nothing to help her with,” Rette snapped. She could hear her own blood pumping in her head. She took a shallow breath. It was the truth. Rette’s father had everything arranged months ago apparently. The Colonel was helping her mother with the final details this morning.

“Then just go home. Relax. Breathe for once.”

“I don’t need to relax!” Rette’s voice rose to a level that caused heads to turn at the bar next to them. She made eye contact with Randall and a few others, and all of them just gave her sympathetic glances, half smiles, or mouthed ‘poor dear’.

That was it. Rette ripped off her apron and rolled it up. The bell of the diner rang signaling another potential sympathizer for Rette. She slapped her order pad down on the counter and turned to march out of the diner, but she stopped.

Her mother stood just inside the diner door with a distant look in her eye. The bell above the door still ringing. “He’s missing,” she muttered, so quietly, Rette wasn’t sure she had heard her right over the continual bustle of the diner.

“What? Who?”

Mother finally met Rette’s gaze. “Johnny is missing.”

Joan cursed behind her, something clattered at the stove where Olly had been standing, and Rette heard the back kitchen door slam. She scanned the diner. Mrs. Peterson gripped Mr. Peterson’s hand, who bowed his bald head when Rette met his gaze. Mrs. Crane clutched her handkerchief to her mouth. Rette felt eyes on her once more, the concentrated attention causing her blood to boil.
Rette stepped forward, took her mother’s arm, and steered her outside.

Rette halted just outside the door, bells still ringing. “What do you mean?”

“He’s missing, Rette, but they go missing all the time, right?”

Rette knocked once on the Carvers’ front door before opening it. “Lynette?” Johnny and his parents always told her she didn’t have to knock, but Mother worked far too hard to instill manners into Rette for her to be able to forget them.

“Come in, sweet girl.” Lynette poked her head in from the dining room where Rette found her organizing her purse. Her eyes were sad, and as she focused on her purse, Rette heard her sniffle.

“Mother told me.”

Lynette sighed. “We had her over here with Mr. Ryan from the mortuary when we got the telegram.”

“But what does it mean?” Rette wrung her hands.

Lynette closed her purse, turned her full body to Rette, and sighed again. “It means he’s missing, Rette.”

Lynette’s eyes filled with tears, and Rette regretted pushing her. “So, what now?”

Lynette brushed a stray curl behind Rette’s ear and took her hands. “Now, my dear, you need to go make sure your mother is ready for your father’s funeral.”

Rette’s throat felt tight, but she nodded. “How do I do this? How do I wait?”

Lynette squeezed Rette’s hands tighter, opened her mouth to speak, but her eyes filled with tears, so she took a breath and started again. “You do what we all do in a season of waiting. You pray.”
M. I. A. The letters rattled through Rette’s mind as the bumpy road jostled her in the backseat of the Colonel’s Buick. The letters rearranged in her mind as Rette struggled to find an alternative meaning that wouldn’t sound so hopeless. Rette swiped her sweaty palms along the black skirt of her dress. Mother sat next to her, staring out the window at the gloomy February sky. Her hat hung low atop her head, a short piece of sheer black fabric partially obscuring her face, granting her the privacy that society deemed necessary. Rette knew she wouldn’t need privacy. Rette hadn’t seen her mother cry since the day her father died.

They pulled up to the town cemetery which was sprinkled with flowers at the occasional headstone. It was well-kept, but it carried with it a sense of finality for its tenants. The Colonel pulled around a bend where a few other cars were parked. The car stopped and Rette stepped out, ushered ahead of the Colonel and Lynette alongside her mother. They came to the lot where Rette knew her grandparents were buried. Rette had many memories sitting in the empty patch beside her grandparents’ graves. She sat in the grass collecting dandelions while her parents paid their respects. That area was now dug up, a flag-covered wooden casket hovered above it, waiting to make its final descent.

Pastor Phillips spoke at the head of her father’s grave, but Rette couldn’t hear the words. She watched the three uniformed men about ten yards away, rifles in hand. The flag was folded, and somewhere a bugler trumpeted out a final farewell.

A man in uniform Rette did not know, held the folded flag out to her mother. “On behalf of the President of the United States, the United States Army, and a grateful nation…”

Rette watched her mother stare through the man. She held up her arms when the flag was offered to her, but it only rested there. She did not clutch it as Rette wished to.

The three riflemen fired seven shots into the sky. Rette flinched at each one.
The casket was lowered into the ground. Rette glanced at her mother again, holding the folded flag in front of her. Where was her mind? Rette knew she wasn’t experiencing any memories from her seventeen-year-old self, she was far too emotionless for that, but Rette wished she would show something. She should be crying, she should be talking, anything but this frigid façade. Rette felt and heard the blood pounding in her ears, and she felt faint as she turned away from the small ceremony to make her way back to the Colonel’s car.

Rette glanced back once to see her mother being ushered forward by Lynette. Mother’s face was set in stone. She showed no sorrow, no grief, not even the slightest glimmer of emotion, and in that moment, Rette felt as though she had lost them both.

Chapter Nineteen

It had been five days. The pain along the entire left side of Johnny’s body was still excruciating. With each breath, fire burned between his ribs. They were broken. Johnny was sure of it.

When the high winds caught his chute as he had made his jump–blindly as their signals had been crossed and no one was quite sure which jump they were to make–and his strappings had yanked his body in a way he was not expecting. Johnny had gasped, the flames rising in his chest, and he’d struggled to maintain consciousness as he made his landing. When he’d made contact with the ground, the pain only intensified, and he had tumbled into a heap. There he’d stayed. For five days he pulled rations from his pack and his canteen from his hip and prayed that enemy forces wouldn’t happen across him.

He’d gathered his parachute to avoid being pulled by the errant gusts, as well as to avoid flagging down the very people Johnny didn’t want to be found by. He didn’t have a radio, and
he’d been the first to jump, the rest having made their jump further in, only to continue to their target. He’d been left behind.

He wasn’t sure how long to expect to sit there waiting for someone friendly to find him. He gathered himself once again, and under the burning afternoon sun, he rolled onto his good side, clutching the bad, and attempted to put his feet under him.

He gasped, and would have gasped at the pain from gasping, but he knew repeating the action would lead to more pain. His vision went dark around the edges, and he lowered himself back down to the ground. He was hurt. Bad. And lying here day after day was not helping, but there wasn’t any other choice. At least this time he’d maintained consciousness.

Early on, he’d tried much more often to move, to put his body upright and make progress, even through the pain, but after passing out and waking with a splitting headache and more pain, he decided such attempts would only make matters worse. He’d inched along on day three, grabbing the grasses and pulling his body weight along, trying to drag himself closer to his target, to someone who could find him and help.

By day five, Johnny lay staring up at the bright afternoon sun, and he watched as one-by-one birds began circling overhead. Their screeches breaking through the eerie silence of the still afternoon. He closed his eyes, exhaustion filling him, and as he fought one last time to keep his eyes open, he watched the birds circling in an endless loop waiting to descend on their prey.

“Rette!”

Rette halted on the threshold of her front door. Her mother came scurrying toward her, arms laden with books, notebooks, and fabric samples.
“I’m so glad you’re home,” Mother gushed. “I found a designer for your gown, and there’s a place in Manhattan that would be perfect for the reception.”

Designer? Manhattan? “Mom, what are you—”

Mother thrust the books into Rette’s arms. She flicked through the ring of fabric samples. “I was thinking blue for your bridesmaids, though getting measurements for all twelve–”

“Twelve?!?” Rette nearly choked. She pulled her face back from the blue swatch Mother held up to her complexion.

“And finding a design that is suitable for the variety of…body types, well that’s an obstacle for another day.”

Rette shifted the books in her arms, trying to stack them to better distribute their weight.

“Come, dear, let me show you all I have found.”

Rette followed her mother to the kitchen where their small dining table was laden with books, photos, and notes. There were samples of invitations, name cards, place settings, and personalized napkins, all emblazoned with a variety of names Rette did not recognize.

“Look, isn’t it lovely? It will be the grandest party of the year.”

“But mom, Johnny is–”

“Missing, I know–minor detail.”

Rette gaped at her.

Mother waved a hand. “They’ll find him. Those silly men go missing all the time. Your father went missing twice. Did he ever tell you? That’s all his mother could talk about.”

Rette watched her mother thumb through the samples, photos, and notes. A lump formed in her throat.

“We can’t afford this, Mom.”
“Sure, we can. This is the wedding you deserve.”

“No mom. We can’t. There’s not going to be a wedding anytime soon anyway.”

Mother huffed. “You can’t talk like that, Margarette. They’ll find him.”

“Mom, planning a wedding is the last thing I want to do right now.”

“Rette, I think you’d find that this would be a lot more helpful for your future than being a cook and maid for that man and everyone at his diner.”

“Mom, I’m a waitress. I don’t cook the food, and I’m not a maid.”

“It’s silly is what it is. You don’t need to work. It’s unladylike.”

Rette emptied her arms of the books and notes and turned to walk away, knowing she wouldn’t win this argument.

“Rette, at least look at this ballroom in Manhattan. It’s a fairytale,” her mother cooed.

Rette whirled back around to face her mother. “No, Mother. No Manhattan. It’s too far.
No ballrooms. I don’t want a fairytale. I just want—” Rette’s throat closed up. She clenched her hands into fists.

A knock sounded on the front door. Rette looked to her mother who just turned back to the table, oblivious of Rette, her protests, and the unannounced visitor. Rette relaxed her hands and marched to the entryway.

Rette opened the door to find Mr. Lewis, Rette’s father’s banker and financial advisor. “Oh, good afternoon, Mr. Lewis.”

He smiled solemnly. “Afternoon, Miss Murphy. I’m sorry to visit unannounced. May I come in?”

Rette hesitated, thinking of her mother and the table laden with very expensive options for a wedding that may or may not even happen. “Do you mind if we speak on the porch?”
Mr. Lewis raised his eyebrows and coughed to hide his surprise. “Sure, sure. Is your mother home? It would be best to speak with you both.”

Rette smiled, trying to squelch her own frustrations with her mother. “She is indisposed at the moment, I’m sure you understand.”

Mr. Lewis gave a sympathetic nod.

Rette stood a little straighter. “Is everything alright?”

“Unfortunately, I do not bring good news. Your father’s investments were not doing well at the time of his death, and his wishes were to sell off at that time. These are unprecedented times we are in and anticipating these pitfalls has proved exceedingly challenging. Against my better judgment, I had to follow through with his wishes. It did not leave you and your mother with as much as he had hoped.”

Rette felt faint. “I see.”

“You are employed at Olly’s Diner, correct?”

Rette nodded. “Yes, that is correct.”

“Good, that will help.”

“Help with what, Mr. Lewis?”

“The money from your father’s investments which he left to you and your mother to live on was to be subdivided into individual allowances for each of you, to be withdrawn monthly over the course of the next ten years.”

Mr. Lewis shifted, the wooden patio board creaking beneath his feet. Rette braced herself.

“The amount totals to fifty dollars each.”
Rette felt like laughing. One hundred dollars was more than enough for groceries and the occasional additional spending, and with the additional income from Olly’s, Rette was sure she and her mother would be fine.

Mr. Lewis hesitated at Rette’s smile. “But that leaves the matter of your home.”

Rette’s palms sweated.

“With what is remaining due on the house, taking into consideration the regular monthly payments that have been made by your parents since they purchased the home, I would suggest refinancing the loan to bring your monthly payments down to only fifty dollars, leaving only fifty for your remaining bills and living expenses.”

Rette took a deep breath. It wasn’t the best-case scenario, but it was achievable at the very least. “I think refinancing would be wise. Thank you, Mr. Lewis.”

Mr. Lewis hesitated, seeming to consider whether to continue speaking or not. “There’s one more thing, Ms. Murphy.”

“What is it?”

“Your father’s care at the end was quite expensive. You can expect to receive a number of bills totaling to quite a high number. They can all be paid in installments, but, alas, they must be paid.”

Rette backed against the door. It was too much. Her father, Johnny, now her mother and the wedding plans, the money. Rette took a shaky breath. “I see.”

“I would recommend, on top of your job at Olly’s, that your mother find work as well to contribute to the household income. That would increase the likelihood that the bill collectors will work with you on making regular payments.” Mr. Lewis hesitated. “I would even
recommend some additional work for you as well if you are up for it and can find the time. Anything will help.”

Rette nodded numbly. “Of course. Thank you, sir.”

Mr. Lewis tipped his hat. “I’ll call on you again in a week to check in. Expect the bill collectors by the end of this week.”

Rette nodded, and as Mr. Lewis turned down their porch steps. Rette turned to the front door. Instead of opening it, she rested her brow against it and prayed.

Chapter Twenty

There was no time left in the day. Rette sighed into her coffee cup— brewed and poured in desperation after her double shift at Olly’s. She just couldn’t cut it. She stared down at the handful of bills strewn across the table. Funeral costs. Doc’s already discounted bill. Pharmacy bill. The bill from the hospital for sending nurses to their house since her father did not want to go to the hospital. It was still too much. Rette couldn’t get a second job. She was essentially working two jobs at Olly's as is, and there wasn’t a place in town that would pay her more than what Olly did plus tips. She sat back into her chair, staring at the wall as though hoping the answers would appear there.

A large crash sounded from the upstairs landing, and Rette clambered up from her seat. She heard her mother’s select swear word, and Rette hurried up the stairs. “Mother?” she called. The house had been quiet when Rette had gotten home. She figured her mother was asleep as she had been for most of the past week.

Rette found her mother yanking on a trunk, the door to the attic stairwell bumping into the wall beside it as her mother tried to pull the truck around the tight corner. “Stupid stairwell.
Stupid trunk,” she huffed, pulling, and pulling to no avail. “Who thought building it in such a way was a smart idea?”

Rette sighed and stepped forward. “Here, Mom, let me.” Her mom stepped back, and Rette studied the trunk, the width and the angle it was wedged at, and she turned it up on its end before waddling it through the doorway. “There,” she huffed, dropping the heavy trunk onto the floor of the landing.

“How did you do that?” Rette mother stared between her and the trunk, disbelief clear on her disheveled face.

Rette gave a soft laugh. “I watched Daddy put it up there. It took him nearly an hour, but he eventually coerced it in.”

Her mother shook her head. “Where there was a will, there was a way with that man.”

Rette studied the trunk. It was her mother’s, a relic of her old life. “Are you going somewhere?”

Mother bent at the waist and pulled the trunk toward what was once her and her husband’s room. Rette didn’t know how her mother could do it. Rette’s father had died in that room. Rette could barely bring herself to look at it let alone enter it. “We’re moving to Manhattan.”

Rette turned to the stairs to return to her cup of coffee she’d left in the kitchen, but she halted as her mother’s words sunk in. “Sorry–what?”

Mother grunted as she continued dragging, doing more physical labor than Rette had seen her do in ten years. “We’re moving to Manhattan.” She stated it simply as though it were a matter of fact, something simple, something known.
But it was not known, especially by Rette who stood glued to the spot, her hand still on the hand railing, about to descend the stairs. “We?”

Mother huffed and stood, giving up on the trunk momentarily. She put her hands on her hips angrily and gave Rette a look she once shriveled under. “Yes, Margarette. You and me. We’re moving to Manhattan.”

Rette opened and closed her mouth, knowing full well she looked like an imbecile—after all, she felt like one. She blinked at her mother. “Why?”

Mother stared at her. “I’ve seen the bills Rette. You’re barely home, and I can’t work on account of my condition—”

Rette huffed, nearly laughing. It wasn’t the first time Rette had heard her mother use her condition as an excuse for not getting a job. She’d overheard her parents arguing about money more frequently than she ever wanted her own children to experience, and most of the time it ended in her father asking her mother why she couldn’t just get a job. Rette’s mother’s condition was simply that she didn’t want a job—her place, according to her, was in the home, making the home a beautiful and welcome place to be. Keeping Rette under control, she would also say, was also job enough as is and put enough strain on her condition.

“So, you won’t work?” Rette felt her cheeks flame, and her feet came unglued from the floor, carrying her closer to her mother.

Mother backed away slightly, and Rette realized at some point in the past few years, she’d grown taller than her mother by a few inches. Or maybe her mother had shrunk in comparison. “We’ll—” her mother’s voice caught, and she cleared her throat to start again. “We’ll live with your Great Aunt Florence. She is getting on in years and could really use some help
maintaining the comings and goings in her house, and really, it’s a much better fit for us than this old shack.”

Rette took a step back. *Shack?* This was the only house Rette remembered. This was the house filled with memories of her father. There were so many moments between this house and Johnny’s next door that Rette cherished too much to just give up on. “We could do it, Mother. *If you got a job.*”

Her mother waved the idea off and bent at the waist to begin pulling the trunk. “We’re moving, Rette.”

Rette grabbed the opposite handle and stopped her mother mid-stride. “No, we’re not.”

Her mother stood and returned her hands to her hips again, but this time she stepped around the trunk and closed the distance between them. “Margarette Louise. You are my daughter, and until you are married to Johnny you are under my care. You are moving with me to Manhattan, and you *will* help me to care for your elderly great aunt. That is your place in society. This is our place now that your father is gone.”

A sweat broke out on the back of Rette’s neck. She took a shaky breath. “I’m not going,” she whispered. Her voice was weak, and Rette hated it. She clenched her jaw to hold her chin still as she fought the rising emotions in her chest. Her eyes burned, and as her mother took one step closer to her and stared up into Rette’s eyes, Rette took a trembling breath.

“You’re going. Even if I must toss you in this trunk and ship you there myself.”

Rette balked. She studied her mother’s wide eyes and her clenched jaw, but she couldn’t see much of the mother she’d grown up with. Even in her anger, she’d never made such a comment, and Rette couldn’t tell if she was serious. From the look on her face, Rette wouldn’t put anything past her.
Rette took one more look at her mother then turned and took the steps two at a time down to the first floor, nearly falling forward with her momentum, and slammed the front door behind her.

“Rette calm down.”

“She’s lost it, Lynette! She threatened to lock me in a trunk and ship me to Manhattan!” Rette could feel her eyes were wide, her forehead creased severely from the effort.

Lynette sighed and lifted her hands, signaling for Rette to take a breath.

Rette huffed and flopped face-first onto the cream settee in the Carver’s front room. “I can’t go, Lynette. I can’t. Not until—” Rette’s chest clenched, and she squinted her eyes shut at the pain. She hadn’t let it sink in. Johnny was still gone. Still missing. They were still waiting to hear, hoping he would be found—alive.

Lynette knelt beside her and rubbed her back. “I will send word as soon as we hear. No matter what.”

Rette looked at her. She looked tired. The bags beneath her eyes were darker than Rette had ever seen them, and creases had begun appearing between her brows and around her mouth. It was wearing on her. More than Rette ever took the time to notice.

“When do you leave?” Lynette asked, her voice low and weak.

Rette shrugged into the pillow her head was propped on. “Mother was packing the trunks when I left. I suppose once everything is packed or sold.”

Lynette brushed Rette’s hair back. “I can talk with her, see if she would allow you to stay with us. We would love to have you.”
Rette shook her head before Lynette had even finished. “She wouldn’t like it, and if Johnny came home, she would want me out of your house rather than under the same roof as him until we’re man and wife. Plus—”

Rette sighed and stared beyond Lynette at a painting on the wall. It was a simple landscape with a singular ray of sunlight beaming down onto the green grass below.

She looked back at Lynette. “She needs me. She’s lost everyone else. I can’t leave her.”

Lynette nodded solemnly. “I knew you’d say that. I was just selfish enough to hope you’d take me up on my offer.” Her voice grew quiet at the end, and Lynette’s eyes dropped to the hand in her lap. Rette looked at it too and saw it tremble.

Rette reached out and took it, stilling the tremors. “I love you, Momma Lynette. Always have. Always will.”

Lynette looked up at her and gave a small smile which fell as soon as the effort put into it was expensed. “Love you too, my darling girl.”

In the end, they each took a trunk and sold the rest. With what they made off the house after paying the remaining balance, they were able to pay off the remaining bills left by her father’s passing. Seeing as neither Rette nor her mother ever learned to drive, they sold their car too, using the remaining money to hire a car to drive them to Manhattan, only two hours away.

Rette stared out her window at Lynette waving in front of the Carvers’ home. Rette lifted her hand too but broke her gaze away as the car began to move. She couldn’t bear to watch Lynette’s reaction to losing her too.

It was quite the feeling, to be leaving but having nothing left tying them to Attabury. All bills paid; all strings tied. Even Olly was able to find three new waitresses to replace the work
Rette had been doing. All that was left was Johnny. Rette’s mind wandered as the car carried them further and further away, what the circumstances had been that led Johnny to go missing. He’d been on some kind of mission, Rette was sure of it, and the Colonel confirmed it after he himself had done some digging and reached out to contacts. Though Rette couldn’t be entirely sure, something within her knew he wasn’t dead. She didn’t feel like he was dead. Surely, she would be able to tell. She’d be able to feel a hole somewhere deep in her soul, knowing her life’s companion was gone. She just felt—empty. As though the place for him was still there, but he was simply absent from filling it.

She sighed and looked out her window. The wheat fields they passed were cropped short, neglected in the winter, waiting for their first blanket of frost, ice, and snow, to finish off any life remaining. It was sad, really. Lying there, waiting for the inevitable, knowing it was coming but being unable to do anything to stop it. Rette didn’t want her life to ever be like that. She wanted to know what was coming, and she wanted the ability to be able to change it if the trajectory was not where she was meant to be. She couldn’t be guided by fate or destiny, whatever anyone called it.

Moving to Manhattan? Not in the plan, and Rette tried to accept it as a new plan. She would find work—something to get her out of the old dark house, stuck there with her mother and dying great aunt. There was only so much death a young woman could stand before she lost it, and Rette feared she was inching closer and closer than she ever expected.

“When we get there, you and your third cousin, Lucille, will both be finding your places in Manhattan society for the first time.”

Rette glanced at her mother who had been silent for the first half of the ride. “Lucy?” Rette recalled her blonde bubbly cousin who was four years Rette’s junior. When Rette and her
parents were visiting one summer, Lucy and her parents were as well, and Lucy followed Rette around everywhere. Rette had embraced her, having always wished she had a younger sister, someone to share the struggles of life with and teach all her secrets to. They had been fourteen and ten at the time, but they hadn’t seen each other since.

“Yes, Lucy, though I much prefer Lucille. It’s much more pleasant on the tongue. Her mother died last year, and her father is struggling to know what to do with her to bring her up as a proper lady. That’s where you and I come in.” Mother just looked out her window.

Rette studied her. How long had she known all of this but never shared? “So, we’re not going there to care for Great Aunt Florence?”

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll call her simply, ‘Auntie’. She’ll catch you with her cane if she hears any of that ‘Great Aunt’ business. But yes, Auntie could use some help maintaining her house, and you, Lucy, and I are going to help her while I help you and Lucy find your place in society with good husbands who can give you good lives.”

Rette choked. “Husbands?” she asked, emphasizing the ‘s’. “Mother, I have Johnny.”

“He’s missing dear.”

“Yes, but most of the men in the country are off at war, and all the ones left probably aren’t worth marrying or are too young for it to be appropriate.” Rette’s voice was shrill, though she tried to control it. Her mother had lost it.

“Nonsense. There are plenty of men left to choose from. Until you know whether Johnny is alive, you need to keep your prospects open.”

Rette ran a hand through her hair, ignoring the fact that she would have to re-pin it before exiting the car. “My prospects,” she huffed under her breath. “Mother, I am engaged to Johnny and when he is found and when he comes home, we will get married then you can finally be rid
of me as you’ve always hoped.” She crossed her arms over her chest angrily, hunched down in her seat, and stared out her window.

She felt Mother’s gaze on her, but she refused to look.

“Margarette,” her mother sighed. “I want you to have a life I didn’t—”

“You say that like it was a bad life,” Rette mumbled.

“It could have been better. Had I been more selective of my second marriage, I could have set up a future for you so we wouldn’t have to have moved if your father died!”

Rette whipped her head to face her mother, anger rising in her cheeks. “You’re ridiculous. You realize that, right?”

Mother huffed and turned away to look out her window.

“If you had been more selective, you wouldn’t have had me. Though I suppose you would have loved for a more docile daughter, someone who is more lenient to your wishes and whims, someone who doesn’t fight you when you make ridiculous demands.”

“You didn’t used to fight me,” Mother stated, her voice so low Rette could barely hear her over the road noise.

Rette sat back in her seat, staring open-mouthed at the back of her mother’s head. She didn’t know what to say to make her mother see reason. She didn’t think there was anything that could be said. Rette bit her lips together and fought the urge to respond, knowing full well that it would do no good.

“Oh, Rette!”
Rette turned toward the shrill voice exclaiming outside the car window. A tiny curly blonde woman was jumping up and down clapping her hands together on the front steps of Great Aunt Florence’s stately home in Manhattan.

Rette didn’t have any desire to remain in the car with her mother any longer, so she pushed her door open and stepped out into the afternoon sun.

Rette was engulfed in an overpowering sweet smell as skinny arms wrapped around her, pinning her arms to her sides. “Oh!” she exclaimed.

“I’ve missed you so much, Rette! It’s been way too long!” Lucy released Rette and pulled back, holding Rette by her arms. “You’re such a beauty, Rette!”

Rette smiled at her, Lucy’s positivity rubbing off on her. “I’ve missed you too, Lucy.”

“We’re going to have so much fun together!” Lucy exclaimed again, hopping up and down on the balls of her feet. Rette grew dizzy trying to maintain eye contact with her.

“Lucy, fetch Jansen for me. I don’t want our bags sitting in the dirt. We’ve got to see about getting these stones cleaned.” Rette saw Lucy’s gaze shift to Rette’s mother, and Rette saw her joy diminish slightly as she was taken aback.

“Oh, right. Okay.” Lucy turned to Rette and put a tiny cold hand to Rette’s cheek. “I’m so excited to spend this time with you, Rette.”

Rette smiled with her and watched as she trotted off to find Great Aunt Florence’s butler, Jansen. Once she was inside, Rette turned to where her mother stood at the trunk of the car beside the driver who was tapping his watch and looking at her impatiently as Mother refused to let him deposit their bags on the stone driveway.
“I’ll get them, sir. Sorry to hold you up.” Rette reached into the trunk and pulled the two small bags Rette and her mother had packed with a few changes of clothes and their other necessities while they waited for the rest of their belongings to be delivered.

Rette’s mother huffed as Rette grunted beneath the weight of the bags, ambling up the front steps of the home and into the foyer just as Lucy reappeared with Jansen followed closely behind.

“My apologies, ma’am,” Jansen said as he scurried to Rette’s side to take the bags from her. His chest rose and fell rapidly, though he tried to stifle the cough that emanated from his thin chest.

“No, no, it’s fine, just show me where we’ll be staying.” Rette adjusted her grip on the bags and smiled at him. He was tall and skinny, and what was left of his hair had lost all color. His skin—and his clothes—hung off him, and Rette feared carrying the bags up the stairs would render him useless for the rest of the day.

Jansen hesitated. He looked between Rette’s face and the bags in her hands. Rette wished he would give in to her offer only so that she could follow him to wherever she and her mother were now expected to live, so she could deposit the bags.

“Right this way, ma’am.” Jansen motioned for her to follow him up the stairs which he took in a surprisingly spry manner.

“Where did she go?” It was Mother.

Rette took the stairs much faster. “Go, go!” she said in a low whisper as she passed Jansen on the stairs.
“I believe she needed to freshen up a bit,” came Lucy’s voice from downstairs. Rette sent mental gratitude for Lucy’s ability to read a situation and her tactfulness to handle it. She would make an excellent ally.

Jansen motioned down a long bright hallway to a series of doors. “The first on the left will be your mother’s. You and Miss Lucille are in the opposite wing.”

Rette turned and gave Jansen a relieved smile. “You don’t know how happy that makes me.”

“I’ll take Madam Murphy’s things and deposit them in her room. Your room will be up the opposite landing and will be at the end of the hall. I hope you find it to your comfort.”

Rette nodded her thanks and relinquished her mother’s bag, the much heavier of the two, into Jansen’s waiting hand. He struggled briefly, and Rette waited until she was sure he had a handle on it before she turned to make her way to her own room.

At the end of the opposite hall was a large oak door, and when she pushed it open, she found the grandest room she’d ever seen. When Rette had visited with her parents, they had always stayed in the wing where her mother would now be staying, the guest rooms as they were typically referenced, but this was a residential room. A room fit for a very rich young woman, someone, Rette realized, she was not.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

Rette turned to find Lucy looking up at the chandelier hanging from the center of the room, the elaborate moldings providing exquisite definition to the ceiling’s peaks and valleys.

“Very.” Rette ran her hand over the velvet duvet on the plush bed. It was all very ornate and much nicer than Rette’s ratty quilt that had once donned her bed at home. Rette dropped her bag on the bench at the foot of the bed as she walked around it. From the tall window, Rette
could see the back garden. Though it was a city home, the other houses were still far enough away and the properties still large enough to allow for plentiful privacy and space to flaunt one’s wealth.

Though there was more than enough opportunity for it, Rette was pleased to see that not every liberty had been taken to show off Great Aunt Florence’s wealth. The back garden, though spacious and well groomed, was simple. Supple grass, bushes, and trees were well kept, and the gazebo in the back left corner looked as though it had a recently fresh coat of blindingly white paint, but there were no carved topiaries or exotic flowers or expensive fountains filling the space. It was simply open and filled with potential.

“My room is just next door. Though these rooms are so spacious, my door is at the end of the hall on the right.” Lucy met Rette at her window and looked out at the view with her. “How are you?”

Rette smiled at her. “I’m well, Lucy. And you?”

Lucy furrowed her brow at Rette. “I am well, but you? You’ve gone through so much, Rette. Your mother told me your father died only weeks ago.”

Rette sighed. Of course she did. “Yes, he was sick for some time.”

Lucy gave a light laugh. “My mother died suddenly.”

She’d said it so blatantly, very matter of fact, that Rette looked at her.

“She was thrown off her horse. The very same docile horse I learned to ride on.” Lucy shook her head in disbelief.

Birds chirped outside, and Rette watched as two cardinals circled each other in the garden.
Lucy continued; her voice was more solemn. “No one expected it. Whether you know it’s coming or not, that doesn’t make it any less hard.”

Rette turned from the window, and unzipped her bag to begin settling in. She pulled her brown wool dress from her bag and shook it out, hoping the time in her case hadn’t wrinkled it.

“So do you have a beau?” Lucy asked, her voice now excited. She laid across the foot of Rette’s bed.

Rette could feel her eyes follow her to the wardrobe which was nearly two feet taller than her and painted white. She opened it, the smell of cedar overwhelming her. “His name is Johnny.”

Lucy squealed. “Oh, I knew it! The moment I saw you, I knew it would be impossible for you to be unattached! Is he handsome? Oh–” her voice dropped suddenly, and as Rette returned to pull more things from her bag, she saw Lucy’s face fall. “Is he in the service? He is, isn't he?”

“He is.” Rette sighed and pulled her light blue dress from the depths of her bag. This one was wrinkled. She would need to have Jansen help her get it steamed.

