

Secrets of a Charmed Life

By Susan Meissner

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Editorial Review

Review

Raves for *Secrets of a Charmed Life*

“Rich with vividly drawn characters, places, and events…It’s themes of reinvention and redemption will strike a chord with readers.”—*Booklist*

“Simply told, yet powerful in its depth…This vivid, well-researched story, depicting the horrors of the Blitz, the beauty of the countryside and the heartbreak and loss of a loved one will remain in your mind long after it ends.”—*RT Book Reviews*

“This story of choices and consequences takes readers on a heartrending journey through war-torn London, the quiet Cotswolds and far-off America…[An] impressive and emotional novel.”—Historical Novel Society

“With vivid storytelling and lovely prose, Meissner weaves a story, told from three perspectives, of *World War II* and present day seamlessly.”—Open Book Society

About the Author
Susan Meissner is a former managing editor of a weekly newspaper and an award-winning columnist. She is the award-winning author of *A Bridge Across the Ocean*, *Secrets of a Charmed Life*, *A Fall of Marigolds*, and *Stars Over Sunset Boulevard*, among other novels.

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Praise for the Novels of Susan Meissner

OTHER NOVELS BY SUSAN MEISSNER

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Part One

One

The Cotswolds, England

THE English cottage, bramble hedged and golden stoned, looks as timeless as a fairy tale except for the bobbing Mylar balloons tied to the front gate. Ivy scampers childlike across the house’s walls—all the way

to the gabled windows on the second story—and then is tamed to civil edges around the paned windows. Easter-hued hollyhocks stand in stately rows beneath the sills. As I pull up onto the driveway, the crunching of tires on gravel sounds like applause, which is fitting since the woman I am to interview is celebrating her ninety-third birthday. I set the brake on the borrowed car and reach for my messenger bag on the seat next to me. I step out of the vehicle and into the postcard charm of April in the Cotswolds. I'm not expecting to be invited to stay for the day's festivities but I hope I will be just the same. I've come to adore the way the British celebrate a happy occasion in the afternoon.

Isabel MacFarland is a stranger to me, though I've been told that I've surely walked past her watercolors for sale in Oxford gift shops. I've yet to even hear her voice. She agreed by way of one of my professors to let me interview her about her experience as a survivor of the London Blitz, and only because the first person I had arranged to speak with had died in her sleep at an assisted-living facility in Banbury. Today happened to be the time that worked best for both of us while still allowing me to meet my deadline, take my finals, grudgingly say good-bye to Oxford and my studies abroad, and return to California.

I get out of the car and silently congratulate myself for arriving safely in the village of Stow-on-the-Wold and without having ruined anyone else's day in the process. In the four months I've been a visiting student at Oxford's Keble College, I've borrowed this car three times before today: once to see whether I should dare try it a second time, then again to prepare myself for the third time, and the most recent to drive my parents and sister out to Warwick Castle and Stratford-upon-Avon when they came to visit me at midterm. Statistically, I'm not owed any kudos for having gotten here in one piece. Apparently a Yank's first few experiences driving on the wrong side of the road are actually her safest. It's after a dozen trips behind the wheel that she becomes dangerous. Lets down her guard. Forgets where she is. That's when she'll make a fatal turn into oncoming traffic; when her senses have been dulled by familiarity.

Today's outing, the fourth time I've driven a car in England, is well below the multiple experience mark, and I will likely not drive again before the term ends. I wouldn't necessarily have needed to drive today, as there's a train station in nearby Moreton-in-Marsh, but there's also a five-mile walk on narrow country roads between the two villages, with an occasional bus making the rounds. Penelope, my dorm mate and a British national from Manchester, who has had the guts to repeatedly loan me her car, insisted I take it.

I stop for a moment outside the car and breathe the scents of grass and sky and dew—refreshing after weeks of city exhaust. All around me are velvety fields quilted by clumps of trees and scattered dwellings oozing storybook quaintness. Some of the nearby roofs are thatched, some not, but all bear exterior walls of golden-hued stone that look as though they would taste like butterscotch if you licked them. A figure appears at an arched front door that is festooned with climbing roses. The woman is wiping her hands on a towel and smiling at me. Her graying hair is stylishly cut with one side longer than the other. I am guessing she is Isabel MacFarland's live-in caretaker and housekeeper, Beryl Avery, and the woman who gave me directions.

