

Chapter 1

May 1941

Sighing with tiredness, April made her way up from the ward where she'd been working. It had been a long, long day at St Thomas' and she'd spent most of her time running backwards and forwards with bed pans and changing dressings. So many, many dressings on so many poor people who had been injured. Still, despite her weariness, she was buoyed by the ward sister's words to her as she left: 'Carry on the way you're going, Harvey, and by the time we're finished with you, you'll be able to run the hospital in an emergency singlehandedly!'

She wasn't sure about that, but after eighteen months of training, she felt like she was finally becoming a proper nurse, and goodness knew, she was now an expert at setting broken bones and stitching cuts.

She thought back to her first weeks in training. How different life was then. When she'd started, there had been no bombs and though the country had just declared war, life had been carrying on much as normal. No one then had any idea of how truly awful war would be in London.

'Got tomorrow off, love?' called Cyril, the hospital night watchman, startling her out of her gloomy thoughts as she passed him.



She summoned a smile. ‘Now wouldn’t that be lovely, Cyril. After a beautiful day like today, it looks like tomorrow might be a nice day for a picnic in the park . . . for those who have time to picnic.’

He laughed. ‘That’s not you nor me, lass. I hardly remember parks and picnics. I used to love listening to the brass bands when I was a lad, though. This damned war – pardon my language – has spoiled the parks; air raid shelters where roses used to bloom. I ask you!’

‘There are still flowers, Cyril, and even duck ponds. And I read somewhere that some famous American bands plan to come – Hands Across the Sea or something like that. I’d best be off; I hate cycling in the dark, although there is a lovely moon tonight. See you tomorrow.’

‘You take care, love. That moon is beautiful, but it’s a bomber’s moon and no mistake. Go as quickly as you can.’

April pushed open the main door and paused for a moment, taking in the glorious sight of the Houses of Parliament bathed in moonlight. But Cyril’s words had sent a shiver down her spine. He was right, it was a bomber’s moon. Beautiful and full and illuminating the streets in an ethereal silver glow. Her father would have noticed too, and he’d be standing at the window, anxiously awaiting her return. She knew he wouldn’t budge until she was safe with him, even if the air raid siren went. Ever since her beloved mother had died when she was eight, it had just been the two of them, with no other family to call their own, and her father watched out for her safety almost too much. It had been a little suffocating when she was younger, but now, older and wiser at the grand old age of twenty, she understood, because if anything happened to





either of them, they'd be all alone in the world, and the thought completely terrified her.

She hurried around to the bicycle stand. Only three were there; many nurses came in on special buses, but as she only lived a few miles away in Camberwell, she could cycle to the hospital easily. Still, even a couple of miles can seem like a very long way when your legs were as tired as hers, she thought grimly.

As she wheeled her bike to the gate, she looked up into the night sky, not looking for twinkling stars but for enemy aircraft. A perfect May night, dark blue sky, stars flung generously against the darkness and that beautiful moon. There were, of course, no street lights, but at least tonight she'd be able to see well enough. But so would the Germans. Hopefully they'd stay away for once. She crossed her fingers and set off.

Out of the gate she went, on to Walworth Road, heading for home. Head down, pedalling furiously, ears attuned to every sound: the purring of a luxury car, the aggressive rumble of yet another military vehicle, the startled screech as a lorry driver realised he was too far over and almost in the wrong lane.

'Be there soon, Dad,' April said to herself quietly. Then she yelped in fear as a van loomed up out of the darkness and almost brushed her aside. She waited where she was until it was quite some way away and then, her trembling stilled, began again to pedal. How her calves ached. She walked miles every day in the hospital, down long corridors, up one staircase and down another, back and forth between beds and sinks, but cycling, she decided, used different muscles – and each and every one was crying





out for a rest. Never mind, not too far now, April, just one more push.

She was just turning into Croxted Road, when she heard it: the terrifying sound that made her blood run cold and goose pimples break out all over her body. Bombers.

Glancing up quickly, she could see the first group of enemy planes. She tried counting but lost her place as wave after wave of enemy aircraft moved in across the capital. Sobbing now, April increased her pace. Sweat was pouring into her eyes, and her breath was coming in fast pants. She recognised the signs of panic, she'd seen it often enough in the patients brought in after an air raid.

She wobbled and fell off her bike, landing on her knees on the road. 'Oh, go away and leave us in peace,' she cried, as she heard the first explosion and then another and yet another. And they were close. Flames began to illuminate the sky and the noise was deafening.

She stood up and looked around for her bicycle; she had to keep moving. In her panic, she couldn't see it, but as she looked around helplessly, another wave of enemy bombers arrived, and the world exploded around her.