“That must be terrible. I couldn’t imagine going through that. When I find someone, I would want to spend every moment with him. You must miss him terribly!” Lucy sighed, clutching her hands to her chest and staring up at the elaborate fringed canopy hanging over Rette’s new bed.

Rette draped the blue dress over the bench beside her bag and pulled the rest of her things from her bag. “Yes, he’s been gone for quite some time.”

As much as Rette appreciated the company, she wasn’t sure she was ready for the girl-talk Lucy was seeking. She didn’t want to dive into how Johnny’s current status made her feel or the fact that she’d been engaged since before he joined up and yet was still unwed.
Lucy propped herself up on an elbow to look at Rette. “Surely he’ll be coming home soon?”

Rette picked up her empty suitcase and dropped it on the floor, pushing it under the bed with her foot. It was unavoidable. “He’s actually missing right now, so we don’t know when we’ll get to see him.”

Lucy sat up and gasped, her hand rising to her mouth. “My goodness, Rette, I had no idea! I’m so sorry!”

Rette shrugged. “Mother says it happens all the time.”

Lucy clutched her chest now and furrowed her pale brow. “That doesn’t mean it’s not worrying! For goodness’ sake! You must feel so lost.”

Rette crossed to the bedside table and picked up the framed watercolor of a pink rose and picked it up. The tiny signature in the corner read Carolina G. Hays. “I definitely miss him. Life has been so busy lately, I would like to say I haven’t even noticed, but–” Rette returned the frame to its spot on the table and looked up at Lucy who was staring at her wide-eyed. “It’s made me miss him even more.”

A lump rose in Rette’s throat, and her pulse quickened as she realized she was about to cry. She clamped her mouth shut and felt her nostrils flare as she tried to staunch them.

“Oh, Rette,” Lucy cooed, rising from the bed, and rounding the bed to embrace Rette, but Rette shook her head, raising her hands up to stop her and backing away.

“No, please,” Rette choked out.

Lucy clutched her hands to her mouth again, not knowing what to do or how to fix her. Rette’s heart sank at the helplessness in Lucy’s eyes as she watched Rette battle with her emotions, and it only made it worse.
So much had happened since Johnny had left over a year ago. *She* had changed so much. Would he even still want her when he finally made it home? She wasn’t the same naive girl he’d proposed to in what seemed to be another lifetime. She was brittle, broken, and bruised. Though she clung to the life she dreamed of with Johnny, she wasn’t sure if that life would even be possible for her now. Would she be able to give up the freedom and purpose that working gave her? Would she be able to raise a family if she didn’t wish to give up work? Would Johnny *let* her continue working once they were married and starting their family? So many thoughts ran through her mind, and with each one her breathing rose faster and faster until Rette found her knees growing weak.

“Rette!” Lucy’s shrill voice cried out as Rette felt herself sway. Rette’s knees buckled, and she felt Lucy’s cold hands at her forearms, helping to lower her to the ground. Her ears roared, and her vision grew dark. She felt an icy hand at the back of her neck forcing her head forward toward her knees.

Rette’s vision began to clear but her chest felt as though it was about to burst.

“Rette—” Lucy’s voice broke through the roaring, and Rette turned her head slightly to look at her, the icy hand still pushing on the back of her neck. “Breathe.”

Rette nodded, and tried to stall her breathing, her stomach aching. She clamped her mouth shut and breathed through her nose, the air burning into her lungs as her body ached for more. She continued until she felt the tension in her body leave, and Lucy released her hold on the back of her neck, allowing Rette to lie back. She disappeared for a moment, only to return with a small pillow from the bed. Her icy hand returned to the back of Rette’s neck and helped lift Rette’s head to slide the pillow beneath it.

“My mother had them too.”
Rette looked at her, her brow furrowed, but Lucy was studying her hands. “Had what?” Rette asked, her voice weak.

“Your attacks. She went through some terrible things as a child and suffered with the burden of the memories until the day she died.”

Rette tried to sit up, but found her body ached too much when she tried, so she relaxed back into the floor. Attacks? Is that what they were? Rette just knew in those moments it felt as though her chest was about to explode, and there was never anything she could do to stop it no matter how hard she tried.

Lucy shifted her gaze to Rette and gave a sad smile. “Maybe it’ll be different for you. Maybe once Johnny is home, yours will go away.”

Rette gave a halfhearted smile and shrugged, trying to ignore how her pulse quickened at the thought of facing this feeling for the rest of her life.

Chapter Twenty-One

For the most part, Rette had relished in her ability to avoid her mother thanks to the large expansive house they now called home. Their schedules seemed to conflict, leaving the only time they interacted to be at mealtimes. Even then, Rette found herself thankfully conversing enthusiastically with Lucy while Mother tried to maintain a conversation with Great Aunt Florence who sat at the head of the table staring at the large painting opposite her and occasionally lifting her spoon to her mouth. Her hands were twisted and turned with age, and she held her spoon in a way Rette could only imagine was exquisitely painful.
“This came for you, Miss Margarettte.” Rette looked up from her breakfast to see Jansen with his freshly combed hair of the morning with a silver tray in hand, a singular envelope lying on top.

Rette’s pulse quickened, but she took it. “Thank you, Jansen.”

“Is it him?” Lucy asked, her voice sharp. Rette saw Mother’s attention shift to them as she noticed Rette clutching a letter.

Rette read the return address. *Mrs. Ada Günthermann.* Rette’s heart sank, but not entirely. It wasn’t Johnny. In some ways it was better. Rette looked up at Lucy and across at her mother who looked at her expectantly.

“It’s nothing,” Rette said, tucking it into her pocket. “Just a letter from Helen.”

Mother huffed. “She’s finally talking to you then?”

Rette’s shoulders slumped slightly as she averted her gaze back to her breakfast which no longer looked appetizing.

She felt Lucy’s gaze shifting between her and her mother, but she lacked the tact that morning to recognize not to push the issue further. “Who is Helen?”

Rette took a small bite of biscuit before wiping her mouth with the napkin, washing it down with a sip of coffee.

Mother lifted her teacup. “Used to be Rette’s best friend. Her fiancé died but not before Rette ruined their friendship with her unkindness.”

Rette’s cheeks flamed, and she looked up at her mother sharply. She knew then what it felt like to wish one’s eyes shot daggers. “Mother,” she hissed.

Mother raised her eyebrows. “Am I lying, sweetheart?”
Rette threw her napkin on the table. “Excuse me,” she muttered before rising from the table to leave the room.

Lucy opened her mouth to interrupt, half rising from the table to join her before Rette’s mother spoke again.

“She wasn’t worth your time anyway. You’ll make much better connections here. You and Lucy are having tea with the other young ladies at the Women’s League this afternoon. You should take some time to shift that disposition of yours before then.”

Rette walked out. She wished she’d walked faster. She took off to her bedroom sure that her mother wouldn’t bother following her there to torment her further. Rette heard the tiny footfalls of Lucy following her but didn’t stop for her to catch up. By the time Rette got to her room, her thoughts of her mother had washed from her mind, the only thought remaining was that of Ada and how she could help Rette fix things with Helen.

Rette entered her room but left the door open for Lucy who followed closely behind and latched the door behind her. “Rette, your mother was really—”

Rette hushed her, ripping open the envelope and beginning to read.

Dear Rette,

Goodness, I have not heard the name Henry Murphy in ages, that seems like two lifetimes ago. Your father was so young then, and I happened across his acquaintance as he was accompanying a family to the shelter my mother and father ran out of their home. He was far too kindhearted for the horrors we were faced with.

Regarding your friend, I am afraid there is not much I can do to help. We are all being watched very closely, and there is little I can do or say anymore that wouldn’t put a target on my
family’s back. We are simply hoping to make it through this alive. Please understand that I do not wish any sort of ill will upon your friend’s family or any others who are undergoing such hardships now. It must be hard for you to understand, being so far from it all.

I hope your friend finds her answers, no matter what they may be, so that she and her family may find peace and comfort in this time.

Sincerely,

Ada Günthermann, formerly Ada Voigt

Rette sighed and swore, tossing the letter down on her bed. Lucy went to her bed and picked up the letter, her eyes scanning it quickly.

“Your friend? Is she talking about–”

“Helen.”

Lucy looked up at her, eyes wide. “Is she Jewish?”

Rette nodded, her heart sinking at the lost opportunity.

Lucy looked back down at the letter, her face pale. “How could she do that? Just let it happen?”

Rette shrugged and motioned between them. “We’re just letting it happen. There’s not much we can do either.”

Lucy rolled her eyes. “Yes, but she’s there. She’s so selfish–”

Rette stopped her, taking the letter from her hands. She shook her head. “No, she’s not selfish, she’s just doing what is best for her family. It sounds like things are really bad for them though. Even if she wanted to do something, it's not as though she could very well write about it, could she? That would really be drawing attention to them.”
Rette turned and began pacing back and forth.

“Maybe she is doing something, but simply can’t say so for fear of being targeted!” Rette’s voice rose in excitement, and for a moment, Rette didn’t even recognize it as her own, it had been too long since she had felt such hope.

Rette looked back down at the letter in her hands, the letter that for all intents and purposes gave little to no hope at all, and her heart sank again. She shook her head.

“No, no, she would have said something else besides the fact that she couldn’t help. She would say something random, something that might tip us off to her being able to help. Something in code. I’m sure of it.” Rette’s pulse quickened at the thought but sank again at the realization that the letter had done none of those things. It was plain, clear, simple, and right there staring them in the face. There was nothing Ada Voigt-Günthermann could do.

The surface beneath Johnny rocked. It was a sensation he’d grown to fear, and a sweat broke out on his brow as he anticipated the rising nausea that always accompanied it. He heard a voice, distracting him from the gentle swaying of the cot he was lying on.

“Corporal Johnathan Carver, 2nd Battalion, 509th Parachute Infantry. Suspected displaced rib fractures along the left side. Anticipated malunion,” a deep voice reported leisurely.

“What’s his status?” another man’s voice asked, this one clipped and confident.

“Registered MIS, contact is being made with next of kin now,” a female voice contributed.

“Good,” said the clipped voice. “At least one family can be reunited.”

Johnny fought the wave of exhaustion over him.
“Let’s get him prepped. If we let those ribs go any longer, he’ll be out of commission for the rest of his life.”

Johnny gave in then to the rocking sensation beneath him, succumbing to the darkness.

When Johnny woke, it was because the sun was burning into his eyes. He groaned and squinted trying to raise a hand to block it but found he was too weak to do anything but flop his arm across his torso.

A chair scraped against the floor. “Corporal? Jonathan?” It was a woman’s voice.

Johnny shifted his gaze, focusing on a woman with bushy brown hair, a white hat pinned to it, and wrinkles around her eyes creased with worry.

Johnny groaned again. His left side ached, and he put a hand to it, feeling large bandages wrapped around his torso.

“Corporal?” the woman asked again, and Johnny was finally able to meet her concerned tawny eyes. She put a hand to his arm, pressing at his wrist. “I’m Nurse Franny. You’re in a hospital in New York City. You were injured. You were missing for quite some time before they could finally find you.”

Johnny looked around, the white ceiling only seeming to reflect the blinding afternoon light. He squinted his eyes shut against the glare.

“You’re safe, Corporal.” Nurse Franny swiped sweat from his brow.

Johnny felt tendrils of exhaustion rise again in his chest and wrap around his aching torso. He gave in, sinking deeper and deeper into the comfort of the bed beneath him.

“You’re safe.”
Johnny blinked. It was dark, but he couldn’t tell if what he was seeing was still the inside of his mind’s eye or if it was truly the darkness of the hospital. Johnny raised his head, his neck weak from his extended rest. A dark figure was propped in a chair beside him, slouched to the side.

Johnny’s throat was dry, and he tried to moisten it but gagged, racking, heaving coughs emitting from his chest. Tears burst out of his eyes as his chest exploded in pain. *This is it. This is how I die.* He took gasping breaths, and a cool glass was pressed to his lips. A trickle of water met the desert of his mouth, and he gulped at it, begging for more.

“Easy, son,” said a low voice.

Johnny opened his eyes to see the face of his attendee. It was his father.

“Pop?” he croaked.

The Colonel hushed him. “I’m here, son. You’re not dreaming. You were injured, bad too. We thought we’d lost you when you went missing. They sent word while they were transferring here that you’d been found. I came as soon as I could.”

Johnny opened his mouth for more water, and his father raised the glass to his lips again.

“Easy now, not too much.”

Johnny sipped on the water, savoring the way it soothed his throat. “How’s momma?”

The Colonel laughed, his eyebrows rising so far to almost reach his receding hairline.

“She’s quite beside herself. She wanted to join me, but I told her to stay home and get everything ready for you.”

Johnny looked at him, feeling his brow crease. “Surely they want me back?” His heart sank. Was that it? One mission and they tossed him to the wayside, no longer needed.

“Oh, they still want you,” the Colonel said solemnly, his face falling.
Johnny relaxed back into his pillow, the ceiling was dark, and Johnny heard his father’s voice echo off the walls around them.

“But I’m taking you home,” the Colonel sighed, reaching to put a hand on his arm. “It’s all set. Your doc is coming to release you in a few days, and then we’ll make our way home. We’ll take it slow. We’re going to break it up over a few days, and you’ll check in with Doc back home every week.”

Johnny’s heart ached, and he smiled through the tears that pricked in his eyes. “Home.”

The Colonel nodded. “You’re lucky. It took some convincing, but I told them they’d get you back that much faster if you’re home. Your doc will set your anticipated recovery time when he releases you then Doc back home will provide progress updates to your commanding officer in the case that anything needs to change.”

Johnny sighed. “And Rette?” his voice was quiet, small, and something within him dreaded the response his father would give. If he would be home, then the expectation would be for them to marry, but could he? Knowing he was going back? Could he take that away from her? Could he tie her to him, and take her dream life from her?

The Colonel sighed and sat back in his chair, looking around at the other cots. Johnny watched his father. He wasn’t one to avoid things, but whatever it was, he didn’t seem to want to tell him.

“She’s in a tough spot, Johnny.”

Johnny’s mind whirled. What could have happened? Was she sick? Hurt? His chest ached as his pulse quickened, all he wanted was to spring from the bed and go to her, shield her against whatever she was battling.
“Major Murphy died. Over a month ago now. We received notice that you were missing the day of the funeral.”

Johnny sighed and squinted his eyes shut. Emotion rose in his chest. He lifted his hand to his face and couldn’t hold in the tears that began to escape.

“She and her mother were in a tough spot financially. They had to sell.”

Johnny lifted his hand and looked at his father who was now meeting his gaze. “They sold? Their house?” his voice broke. Johnny knew the pain that would have brought Rette, and as he watched his father’s head nod slowly, he closed his eyes again at the pain. “Are they staying with you?”

He heard his father sigh again and shift in his seat, the chair creaking beneath his weight. “They moved to Manhattan.”

“What?” Johnny’s voice rose, and he tried to sit up to look at his father. Grumbles rose from the other patients in the room.

The Colonel hushed him, standing over Johnny now and pressing his shoulders back into the bed. “They had family there who needed their help. From what Rette told your mother, Carol didn’t give Rette much of a choice and Rette didn’t want to abandon her.”

Johnny stared up at the ceiling. That sounded like Rette. As much as she would have hated the thought of giving up her home and as much as she would have loved to live with Johnny’s parents, he knew she would never leave her mother, not after she’d lost so much already. “So, she won’t be there?”

“Where? Home?” his father asked, his brow furrowed.

Johnny nodded, watching his father wearily.
“Your mother promised to send word to her when you were found. When I left, I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to bring you back, so as soon as I let your mother know, she’s going to let Rette know that you’re coming home. The rest is up to her.”

Johnny nodded again. It was better left up to her whether she would face him or not, and surprisingly, Johnny found part of him hoping that she would decide taking on life without him would be for the best. She didn’t need him on top of all the other burdens she was juggling. When one juggled too many things at once, something was bound to be dropped, and Johnny would rather be left to recover and go about his service without worrying whether he would be responsible for Rette dropping any of her responsibilities, let alone him.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Rette whirled across the dance floor, her skirt swirling in a feverish frenzy. The trumpets of the song swelled in her heart, and she felt alive. She hadn’t danced like this since—well ever. The young soldier who had swept her onto the dance floor without introduction or reservations gave her a wild grin as he kicked and jived to the music, his hair sticking to the sweat on his brow.

Their hands met again, and Rette allowed herself to be guided through the motions. She relished in it, feeling close to someone. If she closed her eyes and tried hard enough, she could begin to smell Johnny’s soap, the very same soap that many other men, Rette had found, tend to use.

The music ended, and the soldier released her, placing a jovial peck on the back of her hand before waltzing off to pluck another her unsuspecting young lady from her chair.
Rette found Lucy turned in her seat conversing with the couple at the table beside the one she and Rette had claimed when they arrived at the Community House. Located on the west side of Manhattan, it was home to many servicemen whether they were coming or going. The USO had also begun holding events there like this one, which Rette and Lucy had helped to coordinate during their few meetings with the Women’s League.

“Quite the spry one, wasn’t he?” Lucy laughed brightly, her cheeks pink from the social excitement of the evening.

Rette nodded as she sipped her water, the condensation leaving a ring on the tablecloth. “That was so fun. Why haven’t I done that before?” Her pulse was still hammering, and Rette fought off the urge to laugh. The emotions and thrill of the moment still pumped through her system. It had to go somewhere, or she feared she might explode. She bounced on the balls of her feet, scoping out to see if there was anyone else who looked willing to swing her onto the dance floor.

“Johnny never took you dancing?” Lucy asked, her brow furrowed.

Rette stopped her bouncing and looked down at her. She felt a significant amount of her overwhelming energy leak away from her. “Not like that.” She cleared her throat and pulled out her chair across from Lucy. She took a seat and lifted her water to her lips again.

“It’s thrilling, isn’t it?” Lucy’s voice gave away her jealousy, and Rette wished she had given away her dance when she noticed the yearning look in her eyes.

Her blue eyes, so dark, one could almost mistake them for brown, glittered in the low lamplight of the Community Building. The streamers and banners they had spent their afternoon hanging, dangling precariously from ladders reflected in them. They oozed potential that Rette knew Lucy was tired of hearing about. Mother told Lucy constantly there was so much that Lucy
could do if only she set her mind to it. Each time, Rette saw her sigh, and only when she was
turned away from Rette’s mother would she see her roll her eyes.

“Go,” Rette told her.

Lucy looked over at her, head tilting in confusion. “What?”

“Go grab one of those fellas and get your dance. Don’t wait for them. If you want it, take
it.”

For a moment, Lucy sat there, looking between Rette and the mass of people hovering
around the dance floor. Then, Lucy darted out of her seat, and dropped a peck on Rette’s cheek.

“You’re right. Wish me luck!” She skipped off, her voice rising excitedly as she went.

As Rette watched her grab the wrist of a soldier nearly the same height as her with a mess
of short tight curls atop his head, she wished she was as good at taking her own advice as she
was at giving it.

Rette stumbled after Lucy into the front foyer, Aunt Florence’s driver pulling down the
drive and into the car port.

The house was quiet and dark, and Lucy and Rette fought to staunch their fit of giggles
which had begun in the car. Lucy had been trapped on the dance floor for four consecutive songs
because the young soldier she had pulled onto the dance floor could not get enough of her. She
ended up having to feign a sprained ankle which resulted in the young man trying to sweep her
off her feet and up into his arms only to result in both of them sprawled on the dance floor, Lucy
lying atop the young soldier whose face was a dark blistering red.

The party ended shortly after that, but Lucy wanted to stay to find her young soldier to
ensure he was well before they left. He was nowhere to be found. Lucy had felt horrible, but
Rette had recounted the moment to Lucy very animatedly the entire way home, which rendered them both in uncontrollable fits of laughter.

Rette and Lucy padded up to their rooms as quietly as they could, only to encounter Mother waiting at the landing of the stairs, standing guard between the two wings.

“Did you ladies have a nice time?”

Sobered now, Rette studied her mother, wrapped in a new dressing gown, arms crossed in front of her chest, hair tied up in ribbons to convince the public that Mother’s curls were natural, she looked quite ridiculous. “Yes, we did. We’re just headed to bed.”

“It’s a bit late. The event ended nearly an hour ago.”

Lucy cleared her throat, but her voice was still breathless when she spoke. “That’s my fault, Carol. I’d had a collision with a young soldier and knocked him to the ground. I wanted to find him to ensure he was alright, so we waited a bit while everyone was leaving.”

Mother’s brows rose, and she gave Lucy a surprised look. “A collision?”

Lucy nodded and looked to Rette. “My ankle was sore, and before I could stop him, he tried to carry me from the dance floor. I suppose I was heavier than he expected.”

Mother nodded once. “I see. Well, I’ll ensure Jansen tells Quincy that you’ll just be having fruit for breakfast from now on. Clearly those biscuits you love have only added to your—” she paused and looked Lucy up and down. “Endowment.”

Rette cleared her throat, and gripped Lucy’s elbow to draw her to the right where they could proceed to their wing. “Goodnight, Mother. We’re quite tired. I’m sure you understand.”

Mother nodded her dismissal, and as Rette pulled Lucy, who smoothed the front of her dress and pulled in her already slender stomach, she could feel Mother’s eyes on them the entire way down the hall.
The next morning at breakfast, Rette watched as Lucy dutifully ate her excessively small bowl of fruit and sipped her tea, which was devoid of milk and sugar as instructed by Mother.

“A letter came yesterday,” Mother announced from her place at the other end of the table beside Aunt Florence, who continued her usual stare at the portrait hanging opposite from her. Rette looked up at it, curiosity having finally caught up to her. It was a family. A mother and father, dressed finely, with three children, an older girl, standing beside her mother, whose eyes eerily reminded Rette of her own mother, a young boy standing at the father’s side, his hand just barely able to lay possessive claim on his shoulder, and an infant girl propped up on the mother’s knee, her dark blue eyes prominently reflective of Lucy’s.

“From whom?” Came Lucy’s voice, and Rette was reminded of the announcement that hung in the otherwise silent dining room.

Mother waved a letter at them, and unfolded it, stating plainly, “Lynette Carver.”

A chill went up Rette’s spine. “Lynette? Why did she write to you?”

Mother laughed. “Oh, she didn’t. She wrote to you, dear, but you weren’t here when it came. Johnny has been found.”

Rette’s pulse hammered in her ears. A part of her wanted to leap from her chair and dance upon the table in celebration, but what Mother had left unsaid weighed heavily upon her shoulders, keeping her glued to her seat, yearning for more information. “And? Is he safe?”

Mother looked at Rette over the top of the letter. “He’s coming home.”

But in what condition? Rette wondered.

Lucy looked between them impatiently. “Is he alive?”

Rette gave her a small smile of thanks, having been unable to voice the thought herself.
Mother nodded slowly, giving Rette a strange look she didn’t quite understand. “It seems so.”

Lucy squealed and clapped her hands together before grasping one of Rette’s that lay lifeless on the tabletop. “This is the best news, isn’t it, Rette?”

Rette watched as Mother folded the letter up again and placed it on the table beside her. Rette looked at Lucy and gave her a tight smile. “Yes, yes, it is.” Something was off. Mother wasn’t telling her something, and Rette was trying to staunch the anger rising in her chest at her own mother opening and reading her letter.

“Oh, goodness, does this mean you’ll go back to visit? Oh, I would love to come along and meet him! We would have the grandest time!”

Rette turned to Lucy. “Oh, yes. You would love Lynette. Of course, she would fawn over you as well—”

“Absolutely not.”

Rette looked down the table at her mother, whose cheeks were now pink. “Excuse me?” Rette asked.

“The last thing they need is guests congesting their home. You will stay here and continue your efforts with the Women’s League and finding respectable husbands.”

Rette reached for her coffee cup and couldn’t hide the shake to her hands. “I have found a respectable husband, Mother. Johnny. I know he’s been gone a long while, but your exhaustive and expensive wedding plans surely made that fact memorable.”

“He is out of the question,” Mother stated, turning back to her breakfast, and continuing to eat. It was clear to Rette that Mother thought the conversation over, but Rette felt differently.
“How, exactly? Because I am left with the question of what to do with this.” Rette raised her left hand and showed her mother the glittering engagement ring that had called her hand home for over a year now.

Mother lifted her teacup from the table, and a clatter of commotion followed, bookmarked by Mother’s choice swear word and hurried apologies from Jansen behind her.

“You clumsy old fool!” Mother exclaimed, looking down at her overturned teacup and the tea stain spreading across the front of her blouse and across the top of the table.

“Oh, dear me, madam, let me.”

Rette watched as Jansen produced a rag and proceeded to swipe at the puddle of tea on the table, moving Mother’s plate to the side and wiping beneath it. One moment Lynette’s letter was there precariously close to the puddle of spreading tea, and the next it was gone, one of Jansen’s hands draped behind his back as he positioned Mother’s plate back into place.

“Well then, what am I supposed to do?” Mother’s voice was shrill as she looked down the front of her blouse.

Jansen held the rag up to her chest, still a few feet from her. “Well, I could blot at it if you’d like madam, but I don’t think—”

Mother pushed back from the table, growling in frustration, and took off out of the dining room to change.

“Jansen?” A weak gravelly voice asked.

Rette stared in amazement as Aunt Florence, who Rette had not seen speak or engage with anyone or anything in the two weeks they’d been there, raised a hand to Jansen who quickly went to her side. “Yes, ma’am?”

“Give the girl her letter then help me to the sunroom, would you?”
Jansen nodded with a smile. “Of course, ma’am.”

Jansen walked around the table and gave a nod to Rette as he held out the folded letter, not a drop of tea staining it. “Your letter, miss.”

Rette stared between Jansen and Aunt Florence, a smile playing at her lips. She took the letter. “Thank you, Jansen.” He nodded, a bright smile lighting his well-worn face.

Rette tucked the letter into the pocket of her skirt and turned to Lucy. “Come with me? I might need your help.”

Lucy smiled widely, her eyes glittering in excitement. “Anything you need, cousin.”

They stood from their chairs and began to leave, but Rette grabbed Lucy’s elbow to stop her. “Wait.”

She crossed the dining room to where Aunt Florence sat, continuing to stare at the portrait, and Rette bent at the waist and placed a soft kiss on Aunt Florence’s cheek. “Thank you, Auntie. Enjoy your sun.”

Aunt Florence came to life, her head turning to study Rette where she stood beside her. A soft smile spread across her ancient face, as her blue eyes met Rette’s.

“Go get him, dear.” Her voice sounded as though every word took a lifetime worth of effort.

Rette nodded enthusiastically. “I will.” She took off across the dining room, gripping Lucy’s elbow again to pull her from the room, but Aunt Florence’s voice stopped her again.

“Forgive her.”

Rette’s heart seized as Aunt Florence’s words met her ears, and their meaning ran true. As difficult as it seemed, Rette knew she would. After all she’d forgiven her thus far.
It was clear Rette’s mother did not want her to return to Attabury where Johnny’s mother was anxiously awaiting his arrival home, but why, that part Rette was still struggling to figure out.

Lucy was racing back and forth through Rette’s room, gathering things Rette would need for however long her stay in Attabury would be while Rette tried to fold everything into her suitcase with care to avoid creases. Knowing it was inevitable, by the end she was just shoving things in. Rette glanced at the clock. Lucy needed to be at Rette’s mother’s door in five minutes to invite her for tea if Rette was going to be able to make her swift exit down the street to the bus station without being caught.

Lucy handed her one last pair of stockings which Rette shoved into the depths of her suitcase before swinging it shut and latching it. Lucy gripped Rette’s shoulders, and Rette watched Lucy’s midnight blue eyes shift between Rette’s. “I’m so proud of you, Rette. I don’t know that I could have ever defied my mother as you are, but you’re not doing it out of spite.”

Rette gave her a weak smile. She’d put up with many sides to her mother in the past, but these had been some of the most challenging to navigate thus far. Having Lucy made it that much easier, and knowing Lucy would be here helping to keep her mother occupied and running damage control made leaving all the sweeter.

Lucy reached up and put a hand to Rette’s cheek. “I’ll make sure to wait until tonight to tell her. The League has events the next three days I plan to help with, and I’m sure the other ladies won’t mind another set of hands. We’ll demand her expertise. Carol won’t be able to deny us.”

Rette pulled her into a hug. “Thank you, Luce,” Rette said earnestly. She pulled away. “Truly.”
Lucy’s eyes glistened, and she gave a little laugh. “Goodness, it’s all so romantic. I gotta go kidnap your mother so you can go get your man.” She turned and walked to Rette’s bedroom door. She opened it then paused, turning back to Rette with a smile. “Good luck, Rette.”

Rette gave her a little wave. “You too.” They both gave a little chuckle, and Lucy left, closing Rette’s door behind her.

Rette sat on her bed and pulled Lynette’s letter from her pocket again. She lounged back on her bed, unfolding the letter, half listening for the sound of Lucy clumsily dropping her handbag on the landing between the two wings, signaling to Rette that she and Rette’s mother were headed out of the house.

Dearest Rette,

Johnny is alive. He is injured. The Colonel took the train up to the hospital in New York City where he was brought back as soon as we heard. The Colonel has worked it out with Johnny’s commanding officers that he recuperates at home. They will be arriving home in three days.

We would love to have you here. The Colonel and I both agree that having you here could help his recovery and his morale. It has not been an easy experience for our boy, as you can imagine. I anxiously await to hear your response, and of course understand if your duties to your family require you to remain there.

We love you, Rette.

Momma Lynette
Rette sighed and held the letter to her chest. She was going home. Maybe not to her home, but a home that was at times more of a comfort to her than her own. She would see Johnny. Her pulse quickened and her palms sweated at the thought alone. Would he welcome her? Would he still want to marry her? Rette lifted her left hand and watched the solitaire stone glitter in the afternoon light streaming in from her bedroom window.

She still wanted him, no matter what form he came in, she wanted to be his.

A soft thud echoed down the hallway, followed by a glittering “Whoopsies!” From Lucy. Rette heard her mother’s grumbling criticism dwindle away as they made their way down the main staircase, dissolving into nothing.

Johnny leaned his head against the cold glass of the dining car. He picked at the bread remaining on his plate, a bit stale, but still easiest the best bread he’d had in months. He’d been excited at the idea of seeing her, of seeing Rette, but as the train carried them closer and closer to their destination, still another day’s travel away, Johnny couldn’t pretend the weight in his stomach was from excitement.

His torso was still bandaged, anything exerting energy was still challenging, and hacking coughs still brought streams of tears to his eyes.

His lungs were weak, they’d told him. He’d sustained fractures to seven of the twelve ribs on his left side, and two on his right. Four of the nine had shifted during his time crawling along the ground abandoned in North Africa, causing the doctors to have to surgically re-break them, during which he’d sustained a collapsed lung. His recovery was expected to take nine weeks, minimum.
He’d failed yet again to see his men safely home, and as his father drained his third cup of coffee, Johnny felt shame sink in at his ability to be here, headed home, bandaged and broken, yes, but still headed home to people who love him, in a place where he was safe and didn’t have to worry about enemy forces finding him crawling along the desert ground. Meanwhile his men continued without him under the guidance of a new squad leader, one who would, hopefully, fulfill the duties much better than Johnny ever had.