"You found us!" she calls out to me.

I shut the door on Penelope's aging Austin-Morris. "Your directions were perfect. Okay if I park here?"

"Yes, that's fine. Come on in."

The balloons are pogo-sticking this way and that as I open the gate. One of the balloons attempts to attach itself to the strap of my bag as I pass. I gently nudge it away.

Mrs. Avery holds the front door open for me—it is painted an enameled cherry red. "I'm so glad you made it. Beryl Avery. Please call me Beryl." She thrusts her free hand toward me as I step inside.

“Kendra Van Zant. Thanks so much for letting me come, especially when you have so much going on later today. I can’t tell you how grateful I am.”

Beryl shuts the door behind us. I am guessing she is in her late sixties. She smells like cake and cream and other sweet things. A smudge of flour dusts one side of her jawbone.

“It’s no trouble,” she says brightly. “I’m happy you’re here. Auntie doesn’t talk much about her experience during the war and we all wish she would, you know. When anyone else asks about it, she shoos the question away as if no one could possibly be interested in anything that happened so long ago. But of course we are interested. Terribly so, considering what happened to her. It’s such a nice surprise she said yes to you.”

I don’t know what to say to this because it’s a surprise to me, too, that the old woman said yes. Professor Briswell told me Mrs. MacFarland, a noted local artist and friend of his late mother, is known to have been bombed out of her home during the Blitz, but also that she never speaks about it.

“I would ask her why she said yes if I weren’t afraid I’d jinx it for you and she’d change her mind,” Beryl continues.

I’m about to ask why Mrs. MacFarland has been so reluctant to talk about the war so that I will know which questions to avoid, but Beryl fills the tiny space of silence before I can.

“I must tell you, though, that she seems a little lost in thought today. You might need to give her some extra time to answer your questions. It’s probably all the hullabaloo with the party and all.”

“Is she still okay that I am coming today?”

Beryl cocks her head. “I think so. Hard to say if ‘okay’ is the right word. Auntie isn’t one to be overly demonstrative. I’d say she’s content regarding your being here. I think she’s more worried about the party this afternoon. She didn’t want a fuss and I’m afraid that’s exactly what she’s getting. No one wanted to listen to me when I said she didn’t want a big to-do.”

We move out of the narrow entryway into a sitting room that looks as cozy and inviting as one of Tolkien’s hobbit holes. A fat, fern-green couch and its matching love seat are situated in the middle of the room, while glass-topped tables laden with books and jonquils in vases separate them. Persian rugs cover the wood floor. A tea cart sits in one corner, a curio cabinet in another, and an L-shaped bookshelf in a third. Enchanting watercolors of young girls holding polka-dot umbrellas line the walls.

“Are the paintings Mrs. MacFarland’s?” I ask.

“They are,” Beryl replies. “They’re all over the house. She’s quite an accomplished artist, but you probably already know that. The Umbrella Girls are her trademark. Her arthritis is too bad now for painting. She had to stop a while back.” Beryl sighs. “*That* was a hard day. She’s had too many hard days, if you ask me. Far too many.” The woman shakes her head slightly as if to dislodge the weight of the anguish she has observed. “Why don’t you have a seat here on the sofa and I’ll go fetch her?”

Beryl leaves the room and I settle onto the love seat, moving a few of the tightly stuffed throw pillows from behind my back. I can hear voices from other areas of the house now, and laughter in the back garden. A child squeals. Another one yells that it’s his turn to have a go. A more calming adult voice, grandmotherly in tone, instructs someone named Timmy to share the glider with another someone named Garth or he’ll be sent inside.

I pull my voice recorder from my bag and set it on the table in front of me, hoping Isabel won't mind if I record our conversation. I look over the questions on my notepad and decide I will let her answers guide me. I don't want to sabotage the interview by asking too much too soon. As I pull out a mechanical pencil, I hear the sound of shuffling feet.

"I'm fine, Beryl," a voice says, low toned and honeyed with age. "The tea is ready?"

"Oh yes. The tray's all set," Beryl says from the hallway, but out of my view.