Her bike forgotten, April ran desperately towards her street, barely noticing the falling glass and masonry. Then a massive explosion threw her to the ground and she lay, stunned, as all around her it seemed as if the world was disintegrating. She squinted through the dark and the dust, shivering. Despite the warmth of the night and the flames leaping all around her, she felt cold, so very cold. She looked up and spotted the remains of the green and white awning that usually hung above the greengrocer on





the corner. Now it flapped in the heat of the blaze. She watched it in a daze until it fell to the ground amongst the broken glass that had once so proudly proclaimed 'Charlie's Fruit Bowl'.

Dear God, no! That was *her* street. The street she'd grown up on, played with her friends in, and walked along with her dear mother, was on fire. She could see it. She could actually feel the heat, but she refused to believe it. The buzzing of the enemy aircraft overhead brought her back to her senses and she jumped to her feet.

'Daddy!' she screamed. She had to reach him. He would be at the window watching for her, as he was every night. Or would he have heard the planes and hurried to the Anderson shelter? Oh, please. For once let him have just thought of himself. But she knew he wouldn't. There was nothing on earth that would make her father take shelter if he thought his precious daughter was in danger. She was all he had left in the world.

'Oh, Daddy, please be safe. I'm coming.'

She began to run. Past Charlie's Fruit Bowl, past her friend Silvia's house, now gutted and on fire, on through the rubble and the falling bricks, when finally she heard the eerie, terrifying noise that Londoners had been hearing almost every night for the past few months – the air raid siren. Too late, she thought, far too late. The wailing went on and on until she felt she could bear it no longer.

She was heading straight for the flames that were sending sparks dancing against the blue-black sky. Soon she would be able to see the polished brass door knocker in the shape of a wily fox that Dad insisted was the envy of their neighbours, and in no time at all she would be





inside and Dad would be saying, ‘There’s your slippers, love. I’ll just pop into the kitchen and turn on the gas under the milk.’

A huge explosion, followed by another and yet another, made the whole street shake and houses tremble. All around her were falling bricks, exploding windows, collapsing walls, and she could see nothing for the great billowing clouds of dust and smoke. She had lost her sense of direction but blindly pushed forward, falling twice over what turned out to be a broken chimney pot and, a few steps further on, a large flower pot, a pot that had once been home to a rose-bush that grew the most beautifully scented pink roses from early May to late September. Mum’s last rose.

She turned around blindly, her nostrils full of the smell of cordite and dust and the awful black smoke that enveloped her, making her choke. Where was her home? It wasn’t where she had expected it to be. Instead, a large hole full of bricks seemed to have appeared and surely that green velvet was not one of the sitting-room curtains?

She stood still, so shocked that she couldn’t move, couldn’t think. Then she ran forward, dropped to her knees and began to pull the bricks away. Her father was here, he *must* be, buried under this rubble, and she would find him. She would!

The noise and the confusion around her faded away as she focused on just one thing: finding her father. He must be here. Just waiting for her to find him. She dug on, oblivious to the pain in her hands and the glass cutting into her knees and the tears pouring down her face, and muttering over and over again, ‘Daddy! Hang on, Daddy!’





Suddenly, an arm caught her around the waist and tried to pull her back. 'Come on, love, get to a shelter. You'll get yourself killed.'

'Leave me alone! Get away from me! I have to find my father.' She pushed the man away with a strength borne of panic and desperation, then turned and kept digging. Suddenly, a sharp pain brought her back to her senses. She looked at her hand. In the red glow of the flames, she could see that it was covered in blood. No matter, she could tend to it later. Wiping it down her jacket, she carried on throwing bricks and blocks of rubble out of the way.

The arms came back again, stronger this time. 'I'm sorry, love, you've got to get out of here.' The voice was kind but firm. 'I'll look for your dad, don't you worry. If he's there, we'll find him. Now, get to the shelter.'

'I'll take her.' Another voice suddenly appeared. And April found herself being enveloped in warm arms. 'Come now, April, there's nothing you can do here. Let me get you to the shelter, and we'll come back just as soon as it's safe.'

She squinted at the man. It was Mr Cary, one of the local fire wardens. She struggled against him as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her away. 'Get off me!' she screamed. 'Let me look!'

'April.' The voice was low and insistent. 'If your father is injured, he's going to need you to look after him. But at this rate, you'll get yourself killed. Come on, love, you need to get away from here. Let the firemen do their job.'





April collapsed, sobbing on his shoulder. 'I have to find him. Please, help me. What'll I do if he's dead? Where will I go?'

'Shh, girl. Time enough to worry about that. But first, you need to be safe.' The man lifted April and carried her unsteadily over the rubble. April opened her eyes and looked up. High in the night sky, the moon shone down on the hellish scene, mocking them all with its deceptive beauty. It was the moon's fault, she thought. If it wasn't for that huge, stupid moon, she'd be with her dad now, drinking her cocoa. If she could reach up and pull it out of the sky, she would.