The Colonel clapped his hands together, startling Johnny, making his side ache. He clutched it, giving his father a dirty look.

“Sorry,” the Colonel muttered, realizing his mistake. “Ready to make our way back?”

Johnny sighed and thought of the three train cars they had to walk through to get here. It had taken him fifteen minutes just to settle his pulse and breathing to even begin to think about eating. He grumbled in agreement, and the Colonel stood from his booth, buttoning his jacket back up then holding out his forearm for Johnny to grab hold and brace himself as he lifted his body to standing.

Johnny grunted, holding tight to his father’s arm. He hated this. He couldn’t stand, walk, shower, or lower himself to a toilet without help. He couldn’t do that to Rette. This couldn’t be what he brought home for her.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Rette clutched Lynette’s letter in her hand the entire bus ride to Attabury. The seams were worn from being folded and unfolded into its envelope repeatedly until the envelope itself gave way.
She adjusted her coat around her and looked out the frosted window. The bus was entering Attabury, and Rette prepared to recognize the faces it passed, part of her wanted to scream out to them, to connect, but the part of her that wanted to scrunch further down in her seat below the window won out. She knew once the bus stopped and she descended the steps, that she would have to face everyone. She lucked out already that there was no one she recognized on the bus when she boarded in Manhattan. She expected Mr. Hughes or Mr. York with the railroad to be commuting that morning, but alas no one had paid her any mind. What made matters worse was that the bus station sat on the opposite side of town center from Olly’s, so she would have to walk right by to get to the Carver’s home.

When the bus pulled to a stop, she gathered herself, rising from her seat with the few others who were departing. She nodded her thanks to a man with a nasty scar running down the side of his face who let Rette go before him up the aisle. Rette glanced behind her as she prepared to descend the steps, only to find that the man had disappeared. Rette suspected he was only changing seats.

She took the driver’s waiting hand as he helped her find her footing at the station. “Thank you, sir.”

“Have a pleasant day, miss.”

Rette smoothed her skirt and pulled her coat tighter around her body. The air was piercing, and as she stepped out to the sidewalk, she took careful notice of the slick patches of ice that lingered on the pavement.

She braved a glance up, sure of her footing and trust of her body to know where the slick patches gathered from years of walking this same path. She studied the people she passed. There wasn’t a single face she could register as familiar. Had she forgotten them? Caught up in the
whirlwind of her mother’s dream social life, had she forgotten the kind, nosey residents of the town she loved?

Rette glanced from across the road through the window of the bustling diner. She thought of stopping in, pouring a cup of coffee, and catching up with Joan, but the steady stream of patrons ringing the bell as they entered sent her on her way. They’d be far too busy to chat. She’d have to pay a visit another time.

She continued on her way, staring expectantly at people she passed, waiting—hoping—someone might recognize her and exclaim in delight that she’d returned, but all she received back were curt nods and double takes when they noticed her intense stare. After a mother pulled her child along faster as they passed her, Rette returned her gaze to the pavement, watching as each patch of ice she’d expected appeared, her feet finding their familiar path.

As Rette passed familiar streets, she looked down them, noticing the same group of children bundled against the cold throwing a ball around until one of them connected their bat to it, sending it off down the road and they all chased after it with excited exclamations.

Rette glanced down the road, checking for cars before she trotted across to where her childhood home sat on the corner with its yellow siding, and her goal, the Carver’s pristine white house with bricked posts at the front, waiting for her to arrive.

Rette passed her former home quickly, trying not to imagine the day she came home to the attendants carrying her father out of their home for the last time. She took the Carvers’ steps two at a time, and before she could think too much, she rapped a quick knock on their front door.
She stood there, shifting her weight from foot to foot, clutching her coat tighter around her as a strong gust blew through the open patio. She stepped to the side and glanced through the curtains of the front room. Nothing. Rette knocked again.

A screen door slammed, eerily familiar, and Rette looked across the divide between the two homes. A young girl had stepped out of the home she used to call her own, skipping her way down the steps, and fixing a button on her small woolen coat.

Rette turned to the Carvers’ door again and gave it one more firm knock for good measure before she sighed. The Colonel’s car was gone, but Rette knew Lynette didn’t drive, so she must be out. Rette sat on the top porch step, watching as the young girl, her blonde hair pulled into two curly pigtails, crossed the drive between the two houses.

“Hello, miss! Do you mind if I swing?” The girl’s voice was clear, pure, and something pulled at Rette’s chest as it pierced her ear drums.

Rette smiled. “Go right ahead.”

Rette sat and watched as the girl pulled herself up on the wooden plank that was strung up to a low brank on the great oak in the Carvers’ front yard. The girl propelled herself forward, kicking her feet out before pulling them in again.

The screen door screeched and snapped shut again as a young woman stepped out on Rette’s old patio, a red bit of fabric clutched in one hand, while her other hand extended down below where Rette couldn’t quite see what she hung onto.

Rette watched the young woman squint up at her daughter on the swing, before noticing Rette on the steps. She raised the hand not holding the fabric and waved to her. Rette watched as a young boy emerged, carefully making his way down the patio steps. He couldn’t have been more than two.
The mother watched her son, ensuring his safe descent for a moment before she turned to the front window, holding up the fabric, and studying it for a moment. From the angle Rette could see her, she noticed the woman’s swollen stomach, signaling the arrival of the young boy’s and girl’s newest sibling within the matter of weeks, Rette guessed. Rette looked at the fabric the woman was still studying, and as Rette took in the red frame and white rectangle with a singular blue star at its center, her heart ached.

Tears burned in her eyes, and Rette reached a hand up to catch them before the chilly November air could freeze them to her cheeks.

This family of three, soon to be four, was missing their fifth. They were incomplete. Rette rested in the fact that the star was service blue rather than the memorial gold, but her chest ached at the coming milestones missed. The new addition to the family, Thanksgiving, Christmas, all holidays that this young boy and girl would find excitement and joy in, while their mother fought to feel whole without her husband. Who would help them? Who would watch the older children while this mother labored? Who would help her as she battled through the sleepless nights of those first few months.

“Afternoon, Lizzy!”

Rette’s thoughts were broken as Lynette turned the corner onto their street and greeted the young mother.

“How are you feeling?” She carried two grocery sacks, one on each hip.

The young mother, Lizzy, turned and waved at Lynette. “Getting close!” she responded with a hand to her stomach. “Doc says it’ll only be a week or two before I have three rugrats to chase!”

Lynette laughed. “Well, it’ll be a bit before you’re chasing that one. Oh—”
Lynette dropped a bag to the ground quickly as she passed the front of Rette’s old home and reached out a hand to catch the young boy as he fell to the sidewalk. He burst into tears, which propelled Rette to her feet and his mother down the stairs as quickly as her condition allowed.

“Goodness, Georgie!” Lizzy stooped and scooped the boy up into her arms, straddling him over her protruding stomach. She lowered her forehead to his and spoke to him in a soft voice as his cries calmed.

Lynette gave a little laugh and lifted her grocery sack back onto her hip. “I’m happy to help however you need, Lizzy. Don’t forget. Any idea when he’ll be home?”

Lizzy looked up at Lynette and shook her head. “He’s hoping they’ll let him come home in the next couple of weeks to meet the new little one, but you know how they are.”

Lynette nodded sadly, and took a few more steps toward her house, still not noticing Rette. “Can I bring you dinner tonight? I’m making meatloaf and there will be far too much for me alone. Johnny ate it up as a child, so I’m sure Trudy and Georgie will love it.”

Lizzy sagged in relief. “That would be amazing, Lynette. I’m so glad you’re our neighbor.”

Lynette gave her a kind smile, and Rette recognized the gleam in her eye that was once missing purpose. “The feeling is mutual dear, trust me.”

Rette watched Lynette walk down the sidewalk and greet the little girl, Trudy, as she continued swinging from the great oak.

“You have a visitor, Mrs. Carver,” Trudy’s clear voice rang out, and Lynette’s head snapped up to her front porch, making eye contact with Rette.
Rette’s chest clenched, and she couldn’t fight the slight burst of laughter that emitted from her mouth as Lynette sighed, tears streaming down her cheeks as she nearly ran up the sidewalk and the steps to embrace Rette.

Through the crinkle of the paper sacks, Rette relished in Lynette’s embrace. When she pulled away, Rette watched as Lynette studied her. “You’re here.” Her voice was reverent, as though she couldn’t believe it.

Rette nodded. “I am.”

“That must mean this is all real. He’s really coming home, isn’t he?” Lynette’s eyes searched Rette’s face, and Rette smiled.

“Yes. He is.”

The next morning, Rette awoke before the sun, but sat atop the Carvers’ guest bed staring out the window for hours as the sun slowly rose over the horizon. Rette waited until she heard Lynette stirring downstairs before making her appearance. They’d spent the morning cleaning the Carvers’ already pristine home and putting everything in its place. Rette knew neither of them would have been able to stand sitting still, which is what made after lunch so difficult.

Everything was done. There was nothing more they could do, and Johnny and the Colonel were expected any moment.

“Here you are, dear, freshly brewed. Just as you like it.” Lynette handed her the light green mug. “Careful it’s hot.”

Rette took the mug by its handle, bracing herself for the warmth, then embracing it as it thawed her fingers. “Thank you.”
Lynette sighed, squinting out the front window. “They should be here anytime now. The train was due to arrive in Fort Riley an hour ago which is only a half-hour away.”

Rette sipped her coffee, and held the mug between her hands, willing her shaky hands to still. Her heart was beating faster with each deafening tick of the cuckoo clock that hung beside the Carvers’ front door. It echoed in the silence.

“The roads will be icy,” Rette said to break through the echoing ticks. “The Colonel is a cautious driver.”

Lynette smiled, studying Rette and shifting her weight from foot-to-foot. “Yes, he is.”

Rette sipped her coffee again. “It’s only a half-hour away, though.” She knew she was simply repeating what Lynette previously said, but the silence was deafening and Rette’s thoughts couldn’t be pinned together.

Lynette gasped and flew to the door. “They’re here.” There was no excitement in her voice, but the panic and worry were enough to make Rette jump, spilling a drop of coffee on the cream sofa.

Rette’s mug clattered onto the table, and she swiped at the offending droplet, flinging it instead onto the side of her skirt.

Lynette threw the screen door open.

“Wait!” Rette called, but her words were drowned by the slamming of the screen.

The Colonel’s Buick pulled into the driveway that was shared between the two houses.

Rette made it down the porch steps just as the Colonel stepped out of the car. Lynette gripped his arm.

“Is he okay?” Lynette’s voice was riddled with worry as she peeked around her husband to find her son.
“He’s in the backseat.”

Rette stood at the base of the stairs and braced herself. Why wasn’t he getting out? Could he get out? Rette knew very little about the injury that brought him home. She remembered the horrors that she heard whispered at the Community House. Skin melted, limbs missing… Rette breathed deeply against a wave of nausea, steeling herself as Johnny’s door opened from the inside.

“Here, dear, let me get that.” Lynette rushed to hold the door open, revealing half of Johnny from where Rette stood.

“I’ve got it, mom.”

His voice was quiet—tired, but Rette’s chest warmed at the sound. Her shoulders settled from where she didn’t realize they were being held, and a wave of relief washed over her.

The Colonel opened the trunk and pulled Johnny’s duffle out, swinging it over his shoulder in expert fashion.

One of Johnny’s legs appeared, and Rette’s heart skipped a beat. It was a moment later and with a sigh that the other appeared—both whole and seemingly intact. He stood, and Rette realized in his absence she had forgotten just how tall he was. He stood an entire head taller than Lynette who looked as though she wanted to carry him inside herself.

The Colonel walked on ahead, passing Rette to head up the stairs with Johnny’s things.

“Hello, Rette. Good to see you.”

“Hello,” Rette replied breathlessly, her gaze not leaving Johnny. He and Lynette seemed to be arguing, but it wasn’t loud enough for Rette to make out their words.

Johnny took a step back from the doorway, pushing it closed. Lynette rushed forward to hug him. He groaned at her force, and Rette watched Lynette back away quickly.
“Oh goodness me. Are you alright?”

Johnny swore. Rette’s palms sweated, and she couldn’t bring herself to go any closer.

“I’m fine,” he hissed.

Lynette looked back at her. “Rette, come help–”

Johnny pushed off the car and brushed past Lynette. “I said I’m fine!”

He stopped in front of Rette. Their eyes met.

Rette smiled, wringing her hands, and willing the tears not to come.

“Hi,” she choked out.

He maintained their gaze for a second, his expression flat.

“Can I…” Rette began but was unsure how to finish.

Johnny tore his gaze away, and his face pinched in pain. He stepped toward her, and Rette thought he was about to embrace her. She reached an arm out to accept it, but he sidled around her. Rette’s hand brushed his sleeve, and he pulled his arm away, bracing himself on the step railing before ascending.

Rette watched as Johnny took slow, deliberate steps. He hesitated at the third step.

Rette closed the distance between them, skipping the first step. She gripped his elbow to support him.

“Here, Johnny–”

He jerked away and stared at her. His eyes blazed, and he groaned in pain, his left hand holding his side.

Rette flinched back, stumbling down two steps. Lynette steadied her.

Rette watched as Johnny’s eyes simmered down and realization dawned on them. Shame covered his face, and he bowed his head, breathing deep and gathering himself. He pushed off,
but as he moved his foot up to the next step, he stumbled, catching himself on one knee at the top of the stairs, groaning in pain.

Rette and Lynette were halfway up the stairs, both yearning to help but still in the shadow of Johnny’s chastisement.

The screen door swung open with startling force and hit the siding of the wall beside it.

The Colonel knelt beside Johnny, bracing him beneath one arm.

“Come now, son, let’s get you inside.”

Rette watched Johnny raise his head to meet his father’s gaze. They remained there for a moment in shared understanding before Johnny pushed himself up off the steps with a groan.

Lynette rushed past them to hold the screen door open as the Colonel ushered Johnny inside.

Lynette held the door open for Rette as well though she was still frozen halfway up the steps.

“He’s—” Rette began, but she struggled to find the right descriptor. “Different.”

“Yes, well.” Lynette looked inside after Johnny and the Colonel, sadness echoing in her gaze. “We’ve all changed.”

Rette looked down at her feet, shod in Lucy’s spare Mary Janes—very different from the comfortable loafers she spent hours in waiting tables at Olly’s. Rette had to agree—life looked very different now.

“Come now, dear, you can help me prepare some luncheon. I’m sure they’re hungry from their journey,” Lynette beckoned her.
Rette mounted the final steps. Johnny was there, sprawled on the settee Rette had occupied what felt like a lifetime ago. She stalked past him, avoiding Johnny’s searing gaze on her as she passed.

Rette met Lynette and the Colonel in the kitchen where Lynette was ladling the soup they’d pecked at for lunch into two bowls. The Colonel retrieved a box of crackers from one of their cabinets.

“I don’t know—”

“Please, Rette. Give him a chance.” The Colonel placed the crackers on the tray that now held one bowl of soup. “He’s been through a lot.”

Lynette placed the second bowl of soup on a second tray and filled two glasses with water from the tap. “Could you take him this? I’m sure he won’t want to move from his spot just yet. Those stairs took a lot out of him.”

Rette took the tray from between Lynette and the Colonel, giving them both an unsure glance.

She balanced the tray expertly, keeping an eye on the bowl to not tip the contents over the edge. She feared the weeks off would put her out of practice, but she fared well enough, placing the tray down on the coffee table beside Johnny’s sprawling form without spilling a drop.

“There.” She sighed, dusting her hands together though there was nothing on them. She hesitated in front of one of the armchairs. “Do you want some help sitting up?”

Johnny grunted, taking slow steady breaths. He pinched the bridge of his nose. He held his side as he stifled a strong cough. Rette watched, her pulse rising, as a tear escaped the corner of Johnny’s eye. He wiped at it angrily, gripping his side with one hand and pushing against the arm of the couch with the other, swinging his feet back onto the floor.
He sat upright, eyes squinted shut in pain, and Rette watched his shoulders slowly relax as the pain ebbed. He opened his eyes to look down at the soup resting on the coffee table. He sat there for a moment, seeming to judge the distance between him and the bowl, then scooted himself forward slightly before taking the spoon in his hand.

Rette sat there, watching him, feeling as though she should look away as he carried a precarious spoonful from the bowl the entire distance to his mouth, only to tip it slightly at the end, pouring half of it down the front of his shirt.

Johnny swore, dropping the spoon back down into his bowl, and searching for something, anything to mop up his mess. Rette’s stomach dropped as she realized she hadn’t brought a napkin.

“I’ve got it!” she exclaimed, hurrying from the front room back to the kitchen and plucking a napkin from the drawer where she and Lynette had carefully folded them that morning.

She returned to the front room, her feet carrying her swiftly, and she knelt beside Johnny, carefully blotting at the wet stain on the front of his white shirt.

She looked up at him, expecting to see him looking at her, as close as she was, but he was looking down, his light blue eyes avoiding her. He smelled different. Clinical.

Rette sat back on her heels, the damage done to his shirt. “Here, let me.” She took the spoon from the bowl of soup and gathered a carefully balanced bite of broth and vegetables before blowing on it slightly. She raised the spoon to his mouth with one hand, the other holding the napkin beneath it to catch any offending droplets of broth.
Johnny’s gaze shifted to the spoon, and he quickly looked at her. Pain spread across his face, and he sat back quickly, turning his face away from the soup. “Leave me be, Rette,” he muttered, he turned on the settee, and lowered himself back onto the pillow, closing his eyes.

Rette returned the spoon to the bowl and folded the napkin, placing it on the tray beside the lightly steaming soup. “Right,” she said quietly, fighting the rising emotion in her throat. “I’ll just—” She stood, hesitated, looking at him again, his eyes still shut. She turned and walked from the room, hoping to bypass the Colonel and Lynette without question when Johnny’s voice stopped her.

“Go home, Rette.”

Rette turned and looked at him. He hadn’t moved, and if Rette had been in any other state of mind, she might have wondered if she’d heard him at all, but it was unmistakable. He didn’t want her there.

Rette stuffed her dress from the day before into her suitcase and grabbed her few things she’d unpacked off the dressing table. There was a soft knock on the door, and Rette looked up to see Lynette’s concerned face peering in.

“Rette, please—”

“He doesn’t want me, Lynette. I’m not going to stay where I’m not wanted.” She pulled her suitcase closed and flipped the latch.

“Rette, we want you here—”

“No, Lynette. Maybe things will change, but he doesn’t want me here. For whatever reason, he doesn’t want my help. I love him too much to force myself back into his life if he doesn’t want me in it. I’m going.”
Rette lifted her suitcase from the bed and pushed past Lynette in the doorway. The entire way down the stairs and through the kitchen, Lynette tried to reason with her until they passed the Colonel still eating his soup in the dining room. He held out a hand and stopped Lynette from following Rette who continued into the front room.

Johnny still laid there, staring up at the ceiling until Rette ambled by, suitcase in hand. She sat it down by her feet to pluck her coat from the rack by the door. She felt his gaze on her, but she couldn’t bear to look at him. She heard she was unwanted already; she didn’t want to see it too.

She opened the front door, the screen door screeching shut behind her, and down the patio steps, walking quickly past Lizzy’s house, paying one last glance to the singular blue star now hanging in the front window of Rette’s childhood home.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Johnny listened as Rette’s feet stopped down the five steps connecting their front porch to the walkway. With each one, he felt the pain light up along his side tenfold. His chest heaved, and Johnny feared another racking cough that would feel as though the great incision in his side was splitting open. But he spluttered and a sob broke through between his lips, weeks of tears spilling onto his face.

He couldn’t fight it. His head hammered with the force and pressure of his sobs, but the pain in his ribs only grew worse if he held it in. So, he laid there and cried, great moaning, keening sobs rising from his chest, and he did nothing to stop them.

He’d dreamt of their life together, of marrying Rette, bringing her home to the small cabin he was having built on the land he’d purchased as a wedding gift, making love to her,
making her his wife and becoming her husband, having children and crying over their beautifully perfect tiny forms as he held them for the first time, chasing them through their home as they ran like a naked banshee just before bedtime, curling up with Rette once the children were wrangled to count the stars from their porch only to find that the number perfectly matched the number of immense blessings and pleasures of their life together.

He stared up at the white ceiling of his parents’ front room—silenced, the great wracking sobs having had their way with him.

He tried to imagine his life now. He would recover under the dutiful care of his mother only to be carried out to sea once again and carried away to hopefully finish the war once and for all. He would return home when all was said and done, hardened but otherwise whole, and resume his place at the bank—perhaps this time under Mr. Lewis who seemed the more personable option. Maybe he would meet a kind face, a young woman, or a widow, marry her, and live a happily contented life raising a family and providing for them. Working each day and coming home each night to a prepared meal and a kiss on the cheek. Or perhaps he would live alone, content with knowing that Rette was happy, and he would yearn for the letters she would have to send to Momma, bringing her news that she and her husband were expecting their third child, a girl this time, and would be buying their oldest boy a bike at Christmas.

“Johnny?”

He turned his head and found his mother standing between the front room and the kitchen, her face blotchy and her eyes swollen. She blotted her nose with her handkerchief.

He sighed. “Hey, momma.”

She gave him a small smile and came to him, kneeling beside him. “Missed you,” she said, studying his face.
He gave a little laugh. That sounded like a gross understatement. “Missed you too, momma.”

Lynette looked up and over the settee out the front window. “She’s gone, huh?”

Johnny nodded solemnly.

“I can write to her in a few days, maybe invite her back?” she suggested, but Johnny shook his head.

“She doesn’t need this.” He motioned to his sprawling form. “The man she needed is gone.”

Lynette frowned. “You’re still my son, and even if you need a bit more help now, you’ll be fighting fit enough to go back to war soon enough.”

Johnny gave her a sad smile. “Only to come home even more damaged and broken than I already am. She needs someone whole, momma, someone she doesn’t have to feed or bathe like a child—”

“Those things are temporary!” Lynette’s voice was shrill, and Johnny turned his face away from her, flinching at it. “Sorry,” she muttered.

He looked at her, her cheeks pink with anger but her brows raised with worry. Her eyes were eager, searching his face for any possibility that he wanted Rette to come back, but he knew the future they’d dreamed of was gone. “Sell it, Momma.”

Her brows furrowed even more, and Johnny wanted to smooth them before they marred her pretty face. “Sell what?”

He sighed, pulling himself more upright and wincing at the pain and effort of it. “The land. I don’t want it without her, and if something happens to me, I don’t want her having the burden of it. I’m no longer a burden for her, I’ve taken care of that—”
Lynette began to interrupt him, but he held up a hand and gave her a pleading look.

“Please, momma. I just want it behind me. Rette deserves a life of her own, one free of me and the burdens that I could bring, and I—” he stopped, the emotion rising in his throat again. “I bought that land because I felt her—us—there. I couldn’t keep it without her. Even if I marry one day, it wouldn’t be fair to anyone else.”

Lynette put her hand over his where it rested on the cushion of the settee. “Because you still love her, and you will until the day you die.”

Johnny winced at the thought. He knew it was a possibility, but he wanted to imagine that moving on could be an option if he felt ready for it one day. “Please don’t, momma.”

“Am I wrong?” Lynette sat up straighter, offense rising in her voice.

Johnny saw the hope, eagerness, and love in his mother’s face. He knew she only wanted what would make him happy. He needed to convince her life without Rette was what he wanted, but he doubted he’d ever be able to weave that lie. He sighed, stirred his soup, tucked the napkin into the front of his shirt, and lifted his spoon to his mouth. “I hope so,” he said before slurping it down.

Rette walked up the drive of Aunt Florence’s home, toting her suitcase she’d quickly packed barely more than twenty-four hours previously. Her foot slipped slightly on a patch of ice between the stones, but she righted herself quickly before it could take her down. She marched carefully forward, hoping the front door would be open.

Unfortunately, when she got to it, it was locked, unsurprisingly given that it was already dark. She sat down her suitcase, heaved a great sigh, and lifted the bronze knocker mounted to the wood. It clattered boisterously, announcing Rette’s return.
She’d been unable to send word for her return, and Lucy would have already explained her absence, both planning it to be for a much longer duration.

The lock turned and the door creaked open, revealing Jansen in his serving jacket behind it. Of course, they would be eating dinner, it couldn’t be more than a quarter past six. She hoped this would serve her well as it meant her arrival could possibly go unannounced by anyone until morning, giving her time to process and prepare her defenses.

“Miss Margarette!” Jansen exclaimed loudly.

Rette hushed him quickly, picking up her suitcase and easing past him quickly. “Please, be discreet. I would love to get up to my room without my mother knowing.”

His mouth closed quickly, and his smile faded, giving her a quick nod, he turned on his heel to return to the dining room where his absence would be noticed.

Rette made a mental note to ensure that Jansen ranked high on her priority list of Christmas gifts for the season. It would be well deserved. She took off up the stairs, praying none of the women in the house would follow. A jovial laugh stopped Rette in her tracks—not because it was a woman’s laugh, though between her mother, Aunt Florence, and Lucy there was not much cause for such an outburst, but because it was a man’s laugh.

Rette turned at the landing but hesitated on the small stairwell to the hall of her and Lucy’s bedrooms. Rette watched a long stream of light pour into the foyer from the dining room as two men in uniform came waltzing out. One was tall and broad shouldered, while the other unmistakably short with a familiar mess of short tight curls atop his head. Lucy followed, unmistakable in a cheerful, yellow dress which reminded Rette of an early spring daffodil, and Mother lingered a few paces behind the others, still clad in her standard plain black dress.
“We had such a lovely time, Miss Lucy, truly. Thank you, Mrs. Murphy, for the
invitation,” the shorter of the two said as Jansen rounded the group to stand at the front door,
ready to allow the soldiers their exit. The soldiers stopped and turned to Lucy and Rette’s
mother.

The taller, broader soldier rocked on his heels, hands clasped behind his back. “We
missed Miss Margarette though. Perhaps she will join us next time?”

Mother cleared her throat. “Yes, we hope Miss Margarette will be joining us very soon.”

Lucy, having turned to acknowledge Mother’s input, turned her body fully to the two
men, oblivious to Mother’s discretion. “Not too soon though. She’s welcoming her fiancé home,
you know.” Her body oozed enthusiasm, and as Rette watched her reach a hand out to clutch the
shorter man’s arm, she knew Lucy was simply enthusiastic about Rette’s love life.

“Lucille!” Mother hissed.

The tall, broad soldier cleared his throat. “Yes, well, we wish her and her soldier a happy
reunion, don’t we, Joey?”

The short one, Joey, turned from Lucy, who he’d been gazing at, wide-eyed during the
exchange, to look back at the taller soldier. “Yes! Yes, of course!”

“We’ll say goodnight now. Thank you again, Mrs. Murphy for the lovely meal. Pass
along our gratitude to Madame Florence as well, would you?”

Mother nodded. “Yes, of course. Have a good evening, gentlemen.”

Jansen opened the front door and the taller soldier walked out, but Joey hesitated, looking
back at Lucy.

“Can I see you tomorrow? Perhaps for lunch? There’s a place between here and the
House, Tabby’s, that serves delicious luncheon. You would love it.”
Lucy nodded enthusiastically. “Yes! I would love to! Eleven?”

Joey smiled, and Rette’s heart warmed at the sight. This young man had it bad.

“It’s a date,” he stated, rocking forward on the balls of his feet before lifting Lucy’s hand and kissing her knuckles. “Goodnight, Miss Lucy.”

Rette heard Lucy’s tinkling giggle before she gave her demure reply, “Goodnight, Joey.”

Joey followed the first out, and Jansen closed and latched the door behind them. Lucy turned to Mother and sighed.

“That was such a lovely evening!” Rette watched between the banisters as Lucy clasped her hands together and took two skipping steps toward the staircase. Rette shifted her weight, preparing to make her way up the steps.

“Yes, well, Sergeant Callaway was very disappointed that Rette was not here.” Rette saw Mother’s pointed look as she emphasized Rette’s absence.

“Yes, well, I’m sure Rette will have many more opportunities to meet Sergeant Callaway. He’s a swell guy.” With that Lucy started up the stairs. Rette gripped her suitcase in her hand and ducked down, crawling up the last few steps and down the hallway, walking upright once she was out of sight of the foyer. “Goodnight, Carol!”

“Goodnight, Lucille,” came Mother’s flat voice from the foyer.

Rette opened her bedroom door when there was a gasp from behind her. She turned. Lucy was standing at the top of the stairs leading to their wing, a hand grasping her chest as she stared wide-eyed at Rette.

“Lucy?” it was Mother’s voice, louder now. “What’s the matter?”

Rette quickly stepped into her room and closed her door after her, willing it to latch in silence. She pressed her ear to the cool wood of the door and listened carefully.
“Oh! I thought I saw a bug is all—you know me, frightened by the littlest things.” Rette heard Lucy laughed it off.

“Best get to bed, then, before you catch another fright,” Mother suggested, her voice clearer now. Rette knew she, too, was at the stair landing, preparing to head to her own wing.

“Of course, goodnight.”

Light footfalls echoed closer and closer down the hall, Rette heard Lucy’s door open and close louder than normal.

Rette sighed and turned to her bed. It was dark, but thankfully her weeks there had been long enough to memorize the layout of her large room. She didn’t dare turn on a light, if Mother wasn’t tucked into her room yet, the glow from beneath Rette’s door would give away her presence, and she wasn’t prepared to face her—not yet.

She heaved her suitcase up onto her bed and began to unpack in the dark, feeling each piece of clothing as she took it from her case.

“Rette?”

Rette flinched and wheeled around, clutching her chest. Lucy stood in the open doorway, Rette’s doorknob still clutched in her hand. “Get in here,” Rette hissed.

Lucy came in and closed the door behind her, immediately reaching for the lights.

“No!” Rette whispered. “Mother will see.”

Lucy flicked on the lights, and Rette blinked at her. “She’s already in her room, Rette.” Lucy gave her a worried look. “What are you doing here?”

Rette threw her silk camisole down on the bed and sat beside it. “I came home.”

Lucy rolled her eyes and crossed to Rette’s suitcase, pulling clothes from it, and laying them out on the bed to be put away. “Obviously. But why? Did Johnny make it home okay?”
Rette shrugged. “I suppose.”

Lucy stopped and looked at her. “What kind of answer is that? He either did or didn’t. Did something happen?” Her face shifted to worry suddenly. “Oh, is he injured terribly? From what we heard at the Community House, there are some truly horrific—”

“No, that’s not it.” Rette shifted back onto the bed, laying down atop her pillow.

“Then what?” Lucy probed.

Rette knew she’d have to tell Lucy eventually. There was no avoiding it. Emotion rose in her chest and her head ached. “He doesn’t want me,” she stated. Her voice was small, but her statement carried the weight of the past six hours. Rette bit her lip as tears fell from the corners of her eyes, running through her hair until they’d eventually find purchase in her pillowcase.

Lucy sat on the edge of the bed beside Rette, slowly letting her weight sink into the mattress. “Did he say that?”