"Lovely. You can bring it straight in."

"And your medicine?"

"Just the tea, thank you."

"But you didn't take it yesterday, either."

"Now, don't fuss, Beryl."

Isabel MacFarland steps into the room. She is a wisp of tissue-thin skin, weightless white hair, and fragile-looking bones. She is impeccably dressed, however, in a lavender skirt that reaches to her knees and a creamy white blouse with satin-covered buttons. Black ballet flats embrace her slender feet. A gold necklace rings her neck. Her nails are polished a shimmery pale pink and her cottony hair is swept up in the back with a comb of mother-of-pearl. She carries a fabric-wrapped rectangle, book shaped and tied with a ribbon.

I rise from my seat to see if I might need to assist her.

"Miss Van Zant. How very nice to meet you." Her English accent is not like Beryl's. There is something about it that seems stretched.

"Can I help you?" I take a few steps forward.

"No. Thank you, though. Please sit."

I return to the love seat and she lowers herself slowly to the sofa across from me. "Thank you so much for agreeing to see me," I say. "And on your birthday, too."

She waves away my gratitude. "It's just another day."

Beryl appears at the doorway with a tea tray. "Ninety-three is not just another day, Auntie."

Isabel MacFarland smiles as if she has just thought of something funny. Beryl sets the tray down and hands Mrs. MacFarland her cup, already creamed and sugared. Then she hands a cup to me and I add a teaspoon of sugar to it. The stirring of a silver spoon in an English china teacup is one of the sounds I will miss most when I head back to the United States.

"Thank you, Beryl," Mrs. MacFarland says. "You can just leave the tray. And can you be a dear and close the door so that we aren't in anyone's way?"

Beryl glances from me to Mrs. MacFarland with an unmistakably disappointed expression on her face. "Of course," she says with feigned brightness. She heads for the door and looks back at us with a polite smile that surely takes effort. She shuts the door softly behind her.

“I think she was hoping she could stay,” I venture.

“Beryl is a sweet companion and I could not live here on my own without her, but I’d rather have the freedom to say whatever I want, if that’s all right with you.”

I am not prepared for such candor. “Um. Of course.”

“When you get to be my age, your physical frailties cause people to think other things about you are frail as well, including your ability to make your own decisions. It’s my decision to meet with you today. And my decision to say what I will about what happened during the war. I don’t need or want dear Beryl patting my hand or telling me I’m not properly addressing your questions. May I call you Kendra?”

“Yes. Yes, of course.”

Mrs. MacFarland sips from her cup and then sits back against the couch. “And you will call me Isabel. So how are you enjoying your studies at Oxford, Kendra?”

Her interest in my life has an amazingly calming effect. “I will leave here kicking and screaming at the end of next month. I’ve loved every minute of it. There’s so much history compacted into one place. It’s intoxicating.” I suppose I have spoken like a true history major.

“And is there no history where you are from?”

“There is. It’s just different, I guess. Not quite so ancient. Where I’m from, the oldest building isn’t even two hundred years old. It’s just an ordinary house.”

She smiles at me. “I’ve come to appreciate ordinary houses.”

I redden just a bit. “That’s not to say your house isn’t charming, Mrs. MacFarland. Your home is beautiful. Has it been in your family a long time?”

“Just Isabel, please. And yes, you could say that it’s been in my family for a very long time. You are a history major, then?”

I nod my head as I sip from my cup.

“And what is it about history that interests you?”

I’ve never understood why I am routinely asked why history interests me, as though the subject has no appeal to people who didn’t major in it. All during my last year of high school when well-meaning adults and even other students asked what I would be majoring in and I answered them, the next question was invariably a request to explain the reason why. I still get asked three years later.

“How can a person not be interested in history?” I crack a smile so she won’t take offense. But really, how can someone who survived the London Blitz not see the significance of an appreciation of history? The writer Michael Crichton said, “If you don’t know history, then you don’t know anything. You are a leaf that doesn’t know it is part of a tree.”

Isabel finds my question back to her amusing. “Ah, but what is history? Is it a record of what happened or rather our interpretation of what happened?”

“I think it’s both,” I answer. “It has to be both. What good is remembering an event if you don’t remember

how it made you feel. How it impacted others. How it made them feel. You would learn nothing and neither would anyone else."