Suddenly, her breath caught in her throat. She tried to breathe in, to take in the horrible, dusty air, but nothing came.

'Please, help . . .' she wheezed.

And still she could not draw in a breath. The world around her started to darken, the noise to fade, until it all disappeared.



April woke with a start. She was lying on a bench with a scratchy grey blanket covering her legs. The light was dim, but she could hear voices and knew that she was not alone. She lay for a moment, wondering why she felt so terrible. Then it came crashing back. She sat up with a gasp.

'Daddy?'

A woman appeared at her side. It was Mrs O'Connor, who had lived in the house opposite for as long as April could remember. 'April, thank goodness you've come back to us. We're in the shelter. One of the wardens carried you in here. What on earth have you been doing to yourself, dear? Your hands are a mess.'



‘Have they found him?’

Mrs O’Connor shook her head sadly. ‘I’m so sorry, April, your house took a direct hit. And there’s not much left of mine, neither. They’re out there now, lookin’ for survivors. But you best stay here with me for now, love. It’s not safe and the all-clear hasn’t sounded, though I’ve not heard a plane for a bit.’

‘But if there’s an air raid I should get to the hospital! They’ll need all the staff there to help.’ She sat up and swung her legs on to the floor. A wave of dizziness suddenly hit her as she tried to stand.

‘No, love, they’ll just have to manage without you tonight. You’re in no fit state to treat anyone.’

April looked down and noticed that her hands were roughly bandaged. ‘What happened to them?’

‘Accordin’ to the warden, you cut your hands trying to dig the rubble away. I’ve tried to clean them as best I can, but for now, this’ll ’ave to do.’

April stared at the kindly woman. She couldn’t take it in. Her father, their house, the memories of her mother; they were all she had left in the world. If she lost this, then what did she have? Overwhelmed, she started to shake.

‘Oh, Mrs O’Connor, what will I do if he’s gone? There’s no one else. There’s nothing left.’ She sobbed violently in the woman’s arms.

Mrs O’Connor wrapped the blanket around April’s shoulders and tried to soothe her. ‘There, there, my love. There’s many in the same boat. We’ll all manage one way or another. And you’re not alone. All of us, we’ll look out for each other, you hear. Worst comes to worst you can come stay with me sister in Sussex. That’s where I’ll be



goin' soon as I can. Not many bombs dropping down that way. Lucky buggers.'

Suddenly another voice cut in. 'Ah, April, you're back with us. I've brought you some sweet tea. Now come on, girl, buck up. Tears won't get you anywhere.'

April looked up, startled at the brusque tone. It was Mrs Osborne, the vicar's wife. April turned her face away. She was the last woman she wanted to see right now.

Mrs O'Connor leaped to April's defence. 'Mrs Osborne, the girl's just lost 'er 'ome and maybe her father and has nowhere to go. I think she's entitled to a bit of cryin.'

'Don't you worry, April, you can come and stay with me and the reverend till you're back on your feet. Our boy Theo's away doing his duty, though we've got our refugees . . . Did I tell you about them, Mrs O'Connor?'

'Only a few times, Mrs O. Such a kind and charitable lady you are.' April wasn't too far gone that she didn't notice the sarcasm in Mrs O'Connor's voice.

'Well, they do say charity begins at home. And there's room in our house for one more refugee with no home to call their own.'

At these words, April sobbed even harder.

'I think it might be better if you left her with me, Mrs O. Not sure you're helpin' much.'

'Rightio, I see you've got this one under control. What a treasure you are, Mrs O'Connor. But bring her round to the vicarage as soon as the all-clear's sounded, won't you? I'll take good care of her.'

'Bloody woman,' Mrs O'Connor cursed under her breath once she'd left. 'Sorry, love,' she said to April. 'But I've been cleanin' for her for nigh on ten years, and she 'asn't got a





charitable bone in her body. All for show, that one. And those poor refugees work hard for her charity, believe me.'

'I don't want to live with her. It's her fault that Theo left me for that girl.' Remembering the heartbreak of Theo's betrayal brought fresh tears to April's eyes. She'd been in love with him all her life, and she'd thought he loved her, but it turned out she was wrong. And Mrs Osborne had taken great delight in telling her all about it; she'd never thought April was good enough for her precious boy.

Mrs O'Connor snorted. 'If Theo had an ounce of gumption, he'd have stood up to his mum and gone with whichever girl he liked best.'

'Well, he clearly didn't want me enough. I won't live with that woman. I can't. And Dad might still be alive.' April started sobbing again.

'Shh, now, love. He might be, but you need to take what's offered right now. And Reverend Osborne is a fine gentleman. He'll make sure you're all right. And then, maybe, once the dust has settled, so to speak, you can look to your future again. Maybe go and stay with some other family.'