“He told me to leave. He didn’t want me there.” Rette’s face contorted as the tears came faster, harder.

Lucy sighed. “Well maybe he just didn’t want you there to see him weak and recovering. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t want you in his life.”

Rette shook her head and gasped, fighting to speak through the tears. “Johnny wouldn’t—I know he—my Johnny would want me there. He’d let me help him. That’s who he is—was.” She cried harder then, sobs being pulled and yanked from her chest with every breath. She tried to control them, tamp them down so Mother wouldn’t hear, but Rette couldn’t judge how loud they were, her ears began to ring from the force of them.

Lucy tried to soothe her. Rette heard the faint hushing and felt Lucy brushing stray hairs back out of her face, trying to blot the tears as they fell, but long before the tears and pain
subsided, Lucy gave up, resulting to lying beside Rette in agreeable silence as they drifted to sleep waiting for Rette’s tears to cease.

Sun beat through her bedroom window when Rette finally peeled her eyes open. It was late. She could feel it. Rette rose and dressed quickly, knowing there was little she could do for the swollenness of her eyes, and hearing nothing but silence in the house, she made her way downstairs, hoping breakfast would still be laid out for them. She peered into the dining room, and found it empty aside from Jansen covering various dishes, gathering them to take them back to the kitchen.

“Is there much left?” Rette asked, stepping into the otherwise empty dining room.

Jansen turned to her. “Oh, Miss Margarette! I was just preparing to gather a tray for your room. I had Quincy prepare just a bit extra of your favorites. May I make your plate?”

Rette let out a breath she’d been holding. “That would be lovely, Jansen, and thank you for last night–your discretion.”

Jansen gave her a kind smile. It reached his eyes which crinkled endearingly at the corners. “Of course, Miss Margarette.”

Rette thanked Jansen as he placed her plate in front of her and ate ravenously, having gone to bed without dinner the night before. Jansen cleared the dishes away, leaving her the only one in the room.

Rette supposed Lucy and Mother were out at the Women’s League helping with Lucy’s list of events she’d prearranged to keep Mother occupied during Rette’s absence. Rette was grateful. It appeared she would have a good part of the day before she would have to endure her mother’s scorn.
Her mother had been right to try to keep her here. Perhaps life would have to be best spent apart from Johnny. Could she find that life? She’d been attached to Johnny for so long, she wasn’t quite sure what she looked like without them. Though their lives had grown separate over the past year, before that point they’d always been Johnny and Rette, a pair, a unit, a Two-for-One Saturday Special. Invite Rette? Johnny comes along too. Invite Johnny? Expect to see Rette there at his side at his specific request.

Rette looked down at her half-eaten ham and eggs. They’d been lukewarm when Jansen had served them to her, but she’d eaten them anyway. She pushed her plate away, not satisfied, but no longer hungry.

The dining room door squeaked slightly, announcing the quiet entrance of a visitor. Rette turned and found Jansen with a tray in his hand. “Miss Margarette? This came for you just now.”

The yellow paper signified a telegram, something urgent, and Rette stood quickly to take it, not waiting for Jansen to bring it to her.

She ripped it open.

JOHNNY FEVER. PLEASE RETURN. URGENT.

LYNETTE CARVER

A fever. It could signal a person’s final days or break in a matter of hours and the person could be up dancing with the rest of the crowd by sunset. There was rarely an in between. Rette had seen him only the day before, and though sore, he was alert and well. She doubted it could be as bad as the ominous telegram made it out to be. Still, something wriggled in the back of Rette’s mind. She couldn’t just let him suffer without knowing.
“Jansen?” Rette called, catching him before he left the dining room, tray in hand.

“Yes, miss?”

“Could you send a telegram for me?” She flipped the page over and pushed past Jansen toward the library where she knew Aunt Florence’s writing desk would be well supplied.

“Of course!” Jansen replied, following closely behind.

As Rette walked through the foyer, telegram in hand, the front door creaked open, and in stepped Mother who stopped when she saw Rette.

“Well now,” she said, clutching her hands together in front of her. “Isn’t this a surprise?” But from the tone of her voice, it wasn’t a surprise at all.

Chapter Twenty-Five

FEVER BROKE. WEAK BUT RECOVERING. VISIT AT YOUR LEISURE.

LYNETTE CARVER

Rette stared down at the words, a sigh of relief blowing through her. For the past day, Rette bustled from one event to the next, driven by her guilt-tripping mother to attend every one. Her fingers were still bandaged, worn, and aching from being pricked far too many times by the roses her mother had insisted she use at the flower arranging benefit the Women’s League held that morning. The arrangements were to be auctioned off that evening at the Women’s League Winter Ball hosted at the Community House. The proceeds were set to benefit both the USO and the local Red Cross.

Rette unwound the thin bandages from her middle finger, the one that had been particularly mutilated. The puncture wound had sealed, the bleeding had stopped, but it was still
unsightly. Rette opened the drawer of her dressing table, hoping to find a pair of gloves that could help hide the signs of her efforts.

A soft knock sounded on her door, and she turned toward it. “Come in?”

It was Lucy, dressed in a midnight blue dress with a massive skirt that accentuated her barely-there waist. There was a glitter to the fabric, and as Lucy stepped closer, Rette found that there was elaborate beadwork added into the layers of the transparent fabric to create a soft glimmer that reminded Rette of the night sky. If Rette wasn’t mistaken, the dress was the exact shade and degree of glitter that one might find in Lucy’s eyes.

She sighed as Lucy came closer. “You’re beautiful, Luce.”

Lucy’s cheeks went pink, and she swayed, her skirts catching the lights and glittering even more. “Thank you. Tonight is going to be magical, Rette. I just know it.” She skipped over to Rette’s dressing table and stood behind her, meeting her gaze in the mirror.

Rette gave her a smile then picked up the telegram again to read over Lynette’s words. “Johnny’s fever broke.”

Lucy sighed. “Oh, that’s terrific news, Rette. You must be so relieved!”

Rette sat the telegram back down and returned to the drawer of gloves in her dressing table, trying to find the partner of the black silk one that had rested right on top. “Yes. It’s great news.” Her tone did not aid any meaning to her words, in fact, Rette thought they contradicted each other a bit, but she was too drained and exhausted from the past few days to bother correcting herself and thankfully, Lucy didn’t push it.

Lucy ran her fingers through Rette’s loose curls which had yet to be tamed and pinned into place. Rette let her eyes close, relaxing into the sensation. It was not often she had someone else do her hair. Growing up, anytime her mother brushed or pinned her hair, it was far too rough
to be relaxing, so Rette learned from an early age to do it herself. Lucy’s voice broke through her thoughts. “Did you get your dress?”

Rette opened her eyes and looked at Lucy. She’d planned on wearing her only formal dress she owned. “It’s in the wardrobe. It’s not quite the current style, but it will suffice.”

Lucy’s smile spread, and her eyes glittered. “Not that one.”

Rette tilted her head. “What—”

“Wait here,” Lucy said excitedly, spinning away and out to the hall with a giggle. She emerged a moment later with a long dress bag in hand. “Surprise!”

“What is this?” Rette’s voice gave away her excitement, and as her pulse rose, she spared a glance to her dresser mirror to see her cheeks pink and her face alight with life, she felt more like herself in that moment.

“I found it when Georgianna and I went shopping and I found mine, it’s meant for you, Rette. Just wait till you see it!” Lucy laid it across the bed and dragged the long zipper down the front of the bag, revealing the gown beneath.

Rette’s gut sank when she saw the rich red velvet within. “Oh Lucy, this was too much, really. I can’t wear that.”

Lucy immediately shook her head and grabbed Rette’s arm. “It’s not, really, and yes, you can. You must. This is a dress meant to be worn, and I could never pull it off. I don’t have your shape.”

Rette ran her hand over the fabric, and goosebumps rose up her arm as the soft fabric made contact with her fingers. “It is beautiful.”

Lucy smiled. “You haven’t seen anything yet. Let me help you get dressed.”
Rette took off her dressing gown as Lucy took the dress from its hanger. She gathered the dress in her arms and helped Rette slip it on over her head. The fabric fell into place, and as Rette straightened the wide fabric at her shoulders, Lucy took a step back and gasped.

“Oh, Rette.” It was quiet, reverent, and lacking much of Lucy’s usual excitement and enthusiasm. Lucy’s face was devoid of her spritely charm, and Rette’s cheeks flushed.

“It’s horrific, isn’t it?” Rette pulled at the fabric, preparing to slip it off, resigned to wearing her usual out of style gown, but Lucy stopped her, took her hand, and dragged her in front of the large mirror propped against the wall beside her wardrobe.

“Look,” Lucy said, her voice just as serious.

The fabric was draped across Rette’s every curve, clinging, and smoothing to accentuate in all the ways her usual dresses hid. The wide straps kissed the tops of her arms, leading to a deep ‘V’ down the front that Rette knew her mother would turn her nose up at, though plenty was still left to any gazer’s imagination. From the cool breeze across her back, Rette knew a much deeper ‘V’ descended down the back, and as she turned to assess it, the fabric shifted beautifully, only helping to accentuate the curves and edges that Rette’s father’s side of the family had cursed her with. She eyed the graceful curves of her shoulder blades and the divot of her spine—not cursed, she decided, blessed.

Rette caught Lucy’s eye as Lucy continued to stare, open-mouthed. “Speechless?” Rette laughed. Lucy was known to fill silences in any situation, she’d never seen her in such a state.

Lucy blinked and opened and closed her mouth a few times. “I–I–” She laughed. Then her face settled to what Rette could only describe as remorse. “I wish Johnny could see you now.”
Rette’s heart sank slightly, and Lucy must have seen her expression fall because she backpedaled quickly.

“Come, let me do your hair. I think we’re feeling dramatic tonight.”

Rette smiled at her through the mirror, grateful to have someone like Lucy in her life, someone to bring her up out of darkness rather than ridicule or reign over her within it.

Rette sat at her dressing table facing the mirror, and Lucy lifted the brush. She ran it through Rette’s hair until the curls were smooth, creating great waves rather than individual curls. She brought most of her hair off to the right side and brushed the left back, so Rette’s hair cascaded in large waves over Rette’s shoulder, leaving the left side to reveal the side of her face and neck. She felt enigmatic. She could be anyone tonight. She could be Rette Murphy from Attabury, Kansas, or—if she wished—she could become Margarette Murphy, a woman of Manhattan.

She studied herself in the mirror, and the woman she saw was so much more than she’d ever had the chance to be before. Margarette it was.

Lucy exited Aunt Florence’s car first, taking the outstretched hand of Joey who was dressed to the nines in his military uniform. As they pulled up, Rette had watched as he nervously adjusted his tie and tugged his jacket sleeves.

Rette exited the car from her own side, allowing Aunt Florence’s driver to help her.

Rette rounded the back of the car, her wrap pulled tightly around her shoulders against the biting wind.
“Let’s get inside!” Joey called against a particularly strong gust. Rette expected goosebumps to form on the skin that was exposed along her chest and back, but they never did. Her cheeks were flushed from the excitement and anticipation for the night.

Rette followed as Joey led Lucy inside the Community House. Inside was warm. Almost too warm. Rette knew without having to see it for herself that the great fireplace that sat within the great room at the center of the building was lit and roaring ferociously. Rette slipped her wrap from her shoulders as she followed Lucy and Joey weaving between conversing couples and uproarious soldiers. They came to a stop at two small tables, each with two chairs.

Lucy turned to Rette. “These seem to be the only ones available. You and I can take this one, and Joey can take the table beside us.”

Rette waved her off immediately. “Don’t be ridiculous. You two take this one, I’ll sit over here.” She made her way to the neighboring table, draping her wrap over one of the chairs and pulling it out, preparing to settle into it for the night.

Rette looked back at Lucy who looked as though she wanted to deny Rette’s offer, but Rette watched Lucy look up to make eye contact with Joey whose smile widened at getting to sit with her. There could be no argument then.

Rette didn’t mind. She wanted to survey the room, take in the night for what it was worth. It was beautifully decorated. Candles and small arrangements adorned each table, while the low lamps and firelight from the stone fireplace beside the dance floor aided the naturally romantic atmosphere.

Lucy’s tinkling laugh drew Rette’s attention, and she studied Lucy and Joey for a moment. His entire focus was on her. His gaze never wavered from her face, and she shifted her gaze from her hands clasped on the table in front of her up to Joey’s face—which, Rette had to
admit, was quite handsome in a boyish charm sort of way. They glittered at each other. They both had that air about them, that optimism, youthfulness—innocence. Rette envied them.

“May I?” a deep voice asked.

Rette turned and her eyes raked up the broad, familiar features, meeting the soft gaze of a man to whom she had never spoken. “Of course,” she responded before she could think otherwise. She held out a hand. “Margarette.”

He sat down the two cups he carried, and returned her gesture, taking her hand in his large one. He studied her for a moment, hesitating. “Cal.”

Rette smiled at him. Sergeant Calloway. She’d seen him in the foyer the night she returned from Attabury, but she had to admit, he was quite something standing right in front of her.

He sat across from her, placing one of the steaming cups in front of her. Rette’s heart sank. She’d hoped for punch or ice water, but instead was faced with a steaming cup of cider. She lifted it to her lips anyway and blew across the surface. She spared a glance up at Cal. He was staring at her, studying her, simply observing her movements. She felt her cheeks flush, and she hoped she could pass it off as the combination of the heat of the fireplace, the hot cider, and the thick velvet of her gown.

Cal cleared his throat. “Forgive me, you’re just—” he trailed off.

Rette smiled and studied the flame of the candle for a moment while Cal found his words. “You’re not what I expected.”

Rette looked up at him. What he’d expected? She couldn’t help the quizzical look that followed as he smirked at her. He looked as though he knew something. Rette wasn’t sure she liked it. “What did you expect?”
He shifted his weight in his seat, getting comfortable before responding. “Well, the *Rette* I was told about was timid and tended to keep to herself, not one to make an entrance like you did in a dress like that or introduce yourself as *Margarette*.”

Something in his smile and his sharp enunciation of the final ‘t’ in her name brought a deeper flush to her cheeks. “Well, we are not all or nothing, *Sergeant Calloway*. We have multiple sides to who we are. Tonight, I chose to embrace a new side of myself.” She tilted her shoulders and jutted her chin out slightly, accentuating the way her new style accentuated some of her best features.

Cal smiled wider at her. “I agree, and for the record: I like *Margarette*.”

*Rette* lifted her mug to her lips again and studied him over it. He was sincere, and as she sipped at the steaming cider within, he lifted his mug in return, eyeing her as well over his brim. She felt ridiculous watching him, realizing what she must look like to him, so she giggled and sat her mug down. “Well then, Cal. What facets are you hiding?”

His smile persisted as he returned his mug to the table. He leaned in closer and motioned for her to do the same with his finger. He lifted his hand, and in a faux whisper said, “*Cal* is just a nickname the guys call me.”

*Rette* narrowed her eyes at him, propping her chin up on one hand, and playing along. “And what do the ladies call you?”

“*Cal*.”

A burst of unladylike laughter fell from *Rette*’s mouth, and she clamped her hand around it immediately, waving at the few tables who gave her dirty looks. She looked back at *Cal* who had relaxed back in his seat and was surveying her.
“Theodore. Teddy, actually. That’s what my momma and friends back home always called me. I felt I needed something different when I joined up, and my first bunkmate called me Cal, and it stuck ever since.” He ran his thumb over his mug, clearly lost in thought.

“So, who is ‘Cal’ then?” She studied him as his gaze met hers again. His eyes were the strangest shade of green. They swam with muddled brown but seemed to lighten every time they met hers. She’d never seen anything like it.

He smiled. “I like to think ‘Ca’ and ‘Teddy’ are one in the same.” He tweaked an eyebrow at her, as though asking her to challenge him, but the stifled grin on his face maintained the lighthearted air at their table.

“Well,” she said as she leaned back in her seat slightly and ran her hands over the velvet that was draped over her thighs, hoping to rid her hands of the perspiration that had gathered there. “I like to think that Margarette is a new version of Rette. Reinvented.”

Rette watched as his eyes studied her again, and this time his smile faded, his expression turning sad. “What can we say about Margarette that we couldn’t say about Rette?”

She shifted in her seat, smoothing the fabric at her shoulders again. “Rette would never have worn this.”

“No?”

She laughed. “No. It’s far too ostentatious and draws far too much attention to me. I didn’t have to see the eyes on me when I walked in, I could feel them.” She broke their gaze to spare a glance at the rest of the room, and sure enough she caught the eye of at least three other young women she recognized from the Women’s League meetings and three soldiers, all of whom were in conversation with others. She could only sense that she was their topic of conversation.
“Perhaps those people are talking about me?” Cal proclaimed, sitting straighter. He laid his hand out on the table, palm up—an invitation.

Sweat broke out on the back of her neck which had nothing to do with the stifling heat of the room and everything to do with the burning gaze he was now giving her. She could be his. Oh, so easily, she could find herself on his arm being led around the room, writing to him, and waiting for him to come home. She pulled her hand from below the table and draped her hand over his, lightly.

He didn’t grip it, instead his fingertips curled up beneath her palm, and she felt his rough callouses meet the soft supple skin of her palm. Goosebumps raised up her wrist and along her arm, in full view of Cal who took notice and smiled, continuing to run his fingertips along the palm of her hand.

“What do you want from life, Margarette?” Cal asked. Rette blinked and sat a bit straighter in her seat, trying to focus on his question rather than his caressing touch that only made the goosebumps spread further.

Life. She had struggled to fathom it without Johnny in it. He’d always been there, part of her plans, and she never allowed herself to consider a life where she chose for him to not be in her life with her. Though, she remembered, it hadn’t been entirely her choice. “I want purpose,” she stated simply, curling her fingers in now to grip his, stalling his touch. “I want to have a life where I can work for what I want, make a plan, and make it happen.”

“Let’s talk specifics—where do you see yourself in life? Walk me through it.” He gripped her hand tightly and closed his eyes, his long lashes tickling his cheeks.
She hesitated, and when she still hadn’t spoken, he peeked through one eye at her. She wasn’t sure she knew. There were still too many unknowns in her world, and too many times her daydreams had been ripped from her.

“Come on,” he beckoned. “I want to visualize your plan. Let me see it.” He squeezed her hand again. It was comforting, his grip on her hand. It wasn’t commanding, commandeering, or possessive—it was present. Wholly and entirely present, as though there was nowhere else he would rather be in the moment and nothing more important to him than finding out just what she imagined her life looking like when she got around to actually living it.

“Well,” she began. “I would love to be married and have children, but even then, I would want to work.” She waited for him to protest or blanch at the thought, but his eyes crinkled at the corners in a way that Rette could imagine becoming permanent with age, and she liked it.

Sensing her hesitation, he lifted their hands from the table. “And what will you do for work?” It wasn’t loaded. He didn’t even question whether she would or not, it was curiosity—pure, invested curiosity.

She thought about it, and a dream she had tamped down for the past few years began to bloom in her mind’s eye. “I would like to start a school,” she began, and seeing Cal’s eyebrow raise, continued quickly before he could speak and dissolve her dream into nothingness. “For women, where they can learn vocational skills of all kinds, beyond just the skills necessary for maintaining a home or secretarial work, as so many women find themselves in. We can do so much more, and I’ve loved hearing about the way women are having more opportunities to step up and fulfill the men’s roles now that they’re gone, but there has to be so much more we could do. What’s to happen when all the men come home, ready to resume their jobs? What’s going to happen when we no longer need all the planes and ships built? All those women in the factories
will go back home, their purpose demoted, and their skills lost. We need more than that. There is so much potential, and our society is missing out on it by limiting us to the home or the office.”

Rette took a deep breath, her chest heaving slightly. At some point in her speech, her eyes had wandered off, falling upon a specific section of moldings along the ceiling that allowed her mind to wander, and her train of thought to fall out. She pursed her lips, knowing she let out far too much. She shrugged and laughed it off as though it wasn’t that important anyway.

Cal squeezed her hand. His expression was one of shock, but beneath it was something else entirely—pride.

“Don’t do that,” he chastised, giving her a pointed look.

She lifted her chin, suddenly on the defense. “Why not? Women can—”

He shook his head and held his other hand out on the table for her second hand. “No, no. Do that, but don’t diminish it. Don’t pass it off like an errant dream. Don’t shrug as though it doesn’t matter.”

Rette’s cheeks flushed again as she took his other waiting hand, which he clasped tightly. He hesitated slightly, looking between her two hands held in his.

“It matters,” he said, giving her hands a final squeeze before letting go, but Rette didn’t want him to let go.

Her hands were too cool without his. They felt small then, empty, as though they were no longer where they were supposed to be.

He held his hands in his lap and dropped his gaze to her left hand. “Can I ask you something?” He looked back up at her, and Rette nodded quickly.

“Anything.”
“Why would you throw away something people wait their entire lives for the possibility of something going wrong?”

Rette pulled her hands back to her lap quickly. She clasped her hands together and felt her engagement ring still sat on her left hand. Throw away? Rette didn’t throw away anything, Johnny had.

“You don’t understand.”

He gave her a sad smile. “I know your story, Rette. You and Johnny. You were made for each other, and clearly still are.”

“He doesn’t want me.” She glanced up at him quickly. She hadn’t meant to say it. It tumbled out, and as soon as it did, she regretted it. She was unwanted. Not exactly what she wanted to say to a handsome man who had been so invested in her only moments ago.

Cal raised an eyebrow at her. “I find that hard to believe.”

She shrugged, but part of her knew it had been on both of their parts. With everything going on, she had pulled away. She hadn’t taken the time to reassure him that there was something between them still to come home to. Perhaps he thought it was gone. “That’s what he said.”

Cal sighed and squinted. “What you and he share, from what Lucy and your mother explained to me, is transcendent. No matter what you or he does or says, it will still be there. You still love him, don’t you?”

“Of course,” she said quickly, without thinking, and bit her lip, looking up at him. She could feel tears pricking at her eyes, but she didn’t want to cry, not tonight.
“So, take him. The universe, God, whatever you believe in, is giving him to you as much as it has already given you to him. Take it. Accept it as a gift, a blessing, for what it is, and live it. People wait their entire lives for something like that.”

Rette studied him. He was so pensive and introspective, and the degree to which he understood her mind and the situation, it rose goosebumps down her spine all over again.

“Your mother told me she was a war widow, that your father was her second husband, and you grew up in the shadow of her first round of grief.”

Rette stared at him, dumbfounded. Her mother had told him? What had they had for dinner that night? What had her mother drank? Her mother had never had as clear a conversation with her as she seemed to have had with this man, she couldn’t have known for more than a day. It stung.

“I don’t know if Johnny will survive this war. Neither does he. Neither do you. No one does. But—” he raised a finger at her. “Could you live with yourself if he survived, but was no longer in your life?”

Rette knew she would never be able to find another, knowing he was there, a possibility, a love not lost, but given away—it was worse. She shook her head slowly.

“Then why are you here, in that dress, without him? Why isn’t he here, showing you off to all these hungry men who only wish you were theirs? Why aren’t you at his side, helping him back onto his feet so you two can face your future and all that comes with it together?”

Rette’s body turned instinctively, preparing to rise. She knew where she needed to be, and it wasn’t here talking to Cal. “I’m sorry, I have to—”

But he was already standing, holding a hand out to her. “Let’s go.”
Rette looked at his large hand, she knew its warmth, its comfort, but going with him? She looked up at him, still bracing herself to stand.

“I have a car. It will be much faster than the bus, trust me. Plus, I wouldn’t want you taking the bus in that dress. There would be too many errant souls who might find you far too tempting.” He emphasized his hand, still outstretched and waiting. The offer hung there in the air. She could be with Johnny tonight.

She looked up into Cal’s face. He was pleading with her, but not for him. There was nothing selfish in his actions. He would gain nothing from driving her the nearly two hours to Attabury to see Johnny, while she and Johnny—they would gain everything.

She gripped her wrap in one hand and took his hand in the other. She stood, and turned to tell Lucy what they were doing.

Rette found Lucy staring at her with tears in her eyes and the widest smile splitting her face. Lucy looked back at Cal, her gratitude unmistakable. “Go,” was all she said, and they did.

Cal’s Station Wagon reminded Rette of her father’s old car. It was clearly not new, having been well worn and loved with time, but from the fresh and clean interior, it was clear however long it had been Cal’s, he had taken care of it.

“So you want to swing by Aunt Florence’s to get a bag?” Cal asked as he started up the engine.

Rette shook her head, her teeth chattering from the cold. “Just drive.”

He looked at her for a moment before he began to drive, but Rette knew if she took too much time to think about her actions, she wouldn’t go. She would put it off, decide to wait for a few days and catch a bus when it would be more sensible. Plus, her mother would be home, and
Rette didn’t want to face her endless stream of questions. Though from the way Cal had spoken of his encounter with her mother, perhaps her mother supported Rette and Johnny more than she had originally thought.

They took off, and before Rette could realize it, they were driving down the highway toward Attabury.

They rode in silence for the first thirty minutes or so, Rette staring out her window at the dark fields they passed. Mounds of snow lurked and lingered in the dips and valleys of the expanse. The bright, wide moon casting plentiful light upon the landscape.

She found herself daydreaming, thinking of the school she might one day help to start, a school she herself wished she had to train to find a vocation of her own, something to find a purpose in her life aside from having children and loving her husband well. But she realized, through his focus on her dreams, Rette had never returned the inquiry. She looked over at him, relaxed into the driver’s seat, steering with ease and comfort. Where would he end up when it was all over? What did the future look like for him? Rette knew she shouldn’t care, after all he was driving her to go start her life with Johnny whom she loved more than she’d ever truly realized, and yet—she wanted to know.

“What about you?” Rette asked suddenly, though she realized quickly when he gave her a quizzical glance that she’d provided no context into the inner workings of her mind. “What does the future look like?”

He’d looked back out to the road, but he spared her another glance, his eyes soft, and even in the darkness, Rette could see that same swimming light green appear again as he gauged her question. He looked back to the road with a contented sigh. “I want to be a counselor.”
Rette turned in her seat slightly to direct her body and her attentions to him. “And what does that entail?”

He smiled. “I want to help our men when they come back home. I want to help them adjust to normal life again, to leave behind the horrors and fears they’re having to face.” He spared a glance at her to see her reaction, and she just smiled.

It was fitting. Though she’d only truly met him tonight—and was now in his car with him alone, though she tried not to think too much about that detail—it was fitting. He’d opened her up so much in that time, bared her heart in a way no one else had been able to—not even Johnny. He would be good at it, and it was purposeful—impactful.

He continued, though Rette had said nothing in response. “There is so much they have gone through and still will go through that an academic as most therapists and counselors are currently won’t understand. I can meet them. I can help them.” He looked at her again, and Rette broke her focus on him to glance down at her hands, now worrying the corner of her wrap.

“But you’re here, aren’t you? While so many are leaving and facing those horrors you speak of understanding.” She knew it sounded like she was trying to debase his dream, catch him out, or call his bluff, but she didn’t mean it that way. She just wanted to understand.

“I’m leaving in two days. My regiment doesn’t have a return date. We’ll be gone till the end, I suppose.”

She looked back up at him. This would be it. She wouldn’t see him again anytime soon, or if she would see him again—a little voice in the back of her mind thought it important to remind her. “Oh,” she said breathlessly, so much so that her warm breath hung in the cold air of the car in a little puff of fog for a moment.
He looked over at her and met her gaze again. They softened at her, as though he could see right through her into what she was thinking. “I’ll be back.” He sounded so sure and confident. It didn’t seem fair. Having known what Johnny went through and the indecision and unknowns he was faced with. The lack of promises of his safety—Rette was too much of a realist to think otherwise.

She looked out the windshield. They had yet to encounter another vehicle along their way. They were alone. “You don’t know that.”

He sighed. “Oh, but I do. I’m confident in my ability to make it through safely and bring myself and my men home.”

“But you don’t know what could happen.”

“But I do.” He looked over at her, and Rette met his gaze again. He raised his chin higher. “I could come home, whole, in one healthy, ready to roar, piece, and that’s my plan.” He smiled at her, and Rette thought it strange.

He was headed for so many variables, forces, and conditions he could not control. He should be considering every possibility, not blindly heading into battle with the false pretense of a whole homecoming. “But there are so many other outcomes that should be considered—”

He shook his head before interrupting. “Not any that matter, Rette.”

He glanced at her, and Rette stared back, her brow furrowed in confusion, edging, somehow, on a sense of betrayal.

He turned his eyes back to the road but motioned with his hands while he talked. Rette could sense the weight and thought that had gone into what he was about to say. “The only outcome I choose to focus on is the one where I come home, whole, and achieve my goals. Should another outcome occur, I will handle it however it comes, but considering every variable
and possibility is only going to wear down my confidence and perseverance to the point where it would be more likely for me to not come home at all.”

Lights appeared along the horizon ahead of them, and Rette sat straighter in her seat. “Is that Attabury? Already?”

Cal sighed and shook his head. “Abilene. We’ve got another half an hour.”

Rette sat back in her seat. He’d been right. The ride was much shorter with him, as Rette gazed out her window at the grasses and bushes flying by, she knew it wasn’t just because of the company, he was making up considerable distance with his speed. He clearly wanted to get her to Attabury quickly.

When Cal slowed his car in front of the Carvers’ home, Rette suddenly felt uncomfortable. It was dark, late, and though the Carvers’ porch light was still lit, and the Colonel’s car was parked in the drive, she didn’t know what to do. Through the front window, Rette could tell the drapes were drawn. Were they awake? Would Rette be able to wake them if they were asleep? What would they say when they saw her standing there—no bag, no change of clothes, dressed like this? What would they say when they saw Cal?

Rette looked at him now, as he parked his car in front of the house and turned the car off, waiting for her to take the lead. Should she invite him to stay? To come inside? It wasn’t her home. It wasn’t her place. Not to mention, knowing she’d driven that far in the singular company of a very handsome sergeant, would not bode well for her plan of professing her undying and irrevocable love for Johnny, and yet—could she ask Cal to make that drive home?
Rette felt his gaze on her as she looked between him, the house, the car, and the street in front of them without saying anything. He reached over and put his large comforting hand over hers where it rested in her lap.

“You’re beautiful, Rette. I’m glad Johnny will get to see you like this. He deserves it. He deserves you. Just as you deserve him. I have a meeting in the morning, so I’ve got to make the drive home tonight. But thank you for tonight. Your company means—” he stopped, and his gaze raked over her face, seeming to take her in. “You mean a lot Rette. Don’t forget that.”

Rette squeezed his hand and found herself gripping the handle of the car door. Johnny was there. He wasn’t more than ten yards from her, and once that reality sunk in, she could no longer ignore it. “Thank you,” she croaked, her voice surprisingly weighted with emotion.

He gave her a smile, and lifted the hand he still held to his lips and placed a gentle kiss to the back of her hand. “Of course, Rette. Good night.”

His lips were warm, and they rose goosebumps down her arm again. She wanted to say goodbye—just in case, but at the same time, she didn’t want to believe their friendship ended here.

“Good night, Cal, and—” she stopped, considering her words carefully. “I’ll see you.”