Isabel's mouth straightens into a thin, hard line and I am wondering whether I offended her and just ruined my last chance at an interview.

But then Isabel inhales deeply and I see that she is not angry with me. "You are absolutely right, my dear. Absolutely right." She takes another sip of tea and her mouth lingers on the rim of her cup. For a moment she seems to be very far away, lost in a memory—an old and aching place of remembrance. Then she returns the cup to its saucer and it makes a gentle scraping sound. "So, what will you do when you return to the States, Kendra?"

"Well, I've another year at USC and then I'm hoping to head straight to grad school," I answer quickly, eager to be done with pleasantries and get to the reason I am here. "I plan to get my doctorate in history and teach at the college level."

"A young woman with plans. And how old are you, dear?"

I can't help but bristle. The only time a person asks how old I am is when they think the answer is somehow relevant to him or her. It usually never is.

"You don't have to tell me, of course. I was just wondering," she adds.

"I'm twenty-one."

"It bothers you that I asked."

"Not really. It just surprises me when people ask. I don't know why it should matter."

"But that is precisely why it does bother you. I felt the same way once. People treat you differently when they think you are too young to know what you want."

The bristling gives way to a slow sense of kinship. "Yes, they do."

"I understand completely. You are the oldest in your family?"

"I have a sister who's four years younger."

"A sister. Just the one?"

I nod.

She seems to need a moment to process this. "I'd surmised you might be the oldest. We firstborns are driven, aren't we? We have to be. There's no one leaving bread crumbs for us on the trail ahead. We blaze our own trail. And the younger ones, they look to us. They watch us—they take their cues from us, even if we don't want them to." She drains her cup and sets it carefully on the tray.

I'm not sure what she is getting at. "I guess. Maybe. I'm not sure my sister would agree. She's got pretty strong opinions of her own. I think she'd say she's leaving her own bread crumbs."

Isabel laughs and it is light and airy. It's the kind of laugh that spills out when a memory is triggered; the kind of memory that perhaps was not funny in the slightest when it was being made.

“What is your sister’s name?” she says as her laughter eases away.

“Chloe.”

She closes her eyes as if tasting the word. “What a lovely name.” Her eyes open. “Have you a photo?”

I pull my cell phone from my messenger bag and find a photo of Chloe and me taken in front of Christ Church on the last day she and my parents were here. My sister is a brunette like me, wears her hair shoulder length like I do, and has the same gray-blue eyes. But she puts ketchup on everything, plays lacrosse and the violin, and wants to be a civil engineer. We are close, Chloe and I, but none of those things interest me. Not even the ketchup.

I extend the phone and she studies Chloe’s and my smiling faces.

“She favors you,” Isabel says.

“We look like my dad, actually.” I take the phone back and find a picture of my parents from the same day. My mom’s red curls are dancing a ballet in the breeze and she is smiling so wide, her eyes have narrowed to slits. Dad, blue eyed and brown haired with a brushstroke of gray at the temples, has his arm around her. Their heads are nearly touching.

Isabel studies this picture as well, memorizing it. Then she hands the phone back. “You have a lovely family, Kendra. I hope you know how lucky you are.”

I’ve never known quite what to say when someone says I have a lovely family. It’s nothing I can take credit for, so saying thank you seems silly. But that’s what I say as I smile and slip the phone back inside my bag.

“Now, then,” Isabel says, and I sense she is at last shifting the focus from me. “Charles tells me this interview is more than just for an essay for a class.”

It takes me a second to make the connection that Charles is Professor Briswell. “Yes. The seventieth anniversary of VE Day is next month. The professor for one of my other classes has made an arrangement with a London newspaper. The five best term papers will be published in the paper the week of May eighth.”

I watch her face carefully to see whether this additional information is going to spell trouble for me.

“So what you write will be read widely?’

“Only if mine is one of those chosen. And I don’t know that it will be. Is that okay with you if it is?”

“You will write to win one of those spots, yes? You’ll be happy if yours is chosen.”

“Well, yes.”

“This other professor, he is friends with Charles? Can you count on him to judge your essay on the strength of your writing alone? Be a shame if he discounted yours because a fellow professor assisted in helping you secure an interview.”