'I don't have any other family. Just me and Dad.'

'Come now, there must be someone. Maybe on your mum's side?'

April moved away from the older woman's comforting embrace. 'I don't know. I was only eight when she died and I don't remember much about any of them. They came from Cornwall, but we never visited after the funeral. Although my mum sometimes talked about her childhood and the adventures she had with her twin sister. But I'm not sure I ever met her and I never knew why. The search for her father hasn't finished yet.'





‘There you go. Once you’ve got yourself together, and your poor hands are healed, then maybe you can go to Cornwall to look for her.’

‘But what about my training? I can’t not work. How will I live?’

‘Think, love. They have hospitals in Cornwall, don’t they? Get down there and find yourself another hospital, and sure as eggs is eggs, the rest will follow.’



Over the next few weeks, April thought about Mrs O’Connor’s words continually. The search for survivors had continued late into the night, and April herself had cycled to every nearby hospital in the days following the bombing, walking amongst the injured, desperately hoping to find her father. But with so many weeks passed now, April had come to accept he was gone.

Life with the Osbornes was proving trying. Although Reverend Osborne was incredibly kind, his work in the grieving and shattered parish meant he was rarely home. Mrs Osborne, however, was another matter entirely. Mrs O’Connor had been right about her charity being for show. She had two Belgian refugees living with her, and they worked from morning till night in the vicarage, trying to keep it to Mrs Osborne’s impossible standards. Now Mrs O’Connor had left to live with her sister, there was even more work to do, as, according to Mrs Osborne, ‘You can’t find good help these days for love nor money,’ and Madame Goossens and Madame Martens, two sisters who had fled Belgium with nothing but the clothes they stood up in, were run ragged by her constant demands.





April was able to avoid the worst of it as she worked such long hours. She also managed to avoid Mrs Osborne for the most part, claiming study or taking on extra shifts just so she wouldn't have to talk to her. One day, however, much to April's surprise, Mrs Osborne was waiting up for her when she got back from the hospital.

'Oh, April, you'll never guess what,' she gushed as soon as April walked into the living room.

'Hello, Mrs Osborne, is everything all right?'

'It's so much more than all right.' She brandished a letter in April's face. 'I've just had word that Theo will be coming home on leave in a month. Isn't that wonderful?'

April felt her stomach sink. 'Theo?' she said faintly.

'Yes. And I rushed over to speak to Charlotte to see if she knew anything about it, which of course she did.' Mrs Osborne giggled girlishly. 'Those two are *awfully* close.'

April smiled stiffly. What was there to say after all? She was glad Theo was well, but he had told her when he left that he wanted to be with Charlotte. The years of friendship that had started when they were just eight and ripened into love as they got older was merely a 'childish crush', according to him. But not for April. She had loved him with all her heart, and though the pain of the break-up had lessened slightly, she still missed their friendship terribly. She often wondered what she would do if he wanted her back, because although she still loved him, she wasn't sure she could ever really trust him again.

'So, I was wondering,' – Mrs Osborne's voice cut into her thoughts – 'if you might enquire as to whether there is a room for you at the nurses' home so Theo can have his old room back while he's here. I think he might find





it a little . . . unsettling . . . to have you in his room, don't you think?'

'Yes, of course. That's wonderful news. I'm sure he'll be happy to see you. I will speak to Matron tomorrow, but rooms are scarce and . . .' April trailed off.

'Yes, well, you can stay here if you must, but do try.' April kept her expression carefully neutral, then turned and left the room without another word. What on earth was she going to do now?



In her room – well, Theo's really – she threw herself on the bed and stared at the ceiling. On top of everything else, how could she cope with seeing Theo again? It was bad enough living with his mother, but to see him and Charlotte together and blissfully happy would be unbearable.

She thought back over the years. She couldn't really remember a time when Theo hadn't been part of her life. After her mother had died, April had found herself isolated at school as her friends found it difficult to know what to say. But not Theo. He made a point of including her in his games, bringing her home to tea when her house was empty, trying to make her laugh. April smiled as she remembered. They'd become a pair without even noticing. And though Theo was lively and funny when he was at school, only April knew his other side. The quieter, gentler side that was passionate about music and longed to play cello in an orchestra.

But for all his talents, he'd struggled with his schoolwork, whereas April found it easy. So she'd help him after school, and then listen while he played his cello for her. They had been sweet years, she thought, and Theo was





wrong to say it had been a childhood crush. She knew he'd loved her as much as she'd loved him. But as they got older, Mrs Osborne suddenly didn't seem to like her being at the house any more, so they'd gone out instead, exploring London and finding secret places where they could share kisses. She touched her lips at the memory. She could still feel his soft lips on hers . . .