He smiled, sensing her newfound optimism. He nodded. “I’ll see you, Rette.” He released her hand and let her exit his car.

She sensed his gaze on her as she closed the door, lifting her skirt slightly to take the steps up to the Carvers’ porch, and as she rapped her first against their front door, she knew he was still sitting there.

The interior front door opened, and there stood Johnny, hair rumpled, and pajamas crinkled, but whole. He smiled at her, and a weight melted from her. She hadn’t realized how
much she’d feared their reunion, seeing him again. Would he take her? Would he welcome her? Would he want her?

But the way he scrambled to open the screen door said it all, and then she was in his arms. Rette heard Cal’s engine turn over and the car take off down the street, but as she felt Johnny burrow his face into her shoulder and his warm familiar hands make contact with the bare skin of her back, all sound faded away, her ears zeroing in on his words that his lips mumbled onto her neck, their movement a caress that brought every hair on Rette’s body standing to attention.

“You’re here.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Johnny and Rette were inseparable. They’d spent the entire following day spilling out every detail of their hearts and plans, and they were going to make it happen. They both agreed that, while they still wanted to get married, they weren’t going to rush it. They were both still licking their wounds of their time apart, and Rette felt as though they needed time to get to know these new versions of themselves.

Rette asked him exactly how he wanted her to help him, and she made it clear that she wanted to help and wanted him to let her help him. However, she knew he still had his pride and wanted his self-respect to remain intact, so she helped him move around when he needed it, adjusted a pillow, or brought him a refreshment or lunch, but that’s where her help stopped. He left the rest to his parents and the nurse who came every other day to ensure proper healing of his incision and check the health of his lungs, which had improved significantly. She kept him
company, and that, he’d told her, made a bigger impact on his health and happiness than anything else she could do for him.

“I didn’t know it until you were gone, when the pain got so much worse, but you’re what made it bearable. I can work to recover and find myself again if you’re here motivating me. If our life together is there as a reminder of all I could be for you—all I should be for you.” He had stopped, lifting a hand to her cheek, which she leaned into heavily. “All you deserve.”

That was the biggest change Rette had made. She didn’t hold back her affection anymore, and without her mother’s constant pressure and oversight, Rette didn’t feel as though she needed to hold back. If she wanted to sit so close to him on the couch that she was practically in his lap, she did, and did so quite often. If she wanted to kiss him, she did. It was rare that they were in a room together and not touching in some way. It helped her feel rooted, and it reminded her that it was all real, all happening, and that this is what she was fighting for. This life, just getting to be with Johnny was the life she had planned for and dreamed of. Though it wasn’t always supposed to look like this, that’s how life was, and it was beautiful.

Rette woke up on Christmas morning to the feel of someone sitting on the edge of Johnny’s bed.

“Good morning,” Johnny’s voice sounded from behind her. She rolled over and peered up at him. His hair was fresh, and he wore a dark sweater that only made his blue eyes grow brighter. “Merry Christmas.”

Rette groaned and stretched. Since she’d come to stay with the Carvers, she’d given up her usual early morning rise, favoring late nights with Johnny instead. Light flooded into the
room, and she sat up, pulling the covers with her. It was cold in his room. “Merry Christmas,” she croaked.

She and Johnny had stayed up far too late the night before playing card games and betting kisses. When she’d finally tucked herself into bed, it was well past three.

Johnny brushed an errant curl back from Rette’s face. “Momma has fresh cinnamon rolls waiting for us.”

Rette’s stomach growled, and she yawned widely, trying to hide it beneath the covers.

“And coffee.” Johnny laughed.

Rette looked at him. Something was different. His face was brighter, lighter. She looked around her room, then she realized—“You’re upstairs!” For the past few weeks, Johnny had been unable to muscle his way up the stairs without rendering himself excruciatingly weak, so he’d been confined to the downstairs portion of the Carvers’ home, sleeping in the small downstairs guest room while Rette took his room.

He grinned at her and nodded. “And look.” He lifted the side of his sweater, and Rette caught a glimpse of the remnants of his highly toned muscles.

Rette continued looking at what he was trying to show her when it sunk in. “Your bandages!” She sat up then, the covers falling away, the cold air soaking through her thin nightgown. She lifted his sweater higher, now revealing his entire torso. A long angry scar extended up his ribcage. It was still very red, but the scabs had dissolved, leaving freshly healed skin. She ran her fingers over it, feeling the hot, smooth skin. Johnny shivered.

“Your hands are cold. Nurse Goodman said I could remove them today. I didn’t tell you because I thought it could make a good Christmas gift.” Johnny pulled his sweater back down and took her hands. “Good gift?” He looked into her eyes, pleading.
Rette’s chest warmed at his desire to please her. “The best.” She leaned forward and kissed him. He released her hands and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her up into his arms to deepen the kiss. He was hungry, fervent, in a way Rette had not seen him before.

She pulled away as much as she could—only an inch or two—and he breathed heavily, searching her face. His eyes were wide, studying her face, trying to discern why she had pulled away. “I—” she whispered, trying to extricate herself. She enjoyed it, quite a bit, but Lynette was waiting for them downstairs. She raised a hand between them and covered her mouth. “I haven’t cleaned my teeth. My breath is horrid.”

Johnny released his hold on her, and she sat straighter, brushing her hair out of her face, and adjusting the sleeves of her nightgown. Johnny stood from his bed and turned to the door. “I’ll just let you get ready then.” He smiled over his shoulder at her as he opened the door. “But hurry—the rolls are best when they’re still warm.”

Rette gave him a small smile as he turned and left. She crossed her arms in front of her against the cold. She gave another yawn, but this time didn’t bother stifling it. It was Christmas. It was the first Christmas without her father—and she wasn’t even with her mother.

A trunk of Rette’s things had been delivered only a few days after she’d arrived, having to borrow some of Lynette’s things. A note had arrived with it, and it still sat atop Johnny’s dresser.

_Thought you could use some of your things. Love well, Rette. -Mother_

It was brief, but Rette felt as though all that needed to be said was said.

She’d gone the following month, through Thanksgiving and the festivities of the upcoming holidays, without word from her mother. Lucy had written to her to express her
excitement for Rette and sorrow at Joey’s departure. Joey and Cal were part of the same regiment which gave Rette a strange sense of comfort knowing she would have easy access to news of Cal’s wellbeing through Lucy’s continuing infatuation with Joey.

Rette thought of that night, the impact Cal’s simple gesture of bringing her a cider and taking a seat across from her had on her present–on the rest of her life. She had a lot to thank Cal for, and she hoped she would one day have the chance to thank him again.

Rette padded down the stairs in her stockinged feet and emerged into the dining room. The table was laid with still steaming cinnamon rolls and a stocking placed in four spots around the table. Rette tried to avert her eyes from glancing too closely at the stockings, the items inside pouring out across the table in front of each one, but it was clear which one was hers. There was a dress Rette had loved as a child. It was green plaid, and she wore it until it was far too small and threadbare. Mother had tried to throw it away, but Lynette, knowing how much Rette had loved it, had used the fabric to turn it into a Christmas stocking. Mother, of course, had turned her nose up at it, favoring the matching fur set she’d inherited from her father even though with every Christmas they grew smellier and smellier.

Johnny’s was a precious baby blue, quilted from pieces of fabric Lynette had saved from his baby clothes. Lynette and the Colonel’s were handmade as well, but more traditional, made from red felt with a simple ‘Momma’ and ‘Pop’ emblazoned in white felt across the cuff. Ever since the Christmas Mother had rejected Lynette’s heartfelt gift of a handmade stocking, Rette had had a stocking from the Carvers’ as well as her own parents. Even when Rette’s parents couldn’t provide much for Christmas, Rette always knew her stocking from Lynette and the Carvers would be extravagant. Rette often tucked away some of the contents of her stocking to not reveal what she’d gotten from the Carvers. She didn’t want Mother growing jealous or angry
with the Carvers, and Rette didn’t want to have to give her gifts back, not that Mother ever found out to make her do so.

Christmas carols played softly through the house, Johnny’s tell-tale skill at the keys bringing a smile to Rette’s face. He’d found his music again.

Rette crossed through the kitchen to find Johnny sitting at the piano, the keys giving way easily beneath his tactful touch. He gave her a smile and swayed slightly, taking a deep breath to begin singing.

It was a new song. Rette recognized it immediately. It had grown so popular that year, one couldn’t turn on the radio without hearing it. Rette glanced out the front window as she sang and saw the song coming to life. Snow was falling in great bushy clumps. They didn’t float, but rather drifted to the ground, revealing the weight of them. Rette laid her head on Johnny’s shoulder, hearing his baritone voice vibrating through his chest.

The song ended, and Rette sighed, lifting her head to look at him. He kissed her forehead.

“Where’s your momma and pop?” Rette asked.

“You were taking so long, so Momma took an extra batch of rolls next door to Lizzy. Her parents are visiting to help with the kids, but you know Momma–she thinks everyone needs her rolls.” He smiled, and the weightlessness of it reminded Rette of all the smiles she’d seen well before the war began.

“They are very good,” Rette conceded.

Stomps sounded on the porch steps, and Rette glanced up to find Lynette and the Colonel arriving back home, coated in snow. “Goodness!” Lynette exclaimed so loudly as she stepped up onto the porch that Rette and Johnny laughed. She shook her shoulders and patted at her hair, shaking the flakes from it.
The Colonel laughed too, helping her swipe the flakes from her hair. He stopped her as she began to blink rapidly, and Rette and Johnny looked on as the Colonel tenderly wiped a large snowflake that had fallen into her eyelashes. They smiled at each other, and as much as Rette felt she needed to look away, she was just as compelled to watch as they smiled at each other, and Rette felt as though she was peeking in on their younger selves.

The Colonel put a gentle hand to Lynette’s face and his lips moved in inaudible words to Rette’s ears, but whatever it was made Lynette’s cheeks pinken. She glanced away for a second, and when she looked back up into her husband’s eyes, her own glittered in inexorable joy and adoration.

As they turned to enter the house, they caught Rette and Johnny staring at them, and both gave them unabashed goofy faces. It was a rare side of them that Rette had not seen since she and Johnny were children, but it was her favorite side.

“She’s up!” Lynette exclaimed as she hung her coat on its proper hook in the small entryway.

Rette resisted the eye roll she could feel coming on. “Yes, I am, and I’m hungry.”

“Oh!” the Colonel exclaimed. “We better hurry! Has she had coffee yet?”

Rette gave him a playful glare as she felt Johnny’s gaze on her.

“No,” Johnny said dramatically. “She hasn’t.”

“Oh, yes. It’s dire indeed,” Lynette replied, nodding solemnly. “To the table!”

Rette rolled her eyes this time but laughed. They poked fun at her sleeping in and need for coffee and food shortly thereafter, but she would take it—everyday if they’d let her. She would choose this over anything.
They all sat down to the table where their stockings had been laid, and as the tradition goes, they tucked into their cinnamon rolls and coffee before opening their stockings. Rette was never able to partake in this particular form of temptation, as she was usually gifted her stocking the day after Christmas. Her gaze continued to shift to the contents of her stocking, but Johnny and his parents tucked into their cinnamon rolls as though they were the star of the show. As Rette took her first bite, her focus shifted as well, the warm fluffy roll, the molten cinnamon center, and the delicious icing drizzled on top—it was the most decadent thing she’d consumed all year.

As they chatted, laughed, and savored their rolls and coffee, Rette relaxed back into her chair. Her chest warmed, and as Johnny and his parents burst into yet another fit of laughter, Rette felt as though she could float away, she was that light. She was thankful when Johnny reached a hand under the table to hold her knee, it kept her there, in that moment, soaking it in for all the joy, laughter, and light it had to offer.

A few weeks later, Rette found herself home alone one morning. Johnny had left over an hour ago for an appointment with Doc at the hospital, the Colonel was at Fort Riley for meetings all day, and Lynette was next door helping Lizzy battle a head cold while mothering three small children.

She fluttered around the house, helping to maintain its orderliness given that Lynette had spent much of the last few days helping Lizzy next door, leaving her own home neglected. Rette helped where she could, but somehow it was never quite how Lynette could do it. Rette was suddenly envious of Lizzy, being so close to Lynette while raising her young children, Rette was sure Lynette came in, a force to be reckoned with, and had the whole house tidied in a matter of
minutes, able to spend the rest of her visit tending to the children while Lizzy got some much-needed rest. Rette noted to herself to ensure that wherever she and Johnny ended up, it would be near enough that Lynette would be able to come over at a moment's notice to work her magic on their household as well.

Rette straightened the pillows on the front room couch before turning to the guest room which had served as Johnny’s room while he’d been recovering. Since Christmas, Rette had tried to convince him to take his childhood room back, but he said he preferred being at the front of the house, he could be on alert and ensure that all was well. Rette tried to remind him that it was Attabury—nothing ever happened in Attabury, but he’d just shushed her and asked her to allow him to protect her as long as he could. She couldn’t argue after that.

The guest room was pristine. The bed was made neatly, Johnny’s clothes tucked away. There was not a wrinkle in anything about the room that showed Johnny was even staying there. It was so impersonal it made Rette’s stomach drop. She went to the dresser and pulled open one of the drawers just to ensure his clothes were still there, and that Johnny was in fact coming home any moment from his appointment rather than still off at war.

“Find what you were looking for?” came a low, sultry voice.

Rette whipped around, slamming the dresser drawer shut, catching her fingertip. Her pulse raging, she identified the intruder as Johnny then swore loudly, sinking to the floor, holding her pulsing finger. She threw her head against the dresser behind her, seeking revenge but only injuring herself further.

“Are you okay?” Johnny knelt beside her.

“You scared me,” she ground out between clenched teeth.
Johnny chuckled lightly. “I called out when I came in. The front door is right there. How did you not hear me?”

Rette gaped at him. “No, you didn’t! I would have heard you!”

Johnny laughed more. “Yes. I did.”

Rette huffed, holding her finger to her chest. She pulled it away and studied the nail. It was already showing the effects of the trauma.

“It’s a good thing I sleep down here then. Someone could walk in screaming like a banshee and sleeping or awake, you’d never hear them.”

Johnny reached for Rette’s finger to inspect it, but she pulled away. She gave him a level stare. “I’d hear a screaming banshee Jonathan Andrew, but you casually saying hello? With as sensitive as your hearing is, you probably whispered it expecting the whole house to hear!”

He laughed, shaking his head as he took her finger and inspected it. “You’ll survive, love.”

Rette rolled her eyes and huffed again. “How was your appointment?”

Johnny glanced at her, his eyes guarded, then stood, turning from her to head back out to the front room. “It was good.”

Rette squinted at him. There was more to it than that, she could tell. “What did Doc say?”

Johnny shrugged. “I’m healing very well.”

Rette stood, her finger still pulsing gently but otherwise forgotten. “That’s good news, right?” She rounded him, so she could see his face as he responded, knowing she would get more information from what he showed there than anything he could say.

Johnny shrugged. “It’s not bad news, I suppose.”
“How much time do you have left home?” Rette knew the question that hung in the air had to be addressed at some point or another.

Johnny pushed past her. “I’m not sure. Doc is updating my commander with my progress, then a decision will be made from there. I don’t know how much there is left to keep me here.”

Rette’s gut sank. He was healed. Completely. He didn’t have to say it in so many words, but if Doc was updating his Commander and a decision was being made, then he was leaving. Within a matter of a couple weeks, Rette guessed. She sensed his mood draining quickly, so she rounded him again and wrapped her arms around her neck, putting on a convincing smile. “We’ll make the most of it then.”

She leaned in to kiss him, but he put his hands to her hips and held her back too far for her lips to reach, no matter how hard she stretched. She was reminded of his departure at the bus station after Geller’s funeral. She leaned back quickly and tried to hide the wrenching in her gut.

“Can I take you somewhere?” Johnny asked. His voice was devoid of any playfulness, as though he was asking her to pass the salt at the table.

Rette searched his face. His eyes matched his tone, seeming to have aged in a matter of hours, and he stood stiffly, holding her at arms’ length waiting for her response. “Of course.”

Rette’s quiet reply hung in the air for a moment before Johnny released her and took off for the stairs. “Grab your coat. I’ll be right back!” A pinch of playfulness returned, but Rette was left staring at a ghost of Johnny’s form, his words taking a moment to sink in before she could move.

She donned her coat and waited at the front door until Johnny emerged, walking the length of the house with a large black box in hand.

“Ready?”
Rette nodded, giving the box a questioning glance Johnny didn’t see.

“Let’s go.”

Knowing Johnny had appointments, the Colonel took the bus to Fort Riley, leaving his car at Johnny’s disposal, so they loaded up, Rette bundled against the cold, and headed out of town. They didn’t speak, and Rette threw passing glances his way as she tried to discern where exactly he was taking her.

When they were well past their town, Johnny reached a hand over and took hers from her lap. Through her gloves, she could feel his heat, and she was thankful for it. She looked over at him, and watched as, with one hand on the wheel, he settled into his seat, relaxed and at ease for the first time since before he’d left for his appointment. She held his hand in both of hers, stroking his hand as they rode.

Rette glanced out her window, watching the winter sun break through the blanket of clouds that seemed to forever hang low in the sky. Rays of sunlight beamed down to the rolling green fields, making them glow in speckled patches. Johnny drove down a single lane farm road, a glance in the side mirror revealed the cloud of dust behind them that their tires kicked up. Rette was grateful their snow had come and gone last week, expecting yet another wave in the coming week. She tried to imagine how many times the Colonel’s Buick would have gotten stuck in a rut of mud and shook her head, imagining she and Johnny pushing the car along to their destination. The car slowed, and Johnny sighed.

“We’re here.” His voice was quiet, reverent, with a reverberating excitement that made Rette’s pulse quicken. Rette looked out at the land on either side of the car but saw little to identify where they were now parked. A small gate blocked the drive ahead of them. Johnny
opened his car door and got out, leaving the car running. Rette sensed she was to remain as
Johnny worked to unlatch the gate and push it open.

Why were they there? Where is ‘there’? Whose land were they about to trespass on? Surely whoever they were, they wouldn’t take kindly to a young couple encroaching on their privacy. Rette opened her door quickly and stepped out just as Johnny got the gate where he wanted and brushed his hands off, he turned back to her with a smile. His cheeks were pink from the cold, and his eyes gleamed in the low sunlight.

“Where are we?”

Johnny skipped over to her and pecked a kiss on her lips over the top of the car door. His energy was infectious. “Get in! I’ll show you.”

Rette giggled as she sat back into the car and Johnny closed her door, rounding the car at a run to reenter from his own side. She stared out her window at the sunlight spilling onto the fields around them. It was beautiful. There was an energy and life about the land that was unmistakable. Rette was drawn to it, she wanted to run through the tall grasses and lay out in them as the stars glittered above her. Wherever she was, she wanted to stay.

Johnny glanced over at her, and Rette caught his gaze. His brows were raised, and the smile had not left his face since they’d arrived. He drove along a small dirt path with one hand as he held Rette’s with the other.

Johnny made a final turn to the left and stopped the car in front of a small house. It was clearly freshly built, dirt still overturned around the base of it. It was simple, and it couldn’t be more than two rooms. It was beautiful, and a place Rette would be more than happy to call home. Johnny sat there, watching her study it, and Rette couldn’t help but notice how his smile grew with each moment she stared out at it.
“Where are we?” Rette asked again. She searched his face, begging for an answer. She didn’t want to assume, didn’t want to let herself hope, but the joy on Johnny’s face was far too revealing for the moment.

Johnny patted her hand and turned to his door. “Let me show you.”

Rette stepped out of the car and felt the wind brace her against the car. Johnny rounded the car and took her hand, leading her away from the small house out to the open field.

“So?” Johnny asked. He strolled out in front of her, looking around at the wind breaking tree lines along the plains and the endless open fields, speckles of sunlight moving swiftly over them as the clouds were carried by the brisk breeze.

“So,” Rette mused, still confused. “What?” She looked at the line of tall trees along the dirt drive they pulled into. It was misting now, and it clung to her hair.

“Welcome home, love.”

Rette turned back to look at him. Her mouth opened, but no words formed. Question after question rolled through her mind, but she couldn’t figure out how to ask them as fast as they came.

“It’s all set, Rette. The deed is in hand. I’ve had a home built for us. It’s nothing big or extravagant, but we can add on to it once we have a better idea how much space we’ll need.” He raised his eyebrows at her. They were nearly disappearing into his hairline, his forehead creased in deep wrinkles. “It has two bedrooms. A room for us and a nursery to start. We can have a garden, horses, plant some crops, whatever you want. It’s yours too.”

Rette still couldn’t process her questions. She stared, open-mouthed at the land before them. Rette noticed a gentle fog hovering over it all, softening the transition from ground to sky floating from a small pond she hadn’t seen from the road.
Johnny closed the distance between them, putting his hands to her waist, holding her.

“Do you like it?”

Rette looked up at him, his fair blue eyes reflecting the mist and the land behind her. She saw their future in them. A large sprawling house with as many children as they could fit within its walls. She imagined grandchildren, each of their children multiplied and reflected in the small dirty faces running through the fields and feeling the grasses running through their fingers. Christmases where the land and the house and the trees are covered in mounds of snow. Kids playing in the front yard where they stood. The rest of the land was empty, yet full of promise, full of purpose, and full of love.

“I love it,” she choked out. She folded herself into his arms and closed her eyes in his warmth. She didn’t need land, a house, animals, or crops to be home. She was already there.

“Wait,” Johnny gasped and jogged back to the car. He opened the side door and retrieved the black case. “For our memories.” He laid the case on the hood and unlatched it, pulling from it a large black camera.

He turned one way, adjusted some settings, pressed the button, and turned the crank, turned the other way and repeated it, then turned toward Rette. She smiled at him, her hands on her hips.

She heard them before they surrounded her. Tweeting and chirping sounded as a large flock of Cardinals came fluttering out of the trees behind Johnny. They flew around Rette, who laughed and squealed at the collage of reds and browns, before they flew away toward the next row of trees.
Johnny stood in front of her, laughing and winding the camera. “I think I caught that!”

His voice was full of so much joy and excitement, Rette wanted to run to his arms and never look back. So, she did.

That night, Johnny and Rette sat in the front room, Johnny on the far side of the sofa and Rette lying with her head resting on his knee. She stared up at him as he brushed back the curls from her cheek.

“Your hair has gotten too long,” Rette chastised him, running a hand through the hair hanging over his forehead.

“I know.” He ran his hand through it, relaxing back into the cushion.

“I could trim it for you if you’d like, or Momma could,” Rette offered.

Johnny made a hesitant sound. “I think I’d rather not. You tried to give me a haircut when I was twelve, remember?”

“That’s right!” Rette burst into a fit of giggles. “No matter what your mother tried to do to fix it, it didn’t look right for another month or so.”

“Yeah, and the week after we had our school portraits. Not to mention that dance social where none of the other girls would dance with me.” He laughed too, but a note of playful bitterness lingered in his tone.

Rette gasped for a breath and tears pricked her eyes. “I danced with you though, that’s what counted, right?

Johnny laughed, too, and Rette relished at the sound. “If I remember right, your father made you promise to dance with me because he knew no one else would.”
They both chucked at the memory. Rette knew other couples weren’t as lucky to have that many memories and stories to share and laugh over. She also knew that she had taken advantage of that fact time and time again.

“Thank you,” she told him, fiddling with his fingers.

“For what?” Johnny was quiet again, but a smile lingered.

“For loving me. It probably wasn’t always so easy.” She felt his gaze shift to her face, but she kept her eyes fixed on his hands. There were callouses on his palms at the base of each finger.

“It’s true. But it was never impossible.” He pulled his hand from hers and shifted so she had to sit up from his lap. She angled her body toward him and glanced at him only a moment before returning her gaze to their clasped hands. “Hey.” He put a soft knuckle beneath her chin to raise her gaze to his. “I love you. More than I did before everything.”

She allowed a smile for his benefit, but she didn’t feel it reach her eyes. She glanced at the clock on the table beneath the lamp. “Goodness, it’s late!” It was well past midnight. She began to stand from the settee. “I should probably head to bed.”

“No.” Johnny’s quiet voice halted her in place. She looked back at him. His eyes were pleading, their previous playfulness and joy at revealing their future home gone. He grabbed her hand with his and pulled. “Stay. Please?”

Rette looked at him on the settee then at his bedroom door, giving him a dubious look.

“Momma is staying at Lizzy’s to help her through the night with the baby, and Pop is in Fort Riley until Sunday. Please? Just for tonight.” His eyes were wide and raw, need echoing from them in breathtaking waves.
She nodded, and Johnny stood. Her hand slipped into his. She took a step closer to him, and his arms wrapped around her, gripping her dress in both hands. Heat rose in her chest, and he was kissing her as if he were a lost man and she—his salvation.

Johnny woke to a knock on his bedroom door. It was soft, lacking any sense of urgency, so he tucked in closer to Rette, tightening his arms around her and burrowing his face further into her hair. She’d taken it out of the clips she kept it contained in throughout the day, allowing it to fall in tangled curls around her face. It was the most glorious sight he’d ever seen.

The knock sounded again, firmer this time. “Johnny?” The muffled voice belonged to his mother. He knew she wouldn’t enter until he responded, but if it was important enough, she wouldn’t halt her efforts until he and—unbeknownst to her—Rette were both awake. He groaned and begrudgingly loosened his hold around Rette’s still sleeping body. He slipped from the bed and padded over to his door, opening it just wide enough to see his mother, but not wide enough that she would see the sleeping Rette behind him.

“What is it?” Johnny croaked. He swiped at the sleep in his eyes and squinted against the light in the front room. It was bright already. Johnny had slept so hard and long, he had no recognition of what time it was. It had been over a year since he’d slept that restfully.

Lynette gave him a curious look, and he knew it must be strange for her to find him still in bed at whatever time it was. For as long as he’d been home and well, he’d risen before everyone else in the house, too used to his routine. “This came for you.” She held a small yellow telegram envelope out to him through the small crack in the door.

He took it, straightening slightly. There was only one person it could be from, and his pulse quickened immediately. “Thank you, Mother.”
“You’re leaving, aren’t you?” Johnny looked up at her. She was worn, frazzled, and worry was now etched into her features on top of all the rest.

He considered pacifying her, lying, or suggesting otherwise, but he knew she’d see right through him or find out soon enough. He opened the door further, still blocking the opening with his body. “Doc has signed off on my injuries. I’m fit as a fiddle once again. Barely a trace remaining.”

He watched as his mother looked around the front room, before looking back at him. “Does Rette know?”

He waved the envelope at her. “I haven’t heard anything official yet, so I thought it’d be best to wait. She knows I’m healed and that we’re waiting to hear from my commander.”

“Well, I supposed that’s what that is then.” His mother sighed; he could see the stress rolling off her. It was out of character to see her in such a way. “Well, I’ll be next door if you two need me.”

Johnny stepped out of his room and closed the door behind him. He wrapped his arms around his mother and held her. “Thank you, Momma. Love you.”

Her arms were slow to wrap around his back, but when they did, they held on with a fierceness that brought tears to Johnny’s eyes. She pulled at his nightshirt, as though holding him to her, to this moment, to their home, and never wanting to let go. She took a shaky breath against his chest as though she was going to speak, but not a single sound uttered from her lips. She simply pulled away, patted his cheek without looking at him, and walked away out of their home and down the porch steps to continue her neighborly duties next door. He watched her leave, only looking away when she was finally completely out of sight. He still held the thin envelope in his hands, and he looked down at it, reading his name on the recipient information.
He retreated to the bedroom, intending to return to bed and wrap Rette up in his arms once again, but when he opened the door, he found Rette sitting up, pulling her long hair out of the collar out of her dressing gown.

She looked at him over her shoulder, her hair a mess, but cascading over her shoulders in a way that held Johnny’s breath in a lump in his chest. “Is that it then?”

He blinked at her. “What?”

Rette nodded at him, her gaze shifting to his hands held in front of him. He glanced down, suddenly remembering the envelope. “Oh–yes. I think so.”

He was tempted to set it on the dresser, ignoring it until later when Rette wasn’t sitting on his bed looking so wifely, but Rette had other plans. She stood and took it from him. “May I?”

He nodded, waving at her to proceed.

She sat on the foot of the bed and slipped her finger beneath the flap of the envelope, carefully tearing it open before slipping the piece of paper from it. She read it aloud. “Request to report to Fort Benning by evening 21 January for reimplementation.” She stopped, though Johnny was sure there were more details to the message than that–that’s all they needed to hear. She looked up at him, her eyes wide. “That’s tomorrow.”

Johnny couldn’t say he was surprised. He’d expected as much. They were desperate now to have everyone they could, with draft numbers and enlistment numbers rising astronomically. Unfortunately, the casualty numbers had begun to rise, too. “Yes,” Johnny replied simply. “It is.”

He watched as Rette glanced around the room; her face was blank yet seeming to search for something. “We have twenty-four hours.”

“Yes,” he said again, knowing he was stating the obvious. “We do.” His own mind was reeling, too. If he only had a day left with her, all he really wanted to do was tuck her back
beneath his sheets and hold her until his last hour finally came, but Rette seemed to have other plans.

She stood and paced his room, her strides long. He didn’t have to be inside her mind to know it was going a mile a minute, he could see it as her gaze shifted frantically over every inch of the room, returning to him constantly. She did so in silence for a moment until she stopped in front of him. She held her arms out, as though resigned to no other option. “Marry me,” she said, her voice firm. “Today.”

**Chapter Twenty-Seven**

Rette leaned back against the Colonel’s car door, waiting for Johnny to finish his phone call in the War Office. City Hall had been a disappointment. They could obtain a license and marry—if they wanted to wait two weeks. Pastor Phillips had been called away to a family emergency in Oklahoma late last night and would not return until Saturday—three days too late. As a last ditch effort, Johnny had stopped at the War Office to contact his commander and try to request an extension or leave so they could marry while he was still training in Georgia, but one look at his face as he emerged from the office, holding the door open for one of the secretaries returning from her lunch, was enough to tell Rette he’d been unsuccessful.

“Let’s go home,” Johnny sighed. She could hear the defeat in his voice, and as she turned to the car to open her own door, watching Johnny round the car, sighing in frustration as he started the car.

There were no options for them. Another missed opportunity.

“We can just wait, Johnny. It’ll be okay—”

“I want to be your husband.”
Rette looked at him. The anger, disappointment, frustration, and hopelessness in his voice sinking claws into her chest.

“I don’t want to go back—” he stopped mid-sentence, glancing down the side street before he continued on his way, heading past the street his home sat on, and out of town. He glanced over at her. “Not without making you my wife.”

Rette sat in silence, letting his words sink in. She didn’t know what had changed in her mind, but something about this departure felt different. She was ready to face whatever life threw at them, but only if she was his—if she could be Mrs. Jonathan Carver. That could be the only way she could handle it this time.

Before she’d been so afraid—afraid of obtaining such a title before he left, only to have it ripped from her, but she kept hearing Cal’s voice playing over and over in her mind, reminding her that though that was a possibility, it was not the only one.

“We could go to another church? Another town?” Rette was scrambling, tossing ideas out, but Johnny shook his head slowly, squinting against the bright sun. Dark clouds loomed on the horizon, and Rette knew it was the snowstorm waiting to roll in in the next day or two.