I am still not sure whether it is helping me or hindering me that this paper I am to write might be published in a London paper. “I don’t know that they are friends. I suppose they are since they teach at the same college. I happened to mention to Professor Briswell that I was in a bind for another class. He was nice enough to want to help me.”

Isabel leans back and I can see she is satisfied with my answer. “What did Charles tell you about me?” she says.

I’d done all the research on the effect of the Blitz on London’s female population and had needed only the interview to write the paper and be done with it. When the woman I was to interview died, it was too late to change the subject matter without setting myself so far back that I would never finish the paper on time. I had mentioned as much to Professor Briswell, just in passing, and he had told me that an elderly friend in his family might be convinced to help me out. This person was one to decline interviews, though, even regarding her watercolors for which she was known throughout the southwest of England. He’d ask her anyway and tell her I was in a tight spot. But he said I should expect her to say no.

“He told me that you typically decline interviews,” I say.

She smiles. “That’s all?”

“He said you are known for your watercolors. I love your work, by the way.”

“Ah, yes. My Umbrella Girls.”

I turn my head in the direction of one of the more prominent paintings in the room: A young girl in a pink dress is walking through a field of glistening-wet daisies and holding the trademark red-and-white polka-dot umbrella. A brave sun is peeking through clouds that are plump with purpose. “Have you always painted girls with umbrellas?”

“No. Not always.” Her answer is swift and without hesitation. But the way she elongates the last word tells me there is more behind the answer. She doesn’t offer more even though I wait for it.

“Tell me, Kendra,” Isabel says after a pause. “What is it about the Blitz that you would like to know? I should think there are dozens of books out there. What information do you lack that you cannot read in a book?”

I fumble for an answer. “Well, uh, aside from that I’m required to interview someone, I think . . . I think information is only half of any story about people. Personal experience is the other part. I can’t ask a book what it was like to survive the bombs.”

Isabel cocks her head to one side. “Is that what you want to ask me? What it was like to have my home bombed?”

It occurs to me that I posed a rather elementary question with surely an equally elementary answer. I am suddenly superbly underconfident about all my questions. I glance at the notepad in my lap and every bulleted sentence looks superficial to me.

What was it like in the shelter night after night?

Were you afraid?

Did you lose someone you loved or cared about?

Did you wonder if it would ever end?

“Are you going to turn that thing on?”

I snap my head up. Isabel is pointing to my little voice recorder on the coffee table. “Do you mind?”

“You may as well, seeing as you brought it.”

As I lean toward the table to press the RECORD button, the notepad falls off my lap and onto the thick Persian carpet at my feet.

As my fingers close around the tablet, I realize that there is really only one question to ask this woman who for seventy years has refused all interviews, and who told me not ten minutes ago when she told Beryl to shut the door that she would say only what she wanted to.

I place the pad on the seat cushion next to me. “What would you like to tell me about the war, Isabel?”

She smiles at me, pleased and perhaps impressed that I figured out so quickly that this is the one question she will answer.

She pauses for another moment and then says, “Well, first off, I’m not ninety-three. And my name’s not Isabel.”

Two

London, England

1940

THE wedding dress in the display window frothed like uncorked champagne, bubbling toward Emmy Downtree as she stood on the other side of the broken glass. Glittering shards lay sprinkled about the gown’s ample skirt, sparkling as if they belonged there. Yellow ribbons streamed from behind the pouty-lipped mannequin, simulating a golden, unaware sun. At Emmy’s feet, jagged splinters were strewn on the sidewalk at menacing angles. A hand-lettered Help Wanted sign, still partially taped to a fractured edge, pitched forward onto the frame, and fifteen-year-old Emmy knelt to pull it gingerly from the glassy ruin. She could hear the owner inside Primrose Bridal talking on the telephone to the police, demanding attention be paid her. Someone had crashed into her storefront during the night.

Julia, Emmy’s seven-year-old sister, looked up at her. “Why don’t the Germans like wedding dresses?”