Stop it, April! You'll only make yourself feel worse. But she couldn't help it. The memories came crowding back. Memories of walks in the park, tea in the Lyon's Corner House, evenings at the picture house watching Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. She started humming to herself, 'Cheek By Cheek.'

'Oh, I have to stop this,' she said out loud. But then the memory of the night her heart broke came back to her suddenly. Theo had been due to leave for his army training in two days, but before he left, they were going to a church dance. She'd noticed that Theo had been getting more withdrawn recently, and they hadn't seen each other quite as often, but she'd put it down to him worrying about going to war and had tried to be as supportive as she could. She'd been looking forward to the dance for ages, a chance at last to spend time with Theo, but that night, instead of spending time with her, Theo had volunteered to play the piano, while Charlotte Miller, the bishop's daughter, sang. She'd tried to hide her jealousy, but it had been difficult. Charlotte was so pretty and had such a beautiful voice that she felt plain and shabby by comparison.

She'd been sipping her orange squash and talking to an old school friend when Mrs Osborne had come up to her. 'April, my dear. How lovely to see you. Did you come alone?'





‘No, Mrs Osborne, Theo brought me.’ As Mrs Osborne knew. April had tried very hard to hide it from Theo, but she had begun to dislike Mrs Osborne intensely.

‘He’s such a good boy. So lovely of him to still bring you even though he really wanted to bring Charlotte. Such a marvellous voice, don’t you think? And she does voluntary work at the orphanage. Such a lovely, giving girl. It’s no wonder my Theo is so smitten. Did you know, they spent all last Saturday working together at the soup kitchen? Anyway, I must get on. Do pass on my regards to your father.’

And just like that, she’d shattered all of April’s dreams. Theo had told her he couldn’t see her last weekend because he was helping his father, but it seemed he’d been lying. She’d looked at Charlotte with her jet-black hair, blue eyes and pale skin. It was no wonder he’d rather be with her. Not only was she beautiful, but she was talented *and* kind, and her father was a bishop, which made her good enough for Theo in Mrs Osborne’s critical eyes. She’d stared at the two of them, noticing the secret smiles they exchanged as they played, and her heart had twisted in jealousy and anguish.

She’d said a hasty goodbye to her friend and rushed home in tears.

When Theo had come to see her the next morning, he’d refused to come in. Instead he stood awkwardly on the doorstep, looking at her with a belligerent expression. After the night before, when she’d cried herself to sleep, April had been in no mood to pander to him, so she’d stood with her arms folded and waited for him to speak.

‘Why on earth did you rush off like that? You know I’m leaving tomorrow. The least you could have done was say goodbye.’



‘I didn’t feel well, that’s all.’

‘Really? You seemed all right to me.’ His tone was petulant.

‘Well, your mother told me a few things that made me feel a bit sick. According to her, you are besotted with Charlotte. So besotted in fact that you only took me to the dance out of duty, and you spent the whole day with her last weekend when you said you were busy with your father. And you have the cheek to be cross with me?’ She stopped and looked away. She didn’t want to cry in front of Theo.

Theo looked shocked. ‘She shouldn’t have said that.’

‘Well, are you? Besotted with Charlotte? Have you been stringing me along all this time?’

Theo looked down at the ground; a guilty child who’d been found out. ‘April . . . You know I love you . . . but I think I love you more as a friend than anything else.’ He looked up again, his eyes sad. ‘I wanted to tell you, but there never seemed to be a good moment. I never intended for my feelings towards Charlotte to grow, but when Mother suggested that perhaps I could accompany her when she sang in church, and then she started inviting her to lunch after the service, and we’d help at the orphanage . . . well, I suppose . . .’

‘What do you suppose, Theo?’ April was surprised her voice was so steady.

‘April, I think you’re wonderful. Look at you, you’re so beautiful and you’re caring. I really admire that you’re going to be a nurse. And we’ve hardly been apart since we were eight. I don’t know any more whether what I feel for you is more a childish crush or a proper grown-up love.’



And Charlotte . . . Well, it's different with her. Do you understand what I mean?'

April's heart was breaking, but she stood her ground. 'No, Theo, not really.'

Theo took a deep breath, then looked at her with sincere brown eyes, dark hair swept back from his high forehead. April tried not to notice how handsome he was.

'April, now that there's a war on, I think it's only fair that you don't wait for me. I might not come back, and I'd hate to think of you waiting for me when . . .' He stopped again. 'There's no easy way of saying this, but what I mean is, I don't think you should wait for me because I . . . I've asked Charlotte to . . .'

April had gasped. The pain had been almost physical, and for a moment she couldn't breathe.

Theo had wrapped his arms around her tightly. 'I'm so sorry,' he whispered into her hair. 'I will always love you, April. You are my first love.' He pulled back to look into her eyes and wiped a tear from her cheek with his thumb. 'Will you still write to me?'