“I have an idea.” Johnny looked over at her. “You love me, right?”

Rette laughed, a barking laugh that she had to stifle because it surprised her with its force. “Of course.”

“Do we need a ceremony? A paper? To really say we are married?” He looked between her and the now familiar dirt road ahead of them. Rette knew where he was headed.

She shrugged. “If we don't, how will anyone know?”

“Does it matter if everyone knows? What if it was just you and me? All our other options have fallen through. Every time we’ve tried to plan something, put something together, involve
someone else, something happens, and I’m sick of it.” He slammed his fist against the steering wheel, his outburst making Rette jump.

She couldn’t think of what to say, what should be said. He wasn’t wrong. Between her mother’s plans, Geller’s death, Johnny’s injury, and their own indecision and shadows to shed light on, it had been impossible to make it to the altar, and now that they both knew without a doubt that this was what they needed, Rette understood Johnny’s desire to see it through. But the law stood in their way, their absentee pastor rendering himself useless, and all other options unavailable, Rette had to admit Johnny had a point.

“Do we need it all? The ceremony? The officiant? Why can’t it be enough just for it to be you and I?”

Rette looked over at him, catching his pleading glances as he looked between her and the road ahead of them. She knew their turn was coming up soon–she could feel it. His eyes pleaded with her–for him to be enough, for this, what they had to be enough for her. She needed it just as much as he did. They could make it official when he was home, safe. They wanted to be married, and though everything else stood in their way to prevent it, they were going to be married this time when he left. Rette would wait patiently for her husband’s return, and Johnny would face the remainder of the war knowing his wife was waiting for him to make a home when he could hold her in his arms once again. It wasn’t much, but it was all they could get.

“It is enough,” Rette announced, reaching over to take his hand that rested on the gear shift.

His face split into a smile as he continued to shift his gaze between her and the road as he began to slow the car. “Really?”

Rette nodded, smiling back at him.
He nearly leaped from his seat, every ounce of stress, fear, and disappointment having dissolved away. He turned into their drive, parked, and leaped from the car to open the gate, as he did so, Rette looked on as Johnny yelled at the top of his lungs, his energy having to be expended somewhere. Rette sighed and knew, though this would be their last day together for who knew how long, it was one she would remember until she was old, gray, and watching their grandchildren—and who knew? Great-grandchildren—chasing each other through the fields they now called home.

They didn’t speak as Johnny took her hand and led her through the fields opposite their new home.

The grasses shushed the world around them, the breeze whipping around them and enveloping them in a cocoon that drowned out all the rest.

Rette stepped carefully to avoid any pits in the ground, but she eventually found none and could take in the world around her. It was green and lively in its entirety. How the grasses were so green in the dead of winter, she had no idea. It seemed impossible to be sure, and yet there they stood where Johnny halted their advance, gazing out on the glowing emerald expanse of their land. Rette could see their pond, resting in the valley of the hill where their home crested, but even from their current vantage point, they were looking down on the brown roof of their home.

Their land was bordered by tilled and hibernating wheat fields, lying dormant until the opportunities of spring.
Johnny pulled on her hand, turning her to look at him. “When I saw this, I felt you—I felt us, and I knew I’d found our home. I know it’s not like anything either of us grew up in, but I hope it will be a place we can grow and build a life we can find purpose in together.”

Rette released one of his hands to put one of her own against his cheek. “It’s home, Johnny.” She wanted to say more, but she felt as though anything more would not be enough. She took his hand again, looking up into his eyes. “Jonathan Andrew Carver, I take you as my husband.”

He gave a little gasp and stepped closer to her, lowering his forehead to hers.

Not wanting to be interrupted, she pulled back slightly so she could still look into his eyes and continued, “To love. To cherish. To honor and obey. In sickness and health. I promise my heart, my body, my soul to yours until death parts us.”

Johnny closed the distance between them, unable to resist any longer, sweeping her up into his arms, kissing her deeply, and holding her tightly around the waist even as he allowed her feet to find purchase on the ground once again.

He pulled away, only far enough to let himself speak. Rette tried to look at him, but he was far too close. She closed her eyes, relishing in the feel of his arms around her and the sound of his voice—deep, sincere, and heavy with emotion.

“Margarette Louise Murphy, I take you as my wife, and I give myself to you—body, mind, and soul—as your husband, to have, to hold and to love forevermore. I promise to serve you, love you, and honor you as your husband—to do all within my power to provide for you, protect you, and seek you out, pursuing you for all our days. This, my heart, my body, my soul promises to you in good faith.”
Rette opened her eyes, her heart feeling fresh, light, as though awaking from a cleansing prayer to find Johnny’s eyes still closed. He ran his hand up her back. She watched as his lips continued moving.

“I now pronounce myself your husband—before God, our home, and all that nature may have to witness.”

Rette smiled, she leaned her head against his again and let her eyes slip closed, too. “I now pronounce myself your wife—before God, our home, and all that nature—”

Johnny didn’t let her finish. His mouth found hers with a fervent energy that swept every thought from her mind. He lifted her up into his arms, cradling her, and he began to walk, still kissing her for a moment until he broke their kiss to check his path ahead of them, still holding her close.

She clutched her hands behind his neck and watched as his pale eyes sighted what lay ahead of them, swimming with emotion and determination. Rette knew, wherever he may lead her, she would follow—not because she had blind faith or couldn’t make her own mind, but because she knew wherever he may go, she would want to follow.

Rette lay in Johnny’s arms, his hand stroking her bare back in lazy circles. It was dark now. After their moment on the hilltop, Johnny had carried her home, plucking a picnic basket and mound of blankets from the backseat of his father’s car before carrying her over the threshold of their home for the first time as husband and wife. They’d worked in silence, spreading blankets out on the bare wood floor of what would one day be their living room, and forgot all about the picnic basket as they were swept up in newlywed bliss.
The impending separation only spurred them on more, and in an effort to make the most of every moment they could, Rette only then in that moment late into the night, realized just how hungry she was.

Her stomach growled loudly, and Johnny chuckled, his chest jerking slightly beneath her head. She lifted her head and looked at him, an insatiable smile on his face. “I may be a little hungry.”

“I can fix that.” He gave her a wink and sat up, pulling the blanket over his lap as he reached for the picnic basket. Rette glanced at his bare chest then looked away, her cheeks pink.

She heard him rustling through the picnic basket, fishing out two brown wrapped squares and a jar of canned peaches.

“I have two ham sandwiches, and some canned peaches. There’s also some cheese and some crackers if you’re hungry for those.”

Rette reached for one of the squares, sitting up, and wrapping part of the blanket around herself. She unwrapped it as her stomach growled still louder, and sank her teeth into it, unable to resist the moan that escaped her. She laughed, feeling her cheeks pinken more.

Johnny laughed too as he ate his own sandwich. They studied each other, Rette growing more and more comfortable with the idea of gazing unashamedly at her husband. His hair was a mess, and though he’d had nearly two months of leave, his body had retained its strength, his torso defined, its peaks and valleys providing her gaze with ample opportunity to take it all in.

She felt him studying her too, and when the blanket began to slip from her grasp around her body, she didn’t stop its descent.

They sat there in comfortable silence, sharing their first meal as husband and wife.
The air in the car hung heavy with dreaded anticipation. They’d waited as long as they could, only dressing and packing up their blankets and basket at the last possible moment. Johnny’s hand gripped Rette’s knee firmly, only releasing her long enough to shift gears on the car before he laid claim once again. His thumb stroked her knee where her dress had slipped up over it to reveal the bare skin beneath. She didn’t mind. She ran her hand up Johnny’s arm, and felt the strength there, settling into it, trusting it to bring him home to her once again.

When they pulled into the bus station, Rette saw Lynette and the Colonel waiting for them there. His father had gotten his telegram clearly. When they parked, Johnny opened her door and held his hand out for her. She took it and walked beside him well enough, but she felt stretched like a tension wire. She was there, walking toward her husband’s mother and father, but her heart, their future, and his safety were all back at their home where they were guaranteed.

Rette knew she was being selfish. She knew his men needed him. She knew the country needed him. But he was one man—he was hers. Why, if they’d taken all the others, did they need him too?

He pulled her to a stop and greeted his parents, they gave them both hugs, Lynette handing over his duffle to him from home. Rette studied his face, his eyes, the way his lips moved and committed every hair, freckle, and scar to memory, cramming as many nuances and details into her mind as she could. He turned to Rette and slipped an envelope into her trembling hand, pulled her face up to meet his as he spoke, but his words escaped her. All she could hear was the thundering of her heart in her ears and the whooshing labor of her breathing. He kissed her, then held her one last time in a last-ditch effort to hold the pieces of her together. He walked away, looking back at Rette. He waved with a sad attempt at a smile on his face and fear in his eyes.
Then, he was gone.

My Dearest Rette,

Save a place for me. Before you know it, I’ll be home with you in our home, having children, and growing old together. I have faith that I will come home to you. My love, my wife.

Being with you the past two months has brought me so much joy. I have felt so loved, so happy, and so fulfilled. It makes me excited to come home again knowing that’s the life we get to live together. Full of joy, happiness, and satisfaction—there is no greater blessing than that.

I promise to you, Margarette Louise Murphy, that I will come home, that we’ll be together again, that I will spend every day reminding you that you’re my wife and I, your husband. You are my greatest love, and the answer to my prayers. I love you. Never forget that.

There are things I must say that I feel are necessary going into the months ahead, so please bear with me. Read my words and hold them to your heart. If I don’t come home—Lord, I hate the thought of it—if I don’t come home, know this. Even without the legalities of it all, I made promises to you in this life, and if you shall have to go on without me, I made sure that those promises would be fulfilled. Take them, build a life for yourself. Fall in love again. Get married, have children, and live your life. That is my hope for you.

I love you, my darling. More than you will ever know.

Forever, All My Love,

Johnny
Chapter Twenty-Eight

Johnny walked along the familiar path; his duffel was slung over his shoulder. The sun was inching lower and lower toward the horizon, and with it, the end of his freedom. As he neared the Commander’s office, he straightened his uniform, having changed at a diner in town where his bus had stopped. It felt strange to be worn by it again.

He knocked on the office door and was permitted entrance by a barking order. Johnny entered quickly and stated his report. Commander Falk’s office was just as Johnny had remembered it. In more than a year’s time, thousands of soldiers had come and gone through this fort, prepared for training, and shipped off all over the world to fight on behalf of their country.

As Johnny was ordered at ease by the familiar voice, he allowed his gaze to shift to Commander Falk. Though the office had gone unchanging, Commander Falk had not. Deep wrinkles had set in, made permanent with frequency and time, and his hair had gained at least two additional shades of white in that time—or Johnny thought, perhaps the darker hair had simply thinned.

“Corporal Carver!” Commander Falk’s booming voice nearly made Johnny jump. Though he tried for joviality, the Commander came up short, his voice simply carrying an edge to it. “I have to say, I’m sad to see it necessary for you to be back.”

The only reason Johnny would be back through training was due to injury. “You and be both, sir.”

Commander Falk nodded and stood, rounding his desk to lean against the front of it, studying Johnny. “Clean bill of health then? Fighting fit?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, good.” The Commander nodded solemnly before taking a deep breath to continue. “Well, soldier, we get you for one week before you’re getting sent off again. You’ll be
escorting a small number from our recent class here to join your squad who are preparing for training in Tunisia. So, you’ve got a bit of catching up to do.”

One week then he was gone. He couldn’t say he was surprised. “Yes, sir. I’m ready.”

“Good!” His booming voice made Johnny blink rapidly. He’d spent too long away from barky commanders. He’d have to tighten his bearing. “Off with you then! You’re in barrack 12. There should be an empty bunk. Here’s a list of your men who will be accompanying you to New York.”

Johnny took it and glanced at the names before looking back up at Commander Falk. He couldn’t deny the sinking feeling in his gut. “Will we be sailing, sir?”

Commander Falk shook his head. “Not this time, Corporal. Things in the Atlantic have kicked up again, so they’re having you and your men, among some other troops flown over. You’ll make a few stops along the way, but they’ll get you to your destination.”

Johnny felt relief pass over him in waves. “Thank you, sir.”

“You’re dismissed, Corporal.”

Johnny stood at attention and saluted Commander Falk who returned it before waving Johnny out of his office.

Johnny left, clutching the list of men he’d see implemented into his old squad. He read over it quickly: *PVT Clyde Ellis, PFC Leonard Porter, PVT Howard Schneider, PFC Paul Schneider*. Only four? He turned the page over, half expecting to see most of the page filled, the list finishing on the side Johnny had just read, but it was blank.

Johnny found his barracks easily; the layout of the Fort had gone unchanged since he was last there. There were new buildings added, but all the previous ones remained, still in heavy use.
Johnny opened the door to the barracks, revealing the large bunk room with the door to the washroom at the very back. It was lined with eighteen beds, most of which were stripped bare, but a sprinkle of–Johnny counted quickly–four beds were claimed, each man’s personal effects stored carefully.

Two men lounged on their beds, one sat on the floor digging through his footlocker, and the fourth emerged from the washroom, running a white towel over his head.

“Who are you?” The one on the floor asked. His footlocker read H. Schneider on the side Johnny could see.

“Corporal Johnny Carver,” he stated, tossing his duffle down on a bed. “Your new squad leader.”

H. Schneider stood from the floor. One who was lounging sat up, staring at him, while the other groaned and threw an arm over his face. The one emerging from the washroom finished drying his hair and walked to his bunk without another look at Johnny.

H. Schneider looked between Johnny and the freshly washed soldier who was minding his own business. “But I thought–”

Johnny unzipped his duffle, pulling his things to prepare for bed from its depths. Having not slept much the night before, Johnny was exhausted, and his bed–though he remembered how firm it would be–looked quite inviting.

“Porter! Weren’t you supposed to be it?”

Johnny looked up now, catching the eye of the soldier who’d emerged from the washroom–Porter.

He shrugged, glancing at Johnny. “I gave it up.”

H. Schneider swore. “Great, now we’ve got some fuddy duddy with a stick up his–”
“I’m not here to ruin your fun,” Johnny stated quietly.

H. Schneider turned to look at him again. “Oh, you aren’t, are you?” He stepped closer to Johnny and crossed one arm over his chest and tapped his chin with the finger from his opposite hand. “Hmm, let me see.”

He looked Johnny up and down, eyeing the awards that had been emblazoned on Johnny’s chest.

“North Africa. Injured, but recovered. Timing’s right, I’d say, and you’ve got that look about you that my old neighbor had when he talked about his time at war, like you’ve seen some shit.” He stared at Johnny expectantly.

Johnny couldn’t say he was surprised. “Got it in one,” Johnny stated, returning his gaze back to his bag.

H. Schneider guffawed loudly, and Johnny fought off the flinch as he felt the soldier’s breath slap the side of his face. They’d had onions again. Someone had had kitchen duty.

“Paul Schneider.” A hand appeared in Johnny’s peripheral, and Johnny saw the soldier who had sat up on his bunk at Johnny’s announcement. Johnny took his hand and shook it. “That sorry excuse of a man is my brother, Howard.”

Howard exclaimed loudly but Paul ignored him.

Paul motioned to the soldier stretched out on his bunk. “That’s Clyde Ellis.” Clyde waved the hand of the arm still draped over his face. “And back there is Leonard Porter, the finest soldier in our ranks. He’s the reason we were so surprised by your appearance.”

Johnny looked up at Porter, but Porter was busy at his bunk, putting his things away before turning in for the night. Johnny turned back to Paul. “Thank you.”

“We’ve got one week left, though I’m sure Commander’s told you.”
Johnny nodded. “We fly out of New York on the twenty-eighth.”

“Fly, huh?”

Johnny glanced over at Ellis, still lying prone but looking at him now. Johnny nodded.

“That’s what the Commander said.”

“Thank heavens. I can’t do boats. My daddy was a fisher and tried to get me to join him every time, but even on the lake I couldn’t handle it. Tossed my cookies each time. I joined up just so I wouldn’t have to follow in his footsteps. He tried to convince me to go Navy, saying I was born to be on the water, but my stomach churned just thinking of it.”

Johnny smiled and shook his head in disbelief. “I’m the same way. My first deployment was miserable. Thankfully the trip back I was unconscious for most of it.”

They stared at him in sobered silence. He could tell his experience made them uneasy, made the risk of what they headed into too real. Johnny gathered his things and headed to the washroom.

Porter stopped him as he passed. “Carver?”

Johnny glanced at him expectantly.

“It’s good to have you. My cousin was Ted Mills. He told me about you. What are the chances, huh?” Recognition registered, as Johnny remembered Teddy from his first round of training there.

“Yes! I remember Mills! How is he?”

Porter looked down at his hands, and Johnny realized that Porter’s use of the past tense hadn’t been by mistake. “He was killed in the Pacific last summer.”

Johnny’s chest ached. “I’m sorry to hear that. He was a good soldier.”
Porter nodded, glancing up at Johnny. He gave Johnny a half smile, and Johnny took that as his leave.

The next morning, Johnny felt as though perhaps he wasn’t quite fighting fit yet. The morning PT humbled him considerably, when his lung capacity was tested to its max on their typical two-mile warm-up. He didn’t think he had any energy remaining for the rest of the day, but somehow, he continued, his lungs always seeming to be on the verge of giving up but not quite quitting entirely.

Their day passed quickly, and Johnny found himself thankful for the promise of free time after supper. As he cleaned up after himself, he said goodnight to his squad and went on his way, a specific visit in mind before they made their departure.

He opened the door to the Chapel that was never locked and peered into the darkness within. He’d never seen it in the dark. It was eerie–sad.

“Hello?” Johnny called out. “Is anyone–”

A door at the front of the room burst open, and light poured into the main chapel, making Johnny jump. A familiar figure emerged. “Can I help you?” The voice, however, was entirely unfamiliar–edged and short. “Carver.”

Johnny came closer, finding Chap looking rough, tired, and worn. Though Johnny could tell he tried to keep up appearances, it was clear that Chap was struggling. His usually firmly pressed uniform, carefully combed hair, and cleanly shaven jaw were all in disarray, Wrinkled, mussed, and prickly. Something had changed. “Hey, Chap,” Johnny greeted him with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. “Just wanted to stop in to say hello.”
Chap looked him up and down then out at the dark empty chapel behind him. “Hello,” he said bluntly, then looked at Johnny expectantly.

“Hello?” Johnny replied slowly, his greeting turning more into a question. “Can we sit? Is everything all right?”

Chap blinked at him. “No, we can’t, and no it isn’t. I’m not available right now. I’ll see you at Sunday’s service. Goodnight.” With that, Chap retreated to his office and closed the door, leaving Johnny in the dark.

“Right,” Johnny muttered to the dark empty room and returned to his barracks.

Ellis was inside, digging through his footlocker. “Hey, Carver.”

Johnny gave him a wave but said nothing else.

“Everything all right?”

Johnny sat on the edge of the bed and stared off for a moment, replaying his exchange over and over in his mind. “Have you met Chap?” He looked up at Ellis and saw as his face fell slightly.

Ellis hesitated. “Yes. I have—he was different when we first got here. He—” Ellis looked at Johnny, trying to find the words. “He lost his son. He hasn’t been the same since.”

Johnny ran his hands through his hair and swore under his breath. “That explains it.” He looked up at Ellis again. “What happened?”

Ellis sighed. “I heard it was over the holidays. Chap had gone home, took his boy out on the lake to do some fishing. Chap glanced away for a moment, and he was gone. Chap jumped in after him but couldn’t find him in time. He was eight.”
Johnny’s dinner churned in his stomach. The pain and guilt that Chap must have felt—just thinking of it made Johnny sick. He couldn’t wait to be a father one day, but that—losing one’s child, especially alone like that—was his greatest fear.

Chapel on Sunday was not the same. Chap took them through the motions, but his voice was devoid of all meaning. It lacked its weight and belief. Johnny found himself wondering why Chap was even there. Why not at home with his family, tending to the gaping wound in their hearts? As he sat there, listening to Chap drone on and on, the other soldiers stifling their own yawns, Johnny thought maybe Chap wanted the escape—the normalcy that his life before had offered.

When Johnny returned to his bunk, he pulled his writing pad from his footlocker and sat with his back against it. *Dearest Rette,* he wrote.

*I’ve only got a few days left here for training before they’re shipping me off to New York again. I’ll be only passing through. They’ve got us on a plane to Scotland before the end of next week. I’ll write to you again when we arrive.

Things are much the same here, though the Chaplain I met the first time is very different now. I discovered he lost his son in a terrible fishing accident over the holidays. He was only ten. Watching him suffer through that torment, even in my short time here, it speaks to fears of my own about being a father.

I’m so excited to have children with you one day whenever that may be, but I wasn’t expecting all the anxieties that come with it. It was something I had not considered.

I hope being my wife has brought you comfort. I know it has me. Knowing I’ll be coming home to you, to our home, it makes all this worth it. I feel as though I am truly fighting for
something now—I have a reason to come home and a life I know and can find comfort in just waiting for me to live.

I’ll leave it at that, but I look forward to your letters, my beautiful wife.

Forever. All my love,

Your Husband

Chapter Twenty-Nine

It had been a week since Johnny boarded his bus back to training, and Rette was doing surprisingly well. She’d written to her mother that day, knowing it would be best to notify her of their marriage sooner rather than later, fearing her reaction were she to find out much later, and Rette was working up the courage to explain how it had all happened to Lynette and the Colonel. The week had been a frenzy, with the Colonel called away much longer than they’d anticipated, and Lizzy’s head cold being passed along to each of her three children. By some miracle Lynette remained well, but she had her hands full. Rette spent the week alone and quite bored. She’d tried to offer her help at Lizzy’s, but Lynette had shooed her off, not wanting Rette to catch the cold. Lynette didn’t want to have to nurse Rette back to health on top of all of Lizzy’s family, though Rette had argued her own ability to tend to her sicknesses.

Rette stepped out on the porch to check the mail, finding a letter addressed to her within the box. She sat on the top porch step to enjoy the fresh air as she opened it. It was from her mother.

Dear Margarette,
You are not married. What you described was nothing more than empty promises with nothing to show for it. He did not provide for you, he did not protect you, if your name is not legally tied to his, he has done nothing but burden your heart.

Come home, Rette. There is nothing more for you there. Your family is here, and Aunt Florence has been growing weaker by the day. She has not come down for breakfast for the past three days. Lucy has been despondent without you. Now that she’s set her heart on the young Corporal Wallace, she won’t set sight on another man, and has been quite the bore at social functions. Come help me shift her focus to finding someone she can start a life with, someone here, someone constant, someone reliable, and find someone for yourself too. It’s time to set aside your childhood romance and find a husband. You need someone who can provide for you and give you the life you deserve.

I’ll have Jansen put your room back in order, and we’ll be expecting you by the end of the week. I have a few engagements lined up for you girls, and this time we’re staying away from that Community House and the USO events. They’re crawling with soldiers and you girls deserve better than someone who is going to leave you.

With love,

Mother

Rette seethed. She tossed the letter out into the air, not complaining one bit when it landed in a half-melted puddle of snow. Her mother, seeming to be back to her usual antics, held no regard for the romantic, but Rette’s mind whirled.

She had a point. Rette had nothing to show for her marriage to Johnny aside from her own memory. There was nothing physical. No evidence to show for it, no papers, and not even
any witnesses to speak of what they’d shared on that hilltop. It was as though they weren’t married at all.

Rette stormed inside the house, her mother’s letter crumpled into a dripping ball within her fist. She threw it in the bin on her way up the stairs, pulled her writing pad from her dressing table and wrote a strongly worded letter to her mother notifying her that she’d taken up her old job at Olly’s and could not leave him hanging once again. She would stay, and her mother would have to make do without her. Now, she’d done no such thing yet. She hadn’t even ventured into town since she was at the War Office with Johnny trying to find any option for their marriage, but it was a problem easily remedied. She would finish her letter then walk into town to post it on her way to Olly’s. He wouldn’t turn her down. He always needed more help.

So, she did just that, thrusting her letter into the post box where she knew it would be picked up by the end of the day, and waltzed right into Olly’s bustling diner, and behind the counter, picked up a spare apron they kept stored in case there was ever a mess and set to work.

Joan gave her a wide-eyed look, but Rette just continued on her way, taking orders, and working alongside Joan and Rette’s two replacements–Lora and Nell.

“Murphy!” Olly’s booming voice called out. Rette looked up, waiting to be chastised. Instead, she felt all eyes turn on her as Olly addressed her. “Good to have you back.”

Rette smiled at him and waved, turning to return to the table she was taking orders for.

“But!” Olly called out again. “You’re out of uniform. Get yourself a fresh set this afternoon, and don’t let it happen again.”

Rette gave him a nod and a small salute before they all returned to work, the patrons seeming to bustle with renewed energy now.
Rette relished in it. For the past week, she’d lied dormant, purposeless, and she yearned to put herself to work in any way she could. The Carvers’ house was cleaner than it had ever been, Rette finally getting the hang of staying on top of the day-to-day chores, but once she’d mastered that, embroidery grew dull, and the radio either repetitive or depressing— but this? This brought her back to an energy and a version of herself that she could get lost in.

As she walked home that day, feet sorer than they’d ever been given her lack of her usual working loafers, she strode with satisfaction at the completion of a day’s work.

Over the following weeks, Rette found her stride, balancing her time between Lynette at home and working at Olly’s, but as time passed, Rette began to feel off. She woke one morning, nearly two months after Johnny’s departure, with waves of debilitating nausea. Lynette had called Olly’s, deeming her unfit for work and tended to her, but for days it continued. Rette lost all sense of time, and when she lost consciousness on her way back to her bed one morning, she awoke to Doc, leaning over her in bed.

“Margarette? It’s Doc. Do you know what day it is?”

Rette mumbled incoherently but shook her head.

“It’s March twenty-fourth. When was your last menstruation?”

Rette felt her face flush and feared it was another wave of nausea coming on, but it didn’t come, and she thought about Doc’s question. She’d been so caught up returning to some resemblance of her normal life without Johnny that she hadn’t thought. She’d had months before that she’d gone without, but there was never an alternative reason. She swallowed back a rising wave of nausea and cleared her throat. “The first week of January, I believe.”
Doc nodded solemnly. “Now, I do not wish to make presumptions, but I would like for you to be honest with me. Before Johnny left, were you intimate?”

Rette sat up slightly in bed, crossing her arms over her chest. “We got married, Doc. We couldn’t get the papers in time, and Pastor Phillips was out of town, but we did—it was just he and I, but we married, Doc, we did.” Emotions rolled through her chest, and great hot tears spilled down her cheeks. “We’re married.” She sobbed, and even to her own ears, she sounded as though she was trying to convince herself.

She was on the bus to Manhattan by the end of the day. Lynette had argued with her incessantly, insistent that she needed to stay until she was well again. Honoring Rette’s wishes, Doc didn’t reveal Rette’s condition, and Rette hadn’t told her. She couldn’t. She couldn’t tell anyone.

She wasn’t married, and to reveal the result of their union would be to bring scorn and ridicule upon the last happy memory she had with him. She felt more ill at the thought, and she leaned her head against the cold glass, pulling a packet of crackers from her bag. Doc suggested small snacks and meals would be the best way to keep her stomach settled. She took a tentative nibble and sighed, feeling her stomach settle just the smallest bit.

She put a tentative hand to her stomach, though she felt no life within. She closed her eyes and willed the rocking of the bus to halt.

She walked the two blocks from the bus station to Aunt Florence’s home, nausea rising with each step she took closer and closer to her mother. She would know. The second she laid eyes on her, Rette knew her mother would know exactly what brought her home, she only wished her mother would hold off on her scorn and shame until Rette felt well enough to withstand it more.
She lifted the brass knocker and let it fall, each passing second feeling like a lifetime.

The door opened. It was Lucy. “Rette!”

Rette nearly collapsed with relief. One look at her revealed that she’d been on her way to dinner when Rette had arrived, meaning most everyone else was probably preoccupied in the dining room, allowing Rette ample opportunity to retreat upstairs unnoticed.

Lucy’s brow furrowed in concern as she took in Rette’s appearance. Rette tried to imagine how she looked, pale, thin, and exhausted. “Are you unwell?”

Rette gave her a half smile, part of her truly grateful to see her. “I would just like to get to bed unnoticed. Could you help me?”

Lucy reached for Rette’s bag without another word and took Rette’s arm. “Come with me.”

Rette was ushered up the stairs by Lucy who glanced behind her a few times at the open dining room door.

“Lucy?” Mother’s voice called out.

“I’ll be just a moment! I just need to powder my nose!” Lucy’s voice was overtly jovial, and quite convincing.

“Thank you,” Rette whispered.

Lucy hushed her and continued guiding her up the stairs to their wing.

“I knew you’d turn up.”

A chill went up Rette’s spine, and Lucy halted on the top step.

Lucy turned, but Rette didn’t need to–she couldn’t find the energy to.
“Only a few months past your failed wedding, you finally come back, even after I kindly asked for my daughter back, when we could have remedied it all and had you married before you felt this way.”

Rette turned and looked at her mother, giving her the satisfaction of seeing her pale worn face.

“How does it feel, Rette?” Mother’s tone was blunt, haughty, and so unkind it made Rette feel sicker with each word out of her mouth. Mother walked closer to her. “How does it feel to be a mother?” She spat the word at her, and Rette flinched.

Before Rette could say anything for herself, she heard Lucy gasp, and a breeze blew past Rette as Lucy flew past and the sound of flesh on flesh echoed down the long hallway. Rette stared in shock as her mother straightened, holding her cheek with both hands.

“How dare you speak to your daughter that way? I know you’ve been through a lot Carol, but we all have. Rette needs you, Carol, but she doesn’t need that. She came home when she clearly needed you the most, and you greet her with spite?” Lucy took a step back and shook her head, tears falling down her cheeks now. “I am ashamed to call you family.”

Rette watched as her mother’s gaze shifted over to her, and Rette saw the fierce facade crumble before Lucy put a gentle arm around Rette’s shoulders and led her down the hall toward her waiting bedroom.

Chapter Thirty

Tunisia was far from how Johnny had imagined it. His only experience with north Africa involved crawling along the ground in excruciating pain. Their camp was a miniature tent city with all their amenities a typical base may have aside from a few changes considering they were
in the field. Large palm trees dotted the path to camp, but once they arrived at camp, it was much of the same plains that Johnny had been lost in less than six months ago.

On top of the recurrent memories of using the very grasses and weeds he trodded over to drag himself inch by terrible inch toward some unknown and impossible goal, Johnny battled constantly with the burden of time away from Rette.

He knew marrying her meant he’d look forward to coming home to her, but now that he knew just what was waiting for him at their reunion, well it made being apart from her even more tortuous.

The only thing that soothed the ache was her letters, but over the past few weeks, those had stopped too. He sat at supper as Sergeant Bailey handed out mail call from a stack, picking at his meal.

“Renner! Ellis! Carver!”

Johnny looked up just as a letter was tossed his way. It floated down onto the table in front of him. Each of their letters were now identical, packaged in airmail envelopes that opened into a copy of the letter their loved one had written.