Emmy didn’t laugh at her sister’s assumption that the Luftwaffe had blown the window to bits. For the past year they had lived with wailing air raid alarms, drills at school, and mandatory blackout curtains. Several uncomfortable nights had been spent with Mum huddled in the shelter nearest their flat with a dozen of their neighbors when a raid had seemed imminent. Both girls had carried a gas mask to school the past term. It was not so far off the mark that Julia saw the destroyed window and concluded that what they’d been told for a year could happen at any moment had at last happened.

Emmy rose to her feet with the little sign in her hands. “The Germans didn’t do this, Jewels. None of the other windows on the street are broken. See? A car probably hopped the sidewalk. Hit the gas instead of the brake. Something like that.”

Julia’s gaze hung on the wreck of the window. “You sure?”

“Positive. We would have heard the sirens, right? It was quiet last night.”

In fact, the sirens had not whined for more than a week, and the buzzing hum of the Luftwaffe over their heads hadn't been heard in twice that long. It was as quiet as it had been almost a year ago when the war was new and undefined.

"No one will want that dress now," Julia said, apparently satisfied that the Nazis didn't hate wedding dresses after all. "It's got glass in it."

"It can be shaken out. I bet the bride who buys it will never even know." Emmy flicked away a sliver of window glass from the Help Wanted sign and read the smaller words beneath it. *Hand-sewing and alterations. Eight to ten hours a week. Inquire within.* She hadn't seen the placard before and wondered how long it had been taped to the window. Surely it had only been within the last few days. Emmy was familiar enough with the window at Primrose to know the sign was new.

"I wouldn't wear that dress. I like your brides better anyway. Yours are prettier."

Emmy laughed easily. "Think so?" She looked past the ruined display to the woman inside who was becoming more adamant that a policeman come that very moment.

"No, I haven't been burglarized." The woman's voice easily reached the two girls on the sidewalk. "That's not the point! Someone has run into my window and smashed it."

"This one's too poufy," Julia continued. "Yours are much nicer."

"Mine are just drawings, Jewels. Hard to know what they'd look like if they were real." Emmy looked to the chemist's across the narrow street and saw Mum through the window at the register. She'd be coming out soon. Emmy replaced the placard, but lowered it to the display window's floor facedown. She would come back later—when the owner wasn't so distracted—and with her best bridal gown sketches in hand, just in case she needed extra proof that she was worth considering.

"Yours are still prettier," Julia said.

Their mother stepped out onto the sidewalk across from them. Annie Downtree walked between slow-moving cars toward her daughters. A man in a shiny blue Citroën tipped his hat as he stopped for her. Emmy watched as the driver's eyes traveled past Mum's honey brown curls, her slim waist, to her long legs and slender ankles. With only sixteen years separating her mother and Emmy, they had lately been taken for sisters. Emmy had been annoyed at first, but realized quickly that such a mistake meant she came across as the adult she was so ready to be. The sooner she was independent of Mum, the sooner Emmy could chase her own dreams. Mum behaved as a sister toward Emmy most of the time anyway, confiding secrets one moment and withholding them the next, reading magazines and smoking cigarettes while Emmy made dinner, coming home late at night when the mood struck her, asking Emmy for advice when it came to dealing with Neville, Annie's on-and-off-again lover and Julia's father. Mum's intermittent displays of maternal competence were largely spent on Julia, who had never been mistaken for Mum's sister.

"Let's go, then," Mum said when she reached them. She slipped a little white parcel that she had picked up for her employer into her handbag.

"Look what happened to the bridal shop, Mum," Julia said urgently.

Their mother cast a disinterested gaze toward the ruined window. "Well, that's too bad. But no one's getting married these days, anyway. Come on. I still need to go to the butcher before work. Mrs. Billingsley demands a ham."

“That’s not true,” Emmy said.

Mum, already several steps ahead, turned halfway around. “Yes, it is true. I told you yesterday that I had to work today.”

“I mean it’s not true that no one’s getting married. If that were true, this shop wouldn’t still be open.” And the owner wouldn’t be hiring.

“For the love of God, Em. There’s a bloody war on, in case you’ve forgotten.” She swung back around to resume her hurried pace.

“But the Germans didn’t break this window!” Julia chirped.

Mum turned in midstride, her frown deepening. “What are you filling her head with, Emmy?”

“I’m not filling her head with anything. She asked if the Germans bombed this place and I told her they hadn’t.”

Mum sighed but kept walking.