April had shaken her head. 'I think you should go, Theo. If this is how you've been feeling, you should have told me sooner.'

'I know, but I just couldn't bear to hurt you. But Mother said it was only fair to tell you before I went away.'

'You talked about this with your *mother*! So was this your decision or hers?'

He'd looked at her regretfully. 'I'm sorry, I know I've upset you, but I'm a grown man and I make my own decisions.' He'd pulled her into his arms once more. 'I think I'll always love you, April. But I think she's right.'





We've grown up now, and I've changed. Stay safe and take care of yourself. I'll understand if you feel you can't write to me.'

April sighed, trying to shake the memories away. She didn't think she could bear to see Theo and Charlotte together, so she needed to leave this house. She thought about what Mrs O'Connor had said about going to Cornwall. It was time. Her father was gone and she couldn't stay in this limbo forever. She would speak to Matron and see if there was any way she could transfer to a hospital there. Even if she didn't find any of her family, anything was better than staying where she was with the constant reminder of happier times all around her.

'What do you think, Dad?' she whispered. 'Is it a good idea?'

There was no reply, of course there wasn't, but her mind was made up. It was time to leave her memories behind once and for all.



The next day, April went to work with her heart even heavier than usual. But, as she did every day, she tried to push aside her grief and focus on helping the patients. Entering the women's ward where she was working that week, she went straight over to Alice, one of her favourite patients. Alice had broken both her legs in an air raid and was stuck in traction, and as she and April were around the same age, they'd struck up a quiet friendship.

'Good morning, Alice, how are you this morning?'

'I can't complain, nurse. And me mum and sister will be in at visiting time. I can't wait to see them.'



‘How lovely. I’m looking forward to meeting them.’

But that afternoon, when Alice’s mother and sister had arrived, full of hugs and kisses and concern, she wondered, If I were in hospital, who would visit me?

All of a sudden, the black cloud of loneliness that seemed to follow April wherever she went enveloped her and she rushed away. Taking refuge in a supply cupboard, she sobbed out her heartbreak.

‘Oh, pull yourself together, April,’ she said to herself firmly. ‘You’re no use to anyone like this.’ Wiping her eyes on her apron, she straightened her shoulders, grabbed a bandage – so it wouldn’t look like she’d been hiding – and strode back into the ward, hoping that Sister Bartlett, who was not the most sympathetic woman, wouldn’t notice her red eyes. But no such luck.

The sister saw her the moment she entered the ward. ‘Nurse Harvey, a word, if you please.’

April walked reluctantly to the nurses’ station. ‘I know you have lost your father and your home, Nurse Harvey,’ Sister Bartlett said in a hushed voice. ‘But look at some of our patients, the people you are supposed to be helping, and thank your lucky stars you’re beside the bed and not in it. Now, do something useful like getting a bed pan to Mrs Latimer over in the corner. She’s been asking for at least half an hour and if you don’t hop to it soon, you’ll be cleaning up the mess, I can promise you, *and* washing the sheets.’

‘Yes, sister. I’m sorry.’ April was mortified and determined to keep her mind on nursing until she was off duty.

Matron, who had been passing, gave Sister Bartlett a disapproving stare as she bustled past, then she turned to April. ‘When you’ve seen to Mrs Latimer, please come and



see me in my office, Nurse Harvey. Don't worry, my dear,' she said, noting the alarmed look on April's face. 'I just want to have a word to see how you're getting on. Try not to mind Sister Bartlett, she doesn't mean to be harsh but she's dealing with tragedy of her own, I'm afraid. Her son is missing in action.'

April sped away to do as she was told. Poor Sister Bartlett. She must try to remember she was not the only one to have suffered tragedy; everyone was coping with loss. Sister Bartlett might have been harsh, but she was right. She just had to keep her mind focused on helping where she could. They would not win this war by wallowing in self-pity.

A few moments later, she knocked on Matron's door, steeling herself for a telling off. But also aware that this was the chance she'd needed to talk about moving to Cornwall.

'Come.' Matron's voice always sounded formidable, and, trying to remember her kindness, April tentatively opened the door.

'Ah, Nurse Harvey. Take a seat and tell me how you are getting on.'

April sat, twisting her hands nervously together. 'I'm all right, thank you, Matron.'

Matron stared at her over her glasses, a speculative look on her face. 'Are you sure, Nurse Harvey? Because I can quite understand if you are not, and if that means you need to take a little bit of time off to recover your spirits, then we should try to accommodate you. There is no point in having a nurse on duty who bursts into tears at the drop of a hat.'





April looked down at her lap in shame, trying to hide the tears that had once again welled up in her eyes.

‘No, Matron, I’d prefer to keep working. And anyway, I have nowhere else to go . . .’

‘Where are you staying at the moment?’