He tore it open, eagerly expecting to finally feast his eyes on his wife’s handwriting once again, already feeling the anticipation like a salve on his aching heart, but he found his mother’s handwriting instead.

Dear Johnny,

Rette is quite ill. She’s been unable to keep anything down for the past week, and a few days ago she fainted after a particularly bad spell. I had to call Doc. He assessed her privately, and when he was done, I tried to find out what was wrong, but he refused to tell me anything. He
left without answering any of my questions, and before I knew it Rette was packing. I tried to stop her, but she’s gone back to her Great Aunt’s house in Manhattan.

I don’t know what’s going on. She was in surprisingly good spirits when you left, and she was doing so well for so long. It was quite surprising given how she reacted to your leaving the first time, but now—my dear it’s so much worse. She’s a shell of herself.

I wrestled with whether to tell you, as I knew she’d been unable to write for the past couple of weeks as ill as she was, but please write to her?

Can you tell me anything about the day you two spent together before you left? I never heard how you two spent your time together. As happy as she was for weeks after you left, it was clear that the quality time you two got was time well spent. However, I have my suspicions as to Rette’s ailment.

Write to her, write to me. I love you, my boy.

Momma

Johnny’s mind spun. He shoved his plate of food away, unable to stand the sight or smell of it himself. Something was wrong with his wife, and he couldn’t do anything to help. His own mother, who he’d hoped would be able to care for and protect Rette in his absence, was now unable to either because Rette had shut herself away. He had to do something.

He shoved away from the table and ran to his commander’s office. He announced himself, but he did not wait to be admitted before he entered.

Lieutenant Biggs sat at his desk, unchanging since Johnny’s last stint in Scotland. He looked up from his paperwork as Johnny entered, his glasses perched on his nose. “Corporal?”

“Excuse me sir, but I need your help.”
Johnny explained everything: his rushed marriage, how well Rette had been doing since his departure, and her sudden and seemingly serious ailment—he even showed Lieutenant Biggs his mother’s letter. The Lieutenant studied it for a moment, his eyes scanning the words through his glasses and peering up at Johnny over them.

“Was the marriage consummated?”

Johnny took a breath to answer, but choked, coughing slightly. “Excuse me, what?”

“Were you and your wife intimate before or after you were married?” Lieutenant Biggs continued to stare at him, his gaze unnerving.

“What does that—”

Lieutenant Biggs sighed loudly and pulled his glasses from his face, laying Johnny’s letter down on top of the paperwork he’d been working on. “I’ll take that as a yes. It’s been what? Two and a half months?”

Johnny nodded silently.

“She’s pregnant, Corporal.”

Johnny felt the color drain from his face, and he felt cold. A sweat broke out across his forehead down his face and around to the back of his neck. His hands pooled with moisture, and his tongue suddenly felt three times too big. He tried to speak, but nothing came out.

“My wife was sicker than a dog with all three of our children, but never until a couple months in. That’s how we always knew she was expecting. Some women are never ill and do not realize they are pregnant until they can visibly see it but given the timeline and what I can only guess as your successful newlywed endeavors—you’re going to be a father, Corporal.”

Lieutenant Biggs returned his glasses to his nose, picked up his pen again and held out Johnny’s letter with his other hand.
Johnny moved to take it, but his legs wouldn’t move, he thought he was about to fall on his face until his legs came up under him, and he took the paper from the Lieutenant's outstretched hand. “Thank you, sir,” Johnny muttered thickly, still dazed.

He returned to his barracks and sat on the edge of his cot. He stared across the room at a pinup poster Renner had hung up their first day at camp.

*Pregnant. Father.*

Johnny thought back to their wedding on the hilltop and their night at the little cabin. He supposed he knew it was a possibility, but was it really just like that?

He thought of the year ahead of him. He couldn’t recall how long a woman was to be pregnant for, but he knew if Rette was pregnant they’d probably be parents by Christmas.

His eyes burned, and he looked around at the barracks and empty cots around him. They weren’t going anywhere. Unless something happened to them, they were gone for the duration. He wouldn’t be home until it was all over.

And how long would that take? A year? Two? Aside from their recent control of certain areas in north Africa, as far as he knew they were not much closer to making any advances as they were before the US had joined the war.

His child would be walking, talking, able to have a full conversation with him before he even got to hold them—or his wife—again.

He stood and yelled, screaming out at the top of his lungs. He turned to his cot and kicked at it, shoving it feet away. He pulled at the blanket on his bed, not thinking, just needing to destroy something.

It was unfair. He pulled at the short hair atop his head, feeling his scalp burn as the few hairs he was able to grab tore away. Everything he wanted. It was his.
But he was too far away to enjoy it—to live it.

He kicked his cot again, and it toppled to the side. He screamed, his pulse pounding in his ears and tears burning down his cheeks. He sank to the floor beside his overturned cot, unable to fight the racking sobs in his chest. His old wound burned. The healed ribs called out for mercy, and his lungs, long recovered, ceased to work, leaving his vision blurry as darkness etched into his peripherals.

Johnny carried his supply of airmail paper with him everywhere. He wrote Rette a letter nearly every day, and a few days he wrote her twice a day. The letters were posted, sent off to a central office to be scanned and sent back home. But he never heard anything back.

He could handle the wait at first. He knew it would take time for his messages to get to her, but as week after week passed, he grew more and more obsessive. He ran out of his own supply of airmail paper three weeks in, and Ellis handed over half his supply, willing to help Johnny find his answer.

The worst was not knowing. Was Rette well? Was she healthy? Was she pregnant? Did she have some other ailment that had her lying on her deathbed with her husband none the wiser? He wrote to her mother and discovered her own similar suspicion, but neither could get word into her. Johnny thought about writing to her mother, but he knew she would never forgive him if he was the one to reveal such a thing to her if she didn’t already know—but she was her mother, surely, she knew. But if Rette wasn’t pregnant—well he hadn’t done much to ensure that their marriage could provide for her legally or societally, and to reveal that there was a possibility of her being pregnant—well it wasn’t something he’d considered when he was swept up in the romance of the moment.
He hated himself in that moment for putting Rette in such a debilitating position. Was there really nothing that could be done?

“Carver!”

Johnny looked up from his parachute he was supposed to be packing carefully into his drop pack. “Sergeant?”

Sergeant Bailey bent at the waist to pick up the half-written letter Johnny had discarded, lost in thought, his parachute only partially packed. “What is this?”

“A letter, Sergeant,” Johnny stated plainly. When Sergeant Bailey gave him a dubious look, Johnny returned to his parachute.

Sergeant Bailey plucked Johnny’s pack from his hands and shook his head at Johnny’s progress. “This is poor work, Corporal. Get your head out of your ass, put your love notes away, and focus or you’ll get yourself killed.”

Johnny took the pack back and inspected his parachute. Sure enough. Had he jumped with his parachute in such a state, his parachute would become such a knotted mess that it would do little to slow his descent. He watched as Sergeant Bailey continued down their line, inspecting the packs as he went. He looked down at the letter, yet another plea to Rette to answer him, and folded it into his pocket.

If he didn’t set aside his worries, he would never be able to see himself home to find out one way or the other. He wouldn’t write to her again until he heard from her. He’d done all he could.
Chapter Thirty-One

Rette laid in bed for weeks. Mother knew, so at least she didn’t have to put up a front. Lucy never addressed it, never asked, and Rette found herself too exhausted for company most days. Jansen brought her a tray of food for every meal, but aside from a few nibbles, most of it went uneaten. She was growing thin, aside from her growing abdomen, and Rette prayed constantly for the day to come when she would finally feel normal again.

A pile of airmail began to arrive for her only a week after her arrival, and at first it was only one every few days or so, but then they began to arrive in stacks. All for Rette. All from Johnny. She was sure they contained recollections of his epic adventures abroad, but she couldn’t bring herself to open them.

As much as she hated to admit it, her mother had gotten to her. Johnny hadn’t provided for her like he’d promised. Sure, he’d bought a piece of land and had a small home for them, but he left her with false hopes and an illegitimate child. He could claim the child as his own until he was blue in the face, but according to law–according to Rette’s mother and the rest of society were they to discover the state of her–the child was a mistake.

Rette slid her hands over the small bump she carried with her everywhere. She thought of holding her baby in her arms in a matter of months and knew she could never look at something of her own flesh and blood–and Johnny’s–and call it a mistake.

But the circumstances?

Rette sighed into her empty room. She hadn’t felt nauseous since she’d woken that morning, but the fatigue of the past few months kept her in bed anyway. She plucked the bowl of fruit from her side table and took a few bites, relishing in the sweet freshness of the spring berries.
All plans had been tossed away that day. The only plan made was to get married, but they didn’t even do that right. Then Rette was led into her marriage thinking all was well and happy and that she could wait out Johnny’s time away and the war and start life when he returned, but it slapped her in the face. Everyday. Sometimes multiple times a day. For the past few months.

Rette eyes grew heavy. She was exhausted just thinking of it.

She’d tried to formulate the words so many times. When she found herself unable to sleep every night because she spent so much of her day unconscious, she sat with sheets of airmail on her lap. Lucy had explained that they were the new way mail was being carried to troops to minimize weight and maximize efficiency. She’d gotten as far as Dear Johnny before she realized she could never bring herself to say it. He was gone, and he wouldn’t be home until they were done. It could be years—though the thought made Rette’s chest seize with panic. She couldn’t burden him with that on top of all the rest. From how much she missed him, she was sure he missed her just as much, if not more, and to add a child—the guilt of it all. No. She couldn’t do that to him.

She woke that afternoon to a loud slam, and she bolted upright until the force went straight to her head, sending her back down immediately with stars in her eyes and a cold sweat on her brow.

Rette heard footsteps scamper down the hallway, much too fast to be Mother or Jansen—her door opened swiftly. It was Lucy. She breezed into the room, closed the door behind her and went immediately to Rette.

“Lynette was here.”
Rette stared up at her from her pillow. She smiled at Lucy, surely this was Lucy’s way of cheering her up.

Lucy leaned closer; her face was still more serious. “Lynette was here, Rette.”

Rette felt her face fall as she realized what Lucy meant. “What?”

“It was horrible. Your mother answered the door unfortunately. You can imagine her surprise. Her first question was whether you’d invited her.”

Rette shook her head quickly.

“That’s what Lynette said as well, she said she came because she was concerned for you.”

Rette closed her eyes. She could only imagine what the past few weeks must have been like for Lynette.

“Your mother, of course, told her you were none of her concern, and that you were being taken well care of. Then Lynette asked if you were pregnant.”

Rette felt her face drain, and she felt the fruit she’d eaten that morning rising in her throat. “What did Mother say?” Rette croaked through clenched teeth, trying to hold back the wave of nausea.

“I could only make out half of it,” Lucy said quietly, giving Rette a cautious look. “She was yelling and screaming all kinds of things at her. Things about stealing you and trying to be a better mother to you; things about Johnny and how you’re too good for him. It was—” Lucy stopped, and Rette could’ve sworn she saw her shiver. Lucy shook her head as though trying to lose the memory.

Rette hated the jealousy her mother felt toward Lynette. It had always been there, so Rette couldn’t say she was surprised, but she being too good for Johnny? That was new. Rette
had never been told she was too good for something. There was the expectation that she conduct herself better than some of her peers, but her mother had never looked at her to say: *He doesn't deserve you.* To do so would imply that she had something that was deserving of, and Rette wasn’t sure her mother had ever implied that either.

Lucy sat on the edge of the bed and studied her. Rette let her eyes slip closed. She was too exhausted for much else.

“How are you?” Lucy asked.

Rette opened her eyes and found Lucy’s face crestfallen. She didn’t glow quite as brightly as she once had. “I’m so tired, Luce.” Rette let her eyes slip shut again and was met with Lucy’s silence.

“I’ll let you rest,” Lucy said, more to herself and rose to leave the room.

When the door clicked shut behind her, Rette let herself open her eyes to study her empty room. She couldn’t tell Lynette. She’d never be able to keep it from Johnny, and Rette would hate to ask her to. Lynette would convince her to tell Johnny, and Rette couldn’t. It was nearly too much for her to bear, she couldn’t put that on him, too.

She’d have to face the future, the unknowns, this child, alone.

Rette began to emerge over the following months, and as spring gave way to summer, she found herself going through the motions of a normal life. She still didn’t leave the house. Her stomach had begun to protrude before she could manage to spend any length of time out of bed, and by June—well there was no mistaking it.
Food was now her main focus. She made up for her months being unable to keep anything down. She was the first to arrive at each mealtime and the last to leave, though Mother came and went without word, leaving Rette to converse with Lucy about her plans for the day.

Lucy had set up quite the life for herself in Manhattan. She was elected to the executive board of the Women’s League and was put in charge of organizing most of their charitable events. Her latest included funding scholarships to aid families of women who had gone to help the war effort, including volunteering time for babysitting, homecare, and cooking. She was a constant flurry of excitement and was always willing to share her latest adventures with Rette, allowing her to live vicariously through her efforts.

Lucy had been hesitant at first. The first time Rette had come down for breakfast, Rette had asked about her day’s plans, and Lucy looked torn.

“I don’t wish to make you feel pressured to help or to feel bad for being stuck here,” she’d said, studying the handle of her teacup.

Rette smiled at Lucy’s consideration and spoke with as much earnestness as possible, “Please share? I want to know of your adventures, though I will not participate in them myself, I want to know that you’ve filled your time with purpose.”

Lucy had gazed at her, considering Rette’s request, then it had all spilled out in one fell swoop, and every morning and mealtime was the same.

Rette didn’t see much of any of the occupants of the house aside from mealtimes. Sometimes she sat in the sunroom with Aunt Florence, embroidering, but she grew tired of the silence. As the weather grew warmer, she preferred the company of the birds in the back garden, choosing to rest in the shade of the great white gazebo with a small stack of books from Aunt Florence’s ancient library.
She read about plants: the trees, bushes, and flowers that slowly emerged and blossomed around her as the seasons grew favorable, and with it, she felt herself slowly emerging as well. The little kicks and wiggles and flutters from within her womb offered all the company she needed on her quietest of days.

She was there one particularly hot day in mid-July in a simple white cotton dress Lucy had picked up for her. It was loose enough around her midsection with a higher waistline that she’d be able to wear it long into her pregnancy, though if she calculated correctly, she wouldn’t be nearing the end until mid-October and by then the dress wouldn’t offer the warmth that she would need for the Kansas autumn.

She was reading about maintaining cropland, particularly how and why farmers burn their fields after harvest to return nutrients back into the soil, when she heard her name called out.

“Margarette!”

She looked up from her book and squinted into the bright midday sun. It was the kind of light that washed color from everything, and it ricocheted off the light stones of Aunt Florence’s home and back into Rette’s eyes, causing her to squint harder.

Her mother stood at the top of the back steps, and there were three figures lingering behind her in the shadows of the small porch awning.

“We have visitors!”

Mother had a habit of pretending she didn’t exist—especially when other people visited their home—so why would she call attention to her now?

Rette closed her book and gathered herself slowly to her feet. She walked out into the sun, but she didn’t dare look up for the blazing sun overhead.
“Where is your hat?!” Mother ridiculed as Rette mounted the back steps. Recognition sunk into Rette’s skin—so this was the Mother she was dealing with today.

Rette looked up as she found the last step, and her eyes caught the light gleaming off a military uniform. A chill went up her spine and a sweat broke out across her brow—Johnny.

“My word,” a woman’s voice said—one Rette didn’t recognize. It was breathy and lyrical as though every word she felt inclined to sing. “She’s beautiful. Isn’t she dear?”

“Good strong bones, clearly,” came a man’s voice. Rette lifted her hand to shade her eyes, still standing baking in the sun.

It wasn’t Johnny, but it was a soldier, standing tall with an older man and woman standing in front of him. His mother’s head blocked his name tag, so even if Rette could have recognized it, she was robbed of the information.

Rette gave her mother a questioning glance, waiting for introductions. It was clear to Rette that she had been the subject of their conversation prior to their adventure outdoors.

“Margarette, this is Specialist Richard Moore, his mother, Wilma, and his father, Constable Tibald Moore.”

Rette nodded to each one, giving her best smile, unable to help her hands from cradling her protruding stomach. Her condition was clear, she wasn’t going to bother trying to hide it.

“Nice to meet you.”

Mother looked between Rette and their three guests before she continued, “Constable and Mrs. Moore were friends with your father before his death.”

Mother maintained her gaze on Rette, and she stared back for a moment.

“We’re so very sorry for your loss,” Mrs. Moore trilled, clutching her hands to her chest.

Rette gave her a tight smile. “Thank you.”
Constable Moore cleared his throat and rocked on his heels. “Yes well, let’s get this over
with.”

Mother clapped her hands together. “Of course, Constable.” Mother turned to Rette.

“Specialist Moore is to be your husband, dear.”

Rette stared at her mother and gave a short laugh. Mother leveled her gaze at her, and
Rette realized that— in her mother’s eyes—this was a done deal. “I don’t understand.”

Rette watched Specialist Moore sigh and mutter into his mother’s ear, but she lifted a
hand and shushed him.

“You need a husband before that child is born,” Constable Moore barked. “My son is
going to marry you and provide a roof over your head and a companionable life. You’ll want for
nothing.”

Rette stared at him. They couldn’t be serious. It was nineteen forty-three, surely arranged
marriages were a thing of the past. “You fixed this didn’t you?” Rette asked her mother.

Mother turned to her with a haughty stare. “Of course, I did. No daughter of mine is
going to become a social recluse, nor is she going to bring scorn and ridicule down upon herself
and her family.”

“You had no right—”

“That is my job, dear!” Mother’s voice was shrill now, and Rette tensed as her mother
stepped toward her, standing between her and the Moore’s. “I had to do something! Your life in
your own hands in that godforsaken town only resulted in an empty promise and a lifelong
consequence of actions that would never have happened if you were under my roof!” Mother’s
face was flushed, and a gleam in her eyes made Rette wring her hands. Her mother had gone too
far.
Rette side-stepped around her mother and addressed Specialist Moore between his parents. “I’m sure you are a lovely gentleman who will make someone very happy one day, but that will not be me.” Rette watched as offense spread across Constable and Mrs. Moore’s faces. “Good day to you, Constable, ma’am.” She nodded to each one in turn before she stormed inside the house.

She went to her bedroom and flopped down on the bed, instantly regretting it when she felt a muscle twinge in her abdomen. It was only a matter of moments before Rette’s door flew open.

“You ungrateful—” her mother’s insult was lost to the sound of her door slamming against the wall behind it. “You have no idea how many people I have talked to about you trying to find someone willing to marry a woman who is pregnant with another living man’s child!”

“What does it matter?!” Rette screamed, raising her arms before letting them fall back to her bed. She hadn’t bothered to sit up or even look at her mother. “Specialist Moore would have left me too!”

Mother advanced on her and stood over where she lay. “He was in a new program. He’s in academia. He wasn’t going anywhere, and you just threw that opportunity away. He could have offered you everything Johnny forgot to give you!”

Rette sat up then, struggling a bit before she finally used the blanket beneath her to right herself. “Johnny didn’t forget. He wanted to do all those things! We both did! But there wasn’t time.”

Mother gave her an impatient look. “Well now you have all the time in the world, don’t you?”
Rette stood and advanced on her mother. “Do you think I *chose* this? Do you think I *chose* to bring a child into this world who may never know their father? Who may not know what it is to be *held* by him?”

Mother pointed a finger at her. “You chose your actions, my dear. You chose Johnny. You chose to attempt to tie yourself to him for the rest of your life *knowing* the risks though I told you *over* and *over* again that you were better off without him.”

Rette’s face flushed, and hot tears spilled onto her cheeks.

Mother waved a dismissive hand at her. “You made your bed. Now you must lie in it.” She walked out Rette’s door and into the hall.

“I’m leaving,” Rette said, without thinking. Mother stopped and turned. “I’m not raising my child here. I will not subject them to the scorn and ridicule of *you*. I can provide for them well enough on my own, and if Johnny comes home, we’ll make a life together but you?” Rette shook her head. “You will not be part of it.”

Mother blinked at her and opened her mouth to say something, but Rette grabbed a hold of her bedroom door and swung it closed, letting it slam in her mother’s face.

### Chapter Thirty-Two

Johnny searched the dimly lit faces of the men across from him as they donned dark olive-green uniforms, jump packs, and helmets with a variety of elastic straps to help secure their gear upon landing. The only sound aboard the aircraft was the constant roar of the engines that reverberated through Johnny’s bones and into his ribcage which began to ache.

Johnny looked over at the red and blue patch on his arm. A large “AA” in white stitching sat perfectly placed inside of a blue circle surrounded by a red square with the word
“AIRBORNE” sprawled out above the square. It was new to him still, though they’d trained over the past six months in North Africa together. He missed his former regiment, but Johnny was proud to be with these men and knew that regardless of the outcome of their jump, the mission would be accomplished.

The green light flickered on, creating a lump in Johnny’s throat he forcibly swallowed before standing up in tandem with the other two dozen men on the plane. Each of them clicked their carabiners to the static line overhead and double checked their gear, ensuring their weapons were well-attached. Johnny was reassured that losing his weapon would spell a tragic death upon landing, as the Nazis were dug into the “soft underbelly” of Europe providing support for the less-than-average Italian army. Whoever the enemy was, Johnny was ready to fight them. If not for his country, then for his return home – to Rette.

“Go! Go! Go!” the jumpmaster yelled after the ramp opened revealing a thick layer of cloud surrounded by a sea of darkness in the sky. A night jump. Johnny was partial to night jumps for the simple fact that they provided safer descent than their daytime counterparts.

Johnny stepped up, inhaled deeply, and leapt out of the plane, hurtling towards the earth like a shot out of a cannon. The wind buffeted him as he waited for his parachute to open. His body jolted upward as his falling momentum briefly subsided. Reassured that his chute properly opened, he glided into the night sky, the only visible light coming from the fires and illuminated streets of the Sicilian town below them.

Johnny peered to his left and saw anti-aircraft fire parading through the clouds attempting to knock out Allied planes out of the sky – most of which were missing entirely – but Johnny’s mind began racing with the possibility of his jump ending early if a stray round hit him or his chute. Flashes of gunfire and explosions pock-marked his view below as the invasion of Sicily
had already begun raging on the ground. He knew his unit’s mission was to secure a key bridge over the Sele River, but they would have to fight their way through enemy lines to get there, increasing the importance of an accurate airborne invasion.

_I now pronounce myself your wife—before God, our home, and all that nature—_

Rette’s voice replayed in Johnny’s mind as he glided through the sky, inching closer and closer to the ground. He was on-target to land in a soft marsh just outside of the battle-laden streets as a strong wind began to pick him up and sweep him off course.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” Johnny cursed as he tangled with the pulleys to try and redirect his path, but he was too far up, and the wind was too strong for him to make it to the men already gathering their parachutes in the swamp. Johnny veered uncontrollably towards a row of houses on an unoccupied street a half-mile away.

He landed with a light sprint, his parachute draping over the ground behind him. Johnny wished for a moment he could have witnessed his own landing as a third party. He ranked it as one of his personal best. He bent down, rolled up his parachute as quickly as he could before unstrapping it from his chest – he certainly didn’t need it anymore. He detached his gun from his kit and unfolded the metal stock, raising it to his shoulder as he embarked up the road toward what he could only assume was the correct direction. The street Johnny landed on might as well have been an ocean away from his men. He had no clue where he was.

Johnny hugged the facade of the houses lining the abandoned street as he rounded the corner. The hum of an armored vehicle rumbled the pavement and the clicking of boots began to increase in volume, stopping Johnny in his tracks.

_“Mehr Verstärkung auf der Straße! Flankiert sie! Geht!”_
Johnny didn’t understand German, but recognition of the language itself forced him to do an about-face and sprint in the opposite direction, hoping to find an English-speaking ally—or better yet, one of his own men.

“Get down, Carver!” a soldier shouted from ahead of him. Johnny ducked as something whistled past his head, what he could only assume was an enemy bullet. Heart racing and out of breath, Johnny scrambled into a nearby alleyway as a swath of American soldiers emerged from its shadows. Machine gun and semi-automatic rifle fire erupted as Johnny leaned against the wall to catch his breath.

“Covering fire! Move up!” a Sergeant shouted, waving his arms at more men coming through the alleyway. Johnny checked his person to make sure he wasn’t hit, gathered his mind and breath, and joined the line of soldiers sprinting up the street to push back whatever German regiment had chased him this way.

A crack rang out, echoing through the cobblestone streets and off the walls. The lines of men on either side of the street immediately crouched as the same Sergeant shouted, “Sniper! Get off the streets! Clear out!”

Johnny lay prone on the street, hugging the same facade he had trusted earlier. He looked over his shoulder and found a motionless soldier sprawled out in the middle of the street – the sniper’s first victim.

“Return fire! Return fire!”

Where? Johnny was clueless as to where he was supposed to shoot at. Not to mention the only source of light illuminating the street ahead was a streetlight—which Johnny wondered how it hadn’t been destroyed yet—and the glow of the moon peering through the gray clouds. Johnny quickly got to his feet and darted into the nearest building he could find with an open door.
Another crack rang out, and another soldier fell in the street, this one had run from one side to the other to seek better cover only to be caught in the open.

Johnny peered out of the doorframe of the building he sought solace in and noticed a large church steeple about two hundred yards away.

“That’s where I’d be,” muttered one of the soldiers who had joined him in the building. Johnny agreed. He certainly wasn’t a sniper, but he would’ve chosen that place too given the opportunity. Johnny shouldered his gun—trying to wash out the memory of his poor start to marksmanship—and pulled the trigger, aiming at the church tower. The recoil was light—the rifle shot the same rounds as their sidearms—and he was doubtful his rounds would get anywhere near the tower. He didn’t care. He needed these men to get out of the buildings and up the streets to force back the Germans.

Johnny fired three more rounds and ushered the soldiers out of the building and up the street. No crack. Had Johnny hit him? Was the sniper gone? Surely, he wasn’t that good of a shot, but if the sniper was going to shoot at them, he’d just missed his chance.

“I’m covering! Move up! Move up!” Johnny shouted.

The Sergeant eyed Johnny and gave him a nod and waved the rest of his men up the street towards the retreating German forces. Johnny took aim at the steeple again and emptied the rest of his clip, ensuring his men a brief moment of safety for them to cross the open expanse of road the sniper had exploited. A faint click resounded in Johnny’s rifle signaling he was out, and he ejected the clip while simultaneously pulling out a new one from his belt. Johnny drew his rifle to his shoulder again, ready to fire if he saw the slightest movement.

“Let’s go, Carver! Good work!” the Sergeant shouted back at him. He had done his job and he had done it well. Covering fire was usually left to the men with automatic rifles because it
was more consistent, but Johnny had held his own. Johnny rounded the corner of the threshold to face the open street.

Crack. Johnny felt hot lead penetrate his chest before he even heard the echo of the gunshot. Johnny collapsed to the ground, out of sight from the church steeple, blood beginning to seep from his chest. He tried to breathe, but an eerily familiar sting radiated from his chest. Johnny couldn’t tell how bad the wound was in the dark, but there was enough light for Johnny to pull his hand up from his side to see it covered in warm, red blood, replacing it on his chest and applying pressure.

“Medic! Medic! Carver’s hit!” the Sergeant shouted. He came back to Johnny, pulling him out of view of the church steeple, propping him up against a low wall near a new set of buildings. Johnny looked back down the road and saw a figure approach from the shadows of the alleyway Johnny and the rest of his men had started at with another line of new soldiers ready to fight.

The man sprinted all the way to Johnny, running past the two sniper’s victims lying still and beyond help in the street. Johnny waved his arm to signal to the man to get down, but the man was relentless as he slid on one knee down to Johnny’s front. His helmet donned a red cross, and he had a white band around his sleeve with the same red cross on it.

“Carver! How we doin’ here?” the medic called out as he reached to his side for his medical kit. Johnny attempted to give a witty response, but his voice carried no volume.

“Rest easy there, Corporal. You gave him a run for his money and saved twenty other guys. You’re a damn hero, Carver!” The medic quickly pulled a wad of bandages out and pressed them into Johnny’s chest, sending shockwaves of pain throughout his body.
Johnny swallowed and tasted iron in his mouth, and mustered up his energy to say, “How bad–” A spasming metallic cough cut him off.

The medic stayed quiet as he continued to dig through his med kit. He tore open a packet with his teeth and poured a powder into Johnny’s wound which was now a steady faucet of blood.

“Corporal–” the medic began. Johnny searched for the medic’s name on his chest.

“What’s–” Johnny struggled to utter a single word, but he needed to know. He coughed, tasting more blood. “Name?” Johnny ground out.

“Folsom. Corporal Folsom. You’re a lucky son-of-a-gun to be asking me that. It clearly missed your heart.”

Johnny gave a pained chuckle, causing blood to pulse out of his mouth and chest. The medic leaned over him, and Johnny’s vision began to blur.

“That’s it – there you go.” Corporal Folsom adjusted his pressure against Johnny’s chest, pushing his weight into the wall behind Johnny. The medic stared at him. Johnny anticipated his next words.

“Corporal, the round hit your lung and nicked an artery. You’re bleeding out.” Folsom paused, kneeling back to give Johnny a condoling look. “Can I get you some morphine, Corporal?”

Johnny tried to breathe but couldn’t. He began to cough as his vision narrowed. The pain was unbearable, but Johnny used the last bit of his strength to push the medic’s arm away when he held up the syringe.

Folsom sighed, bowing his head to pack the syringe away. “Right. Rest easy, Corporal Carver.”
Johnny nodded at the medic, looking up at the sprinkle of stars through the clouds above as the medic began to recite, “Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.”

Johnny tried to take a breath, but his lungs found no purchase.

“Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us.”

Johnny closed his eyes, not wanting to watch as the stars faded away into nothingness.

“And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever.”

_Amen._

---

**Chapter Thirty-Three**

The hired car Aunt Florence insisted on paying for pulled up in front of the Carvers’ house late in the morning. The Colonel’s car was parked out front, and Rette steeled herself—knowing she would have to face them all eventually. She reached into her purse and pulled out a bill from the envelope Aunt Florence had sent her off with, ignoring her refusal.

She’d waited out the evening, hoping her mother might calm down and see sense, but when Rette appeared at dinner and Mother was nowhere to be found, she’d exploded all over the dining room, spouting out everything that had happened earlier that day.

Aunt Florence’s eyes had zeroed in on her, pinpoint focused on Rette and what she was saying.

“Jansen,” Aunt Florence had called out, her voice strong, short, and crisp.

He’d gone to her and leaned in as she spoke quietly.
He returned a moment later with a fat envelope of bills and handed it to Rette who lifted a hand in refusal.

“Take it. Hire a car for her in the morning, Jansen,” Aunt Florence said from her seat at the table, lifting her spoon to eat her soup. Lucy gave Rette an urging look.

Rette finished her meal and retreated to her room to pack, tossing and turning all night. The driver opened her door, holding a hand out to help her. She took it gratefully and handed him the money.

He bowed his head. “Let me get your bag for you.”