‘I’m staying with the vicar and his wife, but I feel I’m imposing . . .’ She looked up at Matron. ‘Would it be possible to find a room for me at the nurses’ home?’

Matron shook her head. ‘There’s so little space since the home was bombed, as you know. I’m afraid it sounds like you have a perfectly good place, and there’s no need for you to take up room in the home. Do you not find it to your liking?’

‘Oh no.’ April knew she could not discuss her reasons for disliking Mrs Osborne. ‘The Osbornes are terribly kind, and I’ve known them for many years.’

‘Well, then, nurse, all I can suggest is that you keep yourself together on the wards. Think only of the people who need you and depend on you. Allow yourself to fall apart when you are at home alone, and then slowly and carefully put yourself together again. We are here when you need us.’

‘Yes, Matron. Thank you. But . . .’ She stopped.

‘Yes, nurse? Is there something else?’

April took a deep breath. ‘Matron, I was wondering whether it would be possible to finish my training at another hospital?’

Matron looked surprised. ‘Well, I suppose it would. But we’d be very sorry to lose you. You are proving to be a most excellent and capable nurse. But why? Do you have family elsewhere?’



‘No . . . Well, yes, sort of. My mother was from Cornwall, and I would dearly love to go there and see if I have any family left there.’

‘And where in Cornwall was she from?’

April searched her memory for the answer. ‘I think she was from somewhere near Truro, Matron.’

‘I see. And you definitely would like to leave us?’

‘Oh no, not at all. But . . .’ She stopped, unsure what to say.

‘No need to say any more, April. I understand perfectly. I was left orphaned by the Great War and wouldn’t have known what to do with myself if it hadn’t been for my aunts and uncles. Let me make enquiries, and I will let you know.’

Chapter 2

November 1941

April was making her way to the hospital cloakroom early one morning after a long night shift when she was stopped by Matron.

‘Good news, Nurse Harvey. It’s all arranged. Your transfer to the Royal Cornwall Infirmary is confirmed and you can leave within the next two weeks.’

April, who over the past few months had found herself sinking ever deeper into despair, looked up in surprise.

‘Really, Matron? I can leave soon?’

‘Yes, I’ve sent my reference to the matron there – and let me tell you it is glowing; I have been so impressed with your fortitude and your professionalism during this trying time – and she is expecting you at the beginning of December. They will sort out accommodation for you, and let you know on arrival. Now, nurse, you have one week left to work here, then a week to get down to Cornwall and settle in before reporting for duty. How does that sound?’

‘Oh, it sounds wonderful. Thank you so much.’

‘Are we that bad, eh, Nurse Harvey, that you can’t wait to leave us?’ Matron’s eyes glinted with humour, but even so, April flushed with guilt.

‘Oh, I didn’t mean . . .’

Matron laughed. ‘It’s all right, I know what you meant. Now, off with you, nurse, and get some sleep. You have a busy time ahead.’

‘Thank you, Matron.’



April fairly flew home on her bicycle that morning, all her tiredness forgotten. Maybe once she left this place that reminded her so much of her father and her happy times with Theo, she would stop having the terrible nightmares that forced her awake night after night. Always the same dream: her house burning, her father’s terrified face at the window, and all around the sound of the air-raid siren wailing. She shook her head, determined not to think of that now. Instead she thought of how wonderful it would be to tell Mrs Osborne she was leaving. The relationship between them had become even frostier since Theo’s visit in August, and she hoped that this news might lighten the atmosphere until she left.

When she got back, she was pleased to see that both the reverend and Mrs Osborne were in the kitchen having breakfast.

‘Good morning, Reverend Osborne, Mrs Osborne. I have some news. I’m pleased to say that Matron has just told me that I have a position at the Royal Cornwall Infirmary, starting in two weeks, so I will be leaving you at last.’

Mrs Osborne looked up from her tea and toast. ‘Well, that is good news. Isn’t it, Theodore?’

The reverend smiled at April, looking so like Theo, April had to look away. ‘We shall be very sorry to lose you,



April. It's been an absolute pleasure to have you with us, hasn't it, Bella?'

Mrs Osborne said nothing, merely inclined her head.

'And I know Theo loved having you here when he was home. Always nice to have another young person about, don't you think?'

April thought back to the awkward week she had spent when Theo was home, and most particularly to the bewildering last evening. Theo had not minded at all that she was sleeping in his bedroom but even so, she had taken on as many extra shifts at the hospital as she could manage to try to avoid him. But on that last evening, they had found themselves alone together sitting on the sofa in front of the fire talking.

'April, I've been wanting to say since I came home how sorry I am about what happened before I went away.'