He retrieved her small suitcase from the trunk and held it out to her. “I hope you have a good day, Miss.”

Rette took it and smiled. “Thank you, I hope so too. Same to you, sir.”

She turned to face the front of the house she’d once called home. The car pulled away, and Rette glanced down the road after it. Mr. Gerrells was beginning his route at the end of the street, delivering mail, so Rette reached into her purse once again, and she pulled out the letter she’d written to Johnny late last night. Her heart hammering in her chest, she opened the mailbox, placed it inside, and raised the red flag.

She mounted the steps, waddling against the counterweight of her suitcase and the imbalance that came with her condition.

She was sure, with as loud as her heart was beating, that someone inside the home would hear it, and step out, finding her hesitating there, hand raised to knock. She heard voices from within, jolly ones, and it sounded as though more than just Lynette and the Colonel were home.
She thought about walking down the steps and maybe wandering into town, but the sight of her would cause such a stir that it would only be a matter of time before the Carvers’ telephone would ring to tell them the news Rette wished to share herself.

She raised her hand to knock, but before she could, the front door was swept open, and Lynette stood there, excitement on her face. Rette watched the excitement turn to concern to confusion as she took note of what Rette could no longer hide.

“Goodness me,” Lynette gasped, her hand to her chest in shock.

“Lynnie?” It was the Colonel. He appeared on the other side of the screen door, and Rette fought to keep the friendly smile on her face.

Her pulse thundered in her ears.

“Rette?”

The Colonel looked her up and down. Rette shifted her weight, struggling to keep hold of her suitcase which grew heavier the longer she held it. It felt like an eternity before the Colonel reached for the handle of the screen door and held it open for her, motioning her inside past Lynette who still stood there in shock.

“Here let me take that.” The Colonel relieved her of the suitcase, her weight shifting back to the opposite direction, and she side-stepped to maintain her balance.

“Thank you.” Rette sighed and stepped inside the house. Lieutenant Hughes and Captain Marshall were both there with their wives along with Major James, and a large banner reading ‘Happy Birthday’ was slung across the top half of the front window, it didn’t fully obscure the view of the front porch, but one would definitely miss a visitor’s identity if one did not look in time.
Rette held her hands in front of her protruding stomach, trying futilely to hide her current state.

“Rette! It’s good to see you–Oh my.” Lieutenant Hughes stood to welcome her but stopped mid stride when he noticed.

The Colonel and Lynette came up behind Rette and stood there, neither saying anything.

The Lieutenant turned to his wife and the others quickly. “Come– Nancy, Lawrence, Trina, Rick– let’s take the party out back. Lynette and Andrew will join us later.”

The two couples excused themselves, making their way through the house to the back door and out onto the adjoining patio where Rette had spent many summers sipping lemonade with Lynette.

“Do you mind if I sit?” Rette turned to ask Johnny’s parents, who still stood there in silence, both unsure what to say.

“Yes, yes, please!” Lynette rushed to the cream settee and shifted a pillow Rette had embroidered for her birthday two years prior, clearing a space for Rette to settle.

Rette sighed as she sunk into the cushion, her back pained her more and more each day, and the seat in the cab had done little to relieve the pain she woke up with. “Thank you.”

Lynette took the seat next to Rette, but the Colonel chose an armchair across the low coffee table.

Rette sighed. She knew they wouldn’t ask. She knew she needed to say it. “I’m pregnant.”

Lynette took a deep breath and pulled her handkerchief from her pocket. She gave Rette a knowing nod.

“Johnny and I are going to have a baby.”
Lynette raised the handkerchief to her mouth, and Rette noted the tears welling in her eyes, unsure if they were happy or something else.

“We were married—in our eyes at least. You know we tried to make it official, but there was no way to complete the paperwork before he left. This is a baby to be born of love and after the baby is born and Johnny is home, we’ll make everything official.”

Rette stopped talking. She was trying to justify their actions because she couldn’t fight the shame she still felt coming to Johnny’s parents, her protruding stomach on show for them and their friends, without the title of ‘Mrs. Carver’ to show for it.

Lynette reached a hand out to take Rette’s, sniffling as she did. “Dear me, child—is that what stopped you from coming to us sooner?” She gasped. “Is that why you were ill? I thought as much, and I tried—” She choked and cried harder this time, and Rette could tell Lynette now felt shame of her own.

Rette just nodded. She felt silly for running away, for not telling them sooner, for thinking she would find better care with her mother, for believing that there would be anything but love and care offered to her and her baby within the Carvers’ home.

“You—” the Colonel spoke now, and Rette looked at him to see him pointing a finger at her with his eyebrows raised, “Margarette Louise Murphy, are my daughter.” There were tears in his eyes.

Rette felt hot tears on her own cheeks too, and she gave a little laugh at what they must look like sitting there, all crying a mess. If Johnny were there, he would have said something to make them smile. He would have held Rette, put a hand to her stomach, and finally felt his child move within her as she felt nearly every waking—and sleeping—hour now. Rette closed her eyes, imagining his touch. That was the only thing missing.
“I think I’ll set aside ‘the Colonel’ for the little one—it’s a bit of a mouthful, wouldn’t you agree?” the Colonel smiled at Lynette, who smiled too, nodding as she continued crying. “Pappy? Pop? Grandfather?” He sat up a little straighter at the last, putting on a faux air of sophistication.

Rette saw Johnny in that moment, twenty years or so from now as this baby came to them to share the news that they, too, would be grandparents. Rette knew, without a doubt, what Johnny would choose to be called. “No–something classic. Grandpa.”


Rette’s stomach rippled as the baby fluttered in its own agreement. She put a hand to her stomach and leaned back against the pillows, truly relaxed for the first time in months.


Rette smiled in return. The baby fluttered and kicked excitedly, landing a particularly precise blow. After a long car ride, Rette found herself suddenly in need of some refreshment.

“Lynette? May I have something to drink? I’m parched.”

“Oh, absolutely!” She rose from the couch quickly to scurry away.

“Colonel, your friends are waiting to return to your party. Don’t delay it because of me.”

The Colonel nodded his agreement. “Yes, well, you are a welcome distraction from a party, my dear. I am so happy you are here. Both of you.” He rose from his seat and looked at her for a moment in earnest.
Rette smiled. “Thank you. If you’ll excuse me, I need to powder my nose.” She scooted to the edge of the settee and pushed herself up off the couch as gracefully as she could. Each time grew more and more challenging. The Colonel offered her a hand, and she took it gratefully, relishing in the offer of help.

The Colonel excused himself to the back of the house to bring his party back inside while Rette found the restroom.

When Rette reappeared, Lynette was setting a glass of lemonade down on the coffee table, and the party had resumed. Jaunty music trumpeted into the air, and the Colonel swept over to Lynette and pulled her into a dance, spinning and swaying with her, both smiling jovially. Captain Marshall and Lieutenant Hughes pulled their wives in too and suddenly they were all dancing, stepping around each other and laughing as they bumped into one another and the furniture. Rette laughed and swayed to the joyous music.

Beneath the ‘Happy Birthday’ banner, a black car pulled up to the Carver’s home where Rette’s hired car had dropped her off. Rette stopped swaying and watched as two men in uniform stepped out. One man wore a blindingly white clergy collar, and Rette felt her face and hands grow cold and clammy. The men mounted the steps of the Carver’s home, and Rette put both hands to her stomach which churned.

The jaunty jig ended, and a slow, romantic song began, the couples slowed their dancing, and all jumped at the sharp knock on the front door.

“No,” Rette whispered to herself. She was frozen, and she watched as the party turned to the front door. Everyone could see enough below the banner to make out the two men’s uniforms, but Rette was the only one who knew the combination could mean only one thing.

Another knock. The Colonel pushed past the Marshalls and pulled the door open.
“Colonel Carver?” said a solemn voice.

The Colonel stood straighter, but Rette noticed his knuckles go white where they gripped the front door.

“On behalf of the President of the United States…” Rette’s ears began to ring, drowning out his words. When the roaring dulled, she picked up a piece that would stick with her for the rest of her life. “…Corporal Jonathan Andrew Carver was killed…” Rette’s breathing quickened, and she heard her pulse thunder in her ears. Her breath came faster and faster, and the room grew dark around her. She heard voices but couldn’t make out what they said. She reached out a hand to steady herself on something but couldn’t see what and felt her knees make jarring impact with the floor.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Life without Johnny began, and each day her stomach grew– with it, her responsibility. Olly gave her old job back, though she’d left previously without notice and yet another new uniform.

In her evenings, she spent her time alongside Lynette as she passionately tried to teach Rette how to knit baby booties. So far, the first pair had been so tightly knit Rette could barely fit her knuckle in, let alone a baby’s foot, and the second pair had been so large and lumpy they resembled an empty potato skin.

Somehow the news made its way back to Mother, and the letters began. The first was an apology, and Rette was almost inclined to write to accept it, but she concluded the letter by mentioning yet another suitor she’d found that would be “perfect” for her.
Rette knew many would question her lack of desire for a husband, but she would spend the rest of her life waiting for Johnny to come home. She’d been prepared to do it on her own for as long as it took before. She couldn’t just give that up because she’d been told he wasn’t coming home. It sounded crazy even to her own ears, but in her heart, there was no one else, just many years ahead of waiting.

When she arrived home after a particularly long, hot day, Rette found Lynette and the Colonel waiting for her at the dining table, Lynette’s famous casserole and Rette’s favorite steaming between them.

“Good! You’re home!” Lynette was over excited, and Rette saw right through it. “You can join us for dinner!”

“I would love to,” Rette replied, matching Lynette’s tone, “but I already ate at the diner. I’m sorry, maybe some other time.” She slipped off her shoes, her feet aching and unable to consider wearing them any longer. She turned to retreat upstairs.

“Rette—” the Colonel called.

She paused on the second step but didn’t turn. “Margarette,” she corrected him.

“Sorry?” the Colonel asked.

Rette turned back to face her family, all that was left of them. “My name is Margarette. Not Rette. Not Rettie. She was Johnny’s, she can’t be anyone else’s.” She felt hot tears on her cheeks and wiped them away quickly.

Rette saw Lynette’s face soften considerably.

“Margarette,” the Colonel addressed her again with a gentle smile. “Please join us. We want to speak with you about some things that we believe you should be aware of.”
Rette bit her lip, torn between the safety of Johnny’s old bedroom and the steaming casserole wafting her way.

She took the steps back downstairs and sat in her usual seat. They blessed their food, and Lynette picked up the spoon to begin serving the casserole.

The Colonel watched the cheesy goodness spill from the serving spoon as Lynette tossed it onto his plate. “Now Ret—sorry, Margarette. We know it’s been difficult for you. We also know how hard you’ve been working at Olly’s, but we want you to know that you don’t have to worry about anything.”

Lynette was about to spoon a serving onto Rette’s plate, but she held up a hand. “I really did eat at work, Momma.”

“But it’s your favorite,” she cooed, hand still reaching for Rette’s plate.

Rette sighed and handed it to her—it did smell good. “Just a little bit.”

Lynette took her plate with a smile as the Colonel continued, “Now, the land is yours. The home is yours, and everything he had to his name—” he paused, looking at Lynette who nodded. “We’ve agreed that it's yours as well.”

Rette listened attentively, her hands were clasped on top of her now large bump.

Lynette spooned a serving of casserole onto her own plate but remained silent while the Colonel spoke. “We are also aware that you will have not only your life and future to take into consideration, but the child’s as well. So, Lynette and I have both changed our wills. Half of everything we have will go to you to aid in anything you should need, and the other half, will go to the child, which they will have access to once they reach adulthood.”

Rette’s brow tingled, and her mind whirled. None of them had touched their food. Lynette and the Colonel sat staring at her, but she was at a loss.
“I—” Rette’s voice was gone. She cleared her throat. “I can’t accept that.”

Lynette began to speak, but Rette cut her off.

“It is generous, and I am grateful for the offer, but I can’t accept it. It’s too much.”

“Margarette, please—” the Colonel tried.

“No.”

They both stared at her.

“If it makes you feel better, I want the land, and enough of the settlement to handle the upkeep, but I won’t take any more. If you’d like to leave everything to the child, that is alright with me, but I will support myself. Neither you, nor the Army, owe me anything,” Rette finished, and pushed herself away from the table. “Now, if that is all, may I be excused? I am tired, and I need to put my feet up.”

Lynette nodded her assent, and Rette left, retreating to her bedroom.

Rette stood before the mirror that leaned atop Johnny’s dresser. The mirror showed its age, as did Rette. The weight of the past year pulled at her cheeks and rested in the bags beneath her eyes. It was a version of herself she didn’t recognize, with her father’s steady brown eyes and a strand of pearls casting a stark contrast to the black velvet of her dress. The monochrome of it all did nothing for Rette’s complexion.

The reality rested on the surface of Rette’s skin. It hovered over her in an aura of veiled acceptance. She’d resigned to a life alone, but she’d not expected the constant dull ache that had tormented her over the past month.

It had taken a while for things to clear. For Johnny to be collected and sent home, for a funeral to be prepared. It had been an arduous process.
Lynette called to her from downstairs, it was time. Rette took a deep breath and checked her appearance once more. Her skin was pale, unable to be helped, and her eyes were puffy, made raw by the endless sleepless nights.

She still wore his grandmother’s ring. It sparkled on her left hand in a gruesome reminder. Johnny did all he could to set up her future. He fought for their country and sent a letter when he got the chance, but what was that worth? What was the occasional piece of him worth when Rette was home, trying to fill the gap in her life he had once filled, planning a future that never came to pass?

There she stood, not even a widow because she didn’t have his name, yet her abdomen was swollen with his unborn child. She was just the "lifelong friend" or "girlfriend" or “mother to his child” or—if she was lucky—"fiancée."

God bless the United States of America.

It was raining when they arrived. The pathway was slick beneath Rette’s shoes. Her hat—according to tradition—was appropriate to her relationship to Johnny. There was no black veil as his mother wore. Johnny and Rette were never married, his mother—according to the US Army—was the only woman he left behind, despite the fluttering in Rette’s stomach.

Tall officers held black umbrellas over Rette as she followed close beside Lynette and the Colonel.

Rette felt the glances and the double glances of people they passed. Despite the looseness of her dress, her stomach protruded to the point she could no longer see her own two feet. It was a gleaming arrow shot straight at her drawing their attention as there could only be one father.
If Rette turned around, she knew what she would see. Six men—all officers—each gripping onto a single large wooden casket with the Stars and Stripes pulled tight over it. But she wouldn't see Johnny.

Rette wondered how many times in her life she looked back to see him standing there waiting for her, observing her, or pondering some obscure thought. How many times in his life did she tell him she loved him? Not nearly enough at the end, though she loved him beyond herself or even him, moreover, she loved the life she grew within her. He was a part of her.

Rette heard Lynette's unbridled sobs beside her. Rette pulled out the embroidered handkerchief she'd found in his dresser—JAC—and handed it to Lynette. She tried to smile, but it revealed itself as more a grimace as she gripped the crook of Rette’s arm, her glove damp from the rain and her own tears. Rette’s face was dry aside from the mist of the rain.

The Colonel walked with his head high, but his usually stoic mask betrayed him as he faced the death of his only child. No matter how hard Rette gazed at the Colonel, she couldn't see much of Johnny in that moment. Then again, he had always favored the portraits Rette had seen of Lynette’s father.

They placed the casket on a pedestal beneath a large black tent. Small floral arrangements of white lilies and roses donned the area surrounding it. Johnny’s enlistment photo stood proudly to one side. His eyes were just the same glittering with excitement and purpose.

"Father, who art in heaven," the minister began, "hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Rette tuned him out, staring at the box that held the remains of her fiancé. Behind it, in the rain, stood nine men in uniform. Two carried rifles, while six others had empty hands. The final man stood off to the side, braving the rain alone, a small trumpet held in his hands. Rette
identified most with him. The odd man out—the man with one job to do and separate from everyone else.

Rette was separate from all the other women who had been or would be in her position. Even her own mother had been granted the rights of a widow—because she had been married when her first love died for his country. Rette was simply left over. Rette was the one he left behind, the excess, the fiancée. Not the wife. Not the widow. Yet the mother of his child.

To everyone else, Rette was his "almost" but in the end, she wasn't. Johnny was her everything, and Rette his. But all of that shifted, Johnny was gone, while a small spark of his life remained, fluttering inside of Rette, and reminding her of its presence.

The men standing in the slow drizzle began to march, falling into formation to ceremoniously remove the flag from the sealed vessel where what remained of Johnny lay.

The lone trumpeter raised his instrument to his mouth, and a mournful song reverberated from the valves of the trumpet and into the valves of Rette’s heart, rearranging her emotions and pulling forth the sedated numbness, shredding it and effectively ruining the protective layer Rette had built up to protect herself from it all.

The men lifted and began folding the flag. To Rette’s left, Lynette attempted a façade of composure, but small sobs escaped from between her pale lips. The Colonel cried silently; his knuckles white as he gripped the hand of his wife.

The flag was handed from man to man to officer until the flag—the representation of Johnny’s service and sacrifice—bypassed Rette. The officer knelt before Lynette and placed the flag in her trembling hands. Rette squinted her eyes shut, blocking out the thoughts that threatened to overtake her consciousness.
I love you, Johnny. I'm sorry. Rette casted the thought into the soggy air around her, in hopes that he was somewhere near to catch a part of it.

The ceremony was over before it even seemed to begin. People began to stand around them. Rette and Johnny’s parents remained seated in the front row. The attendees paused before the casket and paid their respects with a hand to the solid wood or a quiet, mumbled prayer. Then they passed by the front row in a line. Rette accepted people's sympathy with quiet gratitude, offering her hand to those who made to reach for it and simply nodding at others.

Half-way through, Lynette breached the gap between her and Rette and gripped her arm tightly. Rette looked up at her. She didn't say anything, but her eyes seemed to will words of empathy from within Rette. "I know," Rette whispered.

Guests were departing, Johnny's parents stood to one side conversing with the minister. Rette stepped forward, closing the gap between her aching heart and Johnny's still one.

He was home.

She placed her hand on the soft wood of the lid, her other hand subconsciously rested on her small bump. Rette yearned to feel the love and intimacy she once felt just by being near Johnny. She yearned for the warmth of his chest and the security and strength of his arms around her body. She wanted nothing more than to feel connected to her husband.

What she did feel was a hand on the space of her back between her shoulder blades. Rette turned and found Lynette standing beside her, gazing at the casket in front of them. She clutched the triangular flag to her chest but held something out for Rette in her fist. She moved to take it from her, and a jingle of metal dropped into Rette’s outstretched palm. His tags. Rette’s heart ached.
She wrapped her free arm around her, pulling Rette into her side. Rette’s knees shook beneath the draped velvet of her dress. She felt weak, drained of mental and emotional strength. She felt each millimeter of her heart break, and her body ached beneath the weight of it all.

Rette sat on the edge of Johnny’s bed in her still damp, black, velvet dress. She cried. She clutched his tags to her heaving chest, and she cried. It was all too much—the pain—the emptiness that seemed to fill her entire body—the gaping hole of promise and happiness, once in hand and within reach, snatched away. It wasn’t even not having Johnny there that caused the pain. She had prepared to live without Johnny for as long as the war took. No, what caused the pain was knowing she would never see him smile again. She would never make him laugh again. He would never hold his child—the only part of him that still lived on.

Rette clutched at her stomach, she ached all over, it felt as if the baby too felt the pain. It wasn’t just her heart breaking, but the heart of their unborn child.

When her final customer settled herself into the booth, Rette made her way over, exhausted, sore, and hungry. The woman was late in her years, with a permanent furrowed brow, puckered lips, and a scrutinizing gaze. “Cocksure young men, aren’t they?” the woman stated with contempt, opening the menu to survey the options.

“Excuse me?” Rette paused in pulling her notepad from her apron pocket.

“All those soldiers who think they know what they’re fighting for but really just want the glory and uniform to get into young women’s pants, like yourself. Probably put you in that state and didn’t even realize it, did he?”
Rette shifted her weight onto one hip, putting her pen to her notepad and waiting patiently.

The woman continued to peruse the menu. “They don’t pause to think about what God has to say about all of that. If the finger is bare, you shouldn’t see someone’s body that way.”

Rette glanced down at her left hand. Her fingers had grown thick as she grew closer and closer to giving birth, so Lynette had wisely advised removing Johnny’s grandmother’s ring to avoid doing harm to it or herself. Not having the reminder of Johnny’s love with her killed her. It left her vulnerable to assumptions like these.

“That’s how it was in my day, and now everywhere I go there are young women who find themselves in unfortunate situations with no man in sight and no ring to hold them responsible,” the woman proclaimed. “Filthy.”

Rette opened her mouth to speak, but a lump formed in her throat and threatened to escape through an outburst of sobs. “Excuse me,” she muttered, hastily walking away.

“Could I at least get some tea?” the woman sneered. Olly studied the scene from behind the counter.

“We support our men, here, Miss,” Olly boomed from behind the long bar, nodding to the War Bond advertisement posted by the entrance. “And our employees. I am going to have to ask you to leave.”

Rette brushed past him hastily. She lowered herself to the ground in the quiet kitchen. Her shift was over—it was a quiet Thursday afternoon, and Olly would handle the customers until Nell came in at four for the supper rush—but she still didn’t allow herself to cease thinking about the simple orders of the day.
Eggs, sunny-side up with sausage and hash, joe, and an orange juice—Johnny—with ice. A burger with lettuce and mayo but no cheese or tomato, a bottle of pop, and a slice of Olly’s chocolate cake. Johnny. Apple pie for Mr. Hughes and his usual—turkey sandwich on wheat with cheese, dry, untoasted—Johnny—with steamed vegetables and a small serving of fries—his doctor had him on a strict diet, but his fries kept him happy, he said—Johnny wasn’t like those men.

She had tried to block him out, even in her dreams, by consuming her thoughts prior to falling asleep while recalling all the information she’d taken in from Aunt Florence’s library. From plants and crops to the history of the English language to the American Revolution to theology and all the questions that that brought with it, but to no avail—her dreams were tempting nightmares—beautiful images of what could have been, what should have been.

She should be Mrs. Carver. She should have been able to grow old with Johnny at her side, watching as their children grew up and fell in love and had families of their own. Life should have been happy—full of love and safety.

But there she sat in her ill-fitting waitress uniform. Her swollen stomach, fingers, and ankles were constant reminders of her dissatisfaction, her tears and quiet hiccups reminders of the raw grief she continued to attempt to bury. She wasn’t cut out for motherhood.

Granted, the child’s future was taken care of, but the impending decisions and responsibility, not for the finances necessarily, but just to ensure her own needs let alone the needs of her child were met, it was all too much. She was stuck—that’s what it came down to.

The constant nudging of the child helped sometimes, in the sweet moments of thinking about not having to go through life alone, but at the same time, it made her sick to think that the only part of Johnny that still lived was growing inside her. When he was home, she’d struggled
with his fierce sense of honor and duty to everything else aside from her. Rette wasn’t sure what
she would do if the child was a boy who grew up in Johnny’s image. Ash brown hair, large blue
eyes, thin but stubborn jaw, studious brow, who would feel the same sense of duty and honor and
leave her behind too to seek out his purpose elsewhere. She supposed all she could do was pray
the baby was a girl—who would grow up without her father.

Olly found her braced against the wall beside the mop bucket, her feet tucked beneath her
as she attempted to stretch out a cramp in her lower abdomen. “Don’t listen to her, Rette. You
and Johnny were special. Johnny was a good man. He didn’t choose to leave. He died fighting.
He died to protect you and that child. He lives on in your child, and he will grow up to know that
his father was a great man and hero to his country. I am sure you’ll see to that.” He offered her a
large hand to amble her way up from the floor. Olly was the one person who refused to call her
anything but Rette now—“You’re Rette to me, I dunno who this Margarette gal is,” he’d told
her over and over.

When she was standing once again, she had to bite back groans as the pain refused to
subside. “Thanks, Olly,” she sighed between the tides of her tightening and tensing muscles.

“Go home, Rette, and give the Carvers my best.”

She muttered her thanks, stealing a moment for herself before making her way through the back door. The walk home was short, but that afternoon it seemed twice as long. The October air was frigid, and it bit through her wool coat, which barely covered the front of her. She paused at the bus stop between the bank and Lemaire’s. The pain had subsided but the pressure she felt made walking uncomfortable, but she continued until she left town, passing rows of houses toward the street she’d grown up on.
By the time she reached it, she looked down her street and saw a group of kids biking down the street in a pack, and Lizzy out on a walk with her three little ones. Everyone was bundled against the cold, but it was a sunny day, so they all took advantage of it.

She made her way up the Carvers’ front steps and let herself into the house, hanging her coat and depositing her shoes, rolling her sore ankles one by one.

“Margarette?” Rette glanced through the front room and into the kitchen where she saw Lynette preparing dinner. “Come in here and help me for a moment, would you?”

Rette sighed. She just wanted to sit down and put her feet up, but she crossed the room and sidled up next to Lynette at the stove, giving her a slight squeeze around the shoulders in greeting. “Hey, Momma.”

“Hello yourself. Did you have a good day?” Lynette was stirring a pot of chili, the steam rising into their faces.

Rette sighed and turned around to lean against the counter. “It was—” she thought about how best to put it. It wasn’t outrightly horrible, but it certainly hadn’t been great. “A day.” She laughed.

Lynette gave her a bemused expression and nodded down at her very large stomach.

“And how is our girl doing?”

“You don’t know the baby is a girl, Momma.”

“Yes, I do. I'm grandmama—I know everything.”

They laughed together, and Rette sighed, rubbing her hands over her belly. “Baby’s good. I had some more aches and pains today.”

Lynette nodded, continuing to stir. “To be expected as you draw closer, I’m afraid.”

“I wish he would leave my ribs be though.”
Lynette raised an eyebrow and gave her a look. “‘He,’ huh?”

Rette shrugged. “I’m their momma, I know everything.”

They laughed again, and Rette relaxed into the companionship that Johnny’s parents offered her. Their home had truly become her own over the past few months, and though she knew she would venture out to the home Johnny had built for them once she was back on her feet from giving birth, it was nice to know that she would always be welcome back. She and this baby were all they had left now, and they showed it. They showered her in love and support that rivaled the way they had loved on and supported Johnny when he’d come home injured from North Africa. It was nice for a change.

“Oh–” Lynette began, tapping the spoon on the edge of the pot before turning her full attention to Rette. “We’ve been meaning to tell you. We got a letter from the Army about Johnny’s military death settlement. It’s all been taken care of. We got the letters here today from the Army that state that all of Johnny’s settlement and last rights will go to you and the child. You two may not have been married, but Johnny spoke to all the right people about you and your situation. He arranged it all, and with our rejection of his rights, there is nothing to stop it from all going to you.”

Rette stared at her. More money. More than she would probably ever know what to do with. Rette couldn’t bear to reject this gift. It was the Army’s way of paying Lynette and the Colonel for the sacrifice of their son. If they’d had it transferred to her—she knew she would never be able to say no. “Thank you,” she told Lynette, reaching a hand out to grip Lynette’s arm.
Lynette gave her a smile and lifted a finger as her eyes shifted around. “One other thing. There was something there for you as well. A letter.” Lynette spun around and walked toward the front room where she plucked an envelope from atop the piano.

A letter? From Johnny? Rette wasn’t sure she’d be able to bear reading it. She’d left behind all the ones he’d sent her while in Manhattan, still unread, and she hadn’t bothered to ask for their return. She considered all she had left there lost as she never wanted to return.

Lynette returned and held an envelope out to her. In Johnny’s heartbreakingly familiar handwriting, it was labeled Rette. “Here. This one is for you.”

Rette hesitated for a moment, staring at the letter as if it would strike, before she reached out a shaky hand and took it, holding it between her hands and staring at it.

“Don’t open it until you are ready. Those words—” Lynette’s voice broke, and Rette looked up as she returned her attention to the chili. “They’re the last you’ll ever get from him.” Her voice was quiet, but it rang loud and clear through Rette’s chest. She laid the letter on the counter–face down so Johnny’s handwriting wasn’t calling out her name–and set to work pulling dishes down to set the table for yet another family dinner.

Epilogue

Winter was truly set in, and Rette could see the dead remnants of autumn against the headstones. Some were newer than others, the grass still not fully grown back.

She found it easily enough, a simple white headstone with a cross at the top. CPL Johnathan Andrew Carver. Her sleeping nearly two-month-old stretched in her arms, the blanket falling away. Rette caught the corner and flipped it back, careful not to jostle her daughter. She adjusted her hold on her and moved the roses and letter to her other hand. She stood there,
uncomfortable, as if she was allowing Johnny to survey them somehow. Just to take note that they were there. Dried sunflowers rested along the base of the stone, a sure sign of Lynette’s last visit. Rette didn’t know where to begin.

She had brought two short-stemmed roses from the bushes that grew in Lizzy’s front yard, sure she would support the cause. One was pink, and the other white, seemingly pure aside from the specs of dirt that fell between its petals. Rette stepped forward and knelt with Lydia still cradled in her arms. She placed the pair of roses on the grass before the cross. Lydia stirred and stretched again at the movement, and Rette met the drifting gaze of her awaking daughter. Her big blue eyes shone in the late morning light. Her eyebrows drew together, and she let out a small yawn, stretching her petite arms above her head.

“Hello, love, there’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

And, finally, she told Johnny everything.

My Dearest Rette,

If you’re reading this, life probably looks very different to you now. Plans have changed, and I’m sure your mind is reeling. But I know you— you already have another plan, don’t you? You’ve set a life for yourself, a path for yourself. All I ask is this: Don’t let anyone deter you. Not me, nor my parents, nor yourself, and especially not your mother. Life is ripe for your making, and I know you will make something great of it.

As I write this, I’ve only just transferred to Scotland. It’s June 1942, and we left things a bit rocky last we were together. However, I want you to know this: You are my life. As long as you live your life with purpose and meaning, I am there.
But I still dream of our life together. I'm sure I can see it as you’re reading this. I’m living it out, as that is as close to heaven as I could ever imagine.

Momma and Pop have the details to provide for you in ways that I can’t from here, but I hope I’ve done enough to give you a running start. You are my everything, Rette, though I know I’m only your right now. If you’re reading this, you’ll find love again. It may not come when or how you want it to, but it will. I’m sure of it. I’ll be blowing chance your way from my end.

I could write for hours on end to you, and I know as soon as I end this letter that I will begin a new one, but one I can send to you in confidence that you’ll read it sooner rather than later. I’m selfish enough to hope that you’ll never read this one, but I love you enough to ensure that you’ll have these last final words from me before you start on your next adventure.

You have filled my life with purpose. You are my purpose. Though all the emotions, anxieties, honor, and duty war within me–you are the reason for which I was created. I know that now, and I pray I never forget it. But you, and hopefully one day our children–you are my purpose. Not my honor. Not my duty. Not my need to serve in the military. My need to serve you is what moves me, and it is for that purpose that you are reading this.

I love you beyond life itself, Rette–trust me, I’m loving you still. Wherever I am, that is my heaven. I’ll wait for you. That’s my plan.

Forever, All My Love

Johnny

THE END.