April had looked at him in discomfort. This was the last thing she wanted to be reminded of when Theo was sitting there, looking so handsome and relaxed. He still made her heart beat faster every time he walked in a room, and this past week, having him in the same house had been torture. She'd so longed to recapture their previous easy relationship. To laugh and talk with him as they'd once done. And yes, she admitted, she longed to kiss him again too. She'd realised then, with a sinking heart, that she still loved him. Maybe she always would.

She swallowed. 'Never mind all that, Theo. The most important thing is that you're safe for now, and home. I hope that you and Charlotte will be very happy together.'

'That's just it, April. Being home and seeing you every day has made me think. Charlotte is wonderful, of





course, but sometimes I find myself remembering how it was, just you and me, and the fun we used to have. We've known each other almost all our lives, and I think you probably know me better than anyone else.' He took her hand and looked into her eyes. 'And I think I know you better than anyone too. I miss that. I miss our closeness and how comfortable we were together. How we could sit together and not need to say a word because, well, we just fit, somehow.'

'But last time we spoke, you said I was just a childhood crush. What's changed?'

'I suppose *I* have. Being away from home, fighting . . . thinking about you every single day. Not Charlotte, always you. And this might be my last chance to tell you how sorry I am for hurting you, and how I think I was wrong.'

April shook her head. 'You hurt me so badly, Theo. This last year has been the worst of my life. I lost you and then I lost Dad, and I'm not sure I can trust you again. I can't take any more loss, Theo, so please don't say things you might not mean.'

'I would never want to hurt you, April. You are far too precious to me. All I know is that I miss you. Sometimes I wish . . .' He stopped and looked at her wistfully.

April stared back. She didn't want to hope, and she didn't want to have her heart broken again by this man who seemed unable to make up his mind between two girls.

'I wish I'd never met Charlotte. I think I got confused,' he whispered. 'I understand if you can't trust me straightaway. All I ask is that you write to me. Who





knows what the future holds, or whether we even have a future. I still . . . well, what I'm trying to say is that I still love you.'

'Theo, I . . . ' April had spent enough time getting over her heartbreak and now she was dealing with the grief of her father's death. The thought that Theo might still love her made her heart leap, but also made her fearful. She wasn't sure she could take any more heartache. 'You must know, my feelings haven't changed, and it's true: life is short. Goodness knows, I see enough grief and heartache in my job. I will write to you. But please, Theo, don't play with my feelings. If this is friendship, then so be it, but don't make me love you again.'

'That's all I ask, my darling. And rest assured, my feelings for you go way beyond friendship.' He leaned over and kissed her tenderly on the lips. April drew back in surprise. 'Sorry. I couldn't help myself. You look so lovely with your golden hair shining in the firelight. Say you didn't mind.'

Unable to resist him, April leaned forward. 'I didn't mind, Theo,' she whispered. And this time she kissed him back. He pulled her closer and though she enjoyed the contact, she was also aware that something had changed. Once, when he'd kissed her, her heart would be singing; this time, though, at the back of her mind was the uneasy feeling that something wasn't quite right. She couldn't help but doubt his feelings for her and she wasn't sure she would ever be able to love him in the same way again.

Theo drew back and stroked her cheek. 'Darling April. I knew I could count on you. You are my shelter from the





stormy blast.' He grinned. 'What a thing to say! You can tell I'm a vicar's son! But you know what I mean. With you, I feel I can truly be myself.'

Before she could reply, a sudden 'Excuse me' had them jumping apart guiltily. Mrs Osborne was standing in the doorway.

'I think it's time you were in bed, April, don't you? You have an early start in the morning, and I'd like to spend these last few hours alone with my son.'

April jumped up. 'Yes, of course. Good night, Theo. I don't think I'll see you before I leave in the morning, but I will write to you. Good night, Mrs Osborne.'

And she'd left. But ever since that night, Mrs Osborne, when she'd talked to her at all, had spoken only about Charlotte and her accomplishments. April had done her very best never to be caught alone with her. The thought of leaving this difficult atmosphere made April feel lighter than she had in months. And who knows, she thought, in a few week's time I might have some family of my very own.

She was brought back from her thoughts by Reverend Osborne. 'Now, April, is there anything you need for your new life? I know the Women's Voluntary Service has provided you with some clothes, and that lovely warm winter coat, but is there anything else?'

'Thank you, reverend, but I think I have sufficient. You can only wear one set of clothes at a time, and the WVS has been so generous. I could never have afforded to buy enough clothes with my coupons.'

'Very well, my dear. I must get on, but we will have a special farewell supper for you, shall we not, Bella?'



‘Yes, I’m sure the Belgians can rustle something up. Though, on the rations we have, it won’t be that special, I’m afraid.’

‘That would be lovely.’ April forced a smile. Although, she thought sourly, if I was Charlotte, I bet Mrs Osborne would have managed to find a little something special.

Oh stop it, April, she said to herself. You sound like a very bitter woman.