“We like looking at the wedding dresses,” Julia said. “We don’t want to go to the butcher.”

“Yes, well, I like looking at the crown jewels,” Mum called out over her shoulder.

Emmy pulled her gaze away from the remains of the window, the yards of organza, and the placard lying on its face.

Julia slipped her hand into Emmy’s as they stepped away from the shop, their shoes crunching on silvery slivers. “I don’t like the butcher. His store smells like dead things. I don’t like it.”

“We can wait outside.”

The girls had taken only a dozen steps when Emmy heard the swish of a broom and the tinkling of glass against the edge of a dustpan. And then a voice cried out, followed by a murmured curse. Emmy turned to see a broom hit the pavement. The owner of the shop held one hand in the other and her face was wrenched more in annoyance than in pain. The broom and dustpan lay at her feet.

“Catch up with Mum.” Emmy turned from Julia and retraced the few steps to where the owner stood. A crimson line crisscrossed her palm where a piece of glass had cut her.

“Are you all right, ma’am?” Emmy asked.

“Yes, yes,” the owner mumbled as she yanked a handkerchief from a dress pocket and shook out the folds. She pressed the cloth to the wound. Emmy bent to retrieve the broom and dustpan.

“Careful there! No sense in both of us slicing our hands to ribbons,” the woman said.

“Would you like some help with this? I can sweep this up while you take care of your hand.”

The woman peered at Emmy, as if unprepared for such spontaneous kindness from a stranger. Then her eyes widened in recognition.

“I know you. I’ve seen you looking in my window, haven’t I? Many times.”

Heat rose to Emmy’s cheeks. “Yes, ma’am. I like . . . I like your gowns. I hope to have a bridal shop of my own someday.”

The woman smiled as she wound the handkerchief around the cut and a scarlet thread of blood began to seep through. “Well, I surely hope for your sake happier times are in your future.” She nodded toward the broken display window. “As you can see, it isn’t always a charmed life, running a business on your own. Especially with a war going on. If you’ll excuse me, I need to find some gauze. I’ll get to that mess later. But thanks.” She started to head back into her shop.

“I see that you’re looking to hire someone,” Emmy blurted.

The woman turned, her head cocked in negligible interest. “I am.”

Emmy swallowed back her nervousness. “May I come back later today and speak with you about the position?”

The woman hesitated. “How old are you?”

“Nearly sixteen.” The little lie flew out of Emmy’s mouth before she could stop it. Her birthday was nearly a year away. But a fifteen-year-old was still a child. A fifteen-year-old could still be evacuated.

“Have you any experience?”

Another swallow. “I’ve some.”

Pressing the handkerchief tighter to her hand, the shop owner nodded once. “Come back at closing time and we’ll talk. Six. I’ll need references.”

“Oh. Um, okay. Six, then. Right,” Emmy stammered, her mind already reeling with the prospect of convincing this woman that her sketches of wedding gowns would have to serve as references.

“My name’s Mrs. Crofton and I don’t like it when people are late. Just leave the broom and dustpan there.”

“I’m Em-Emmeline Downtree. I will be here at six. Thank you, Mrs. Crofton.”

The owner stepped into the shop with a wordless tip of her head. Emmy set the broom and dustpan against the glassless window frame and walked away, amazed at the turn of luck that had come her way. For the better part of a year she’d been peering into Primrose Bridal’s windows on market day, captivated by the gowns that hung fairylike from mannequins and padded hangers. This newfound affinity had eclipsed her fondness for doodling dress designs during math class and making countless paper dolls for Julia. Mum was one to walk right past Primrose Bridal; not so much in a hurry as in indifference. Mum had never married, and if perhaps someday she would marry, Emmy doubted she would wear white. For a half second Emmy wanted to thank the scoundrel who had run into Mrs. Crofton’s window and set in motion the events that had resulted in her being granted an interview.

She rounded the street corner and nearly ran into Julia.

“Why aren’t you with Mum?” Emmy gasped.

Julia frowned at her. “I don’t like the butcher’s. I don’t like the way his store smells.”

Emmy grabbed her sister's hand and pulled her down the sidewalk. "You should have done what I said."

"Why were you talking to that lady?"

"Never mind that now."

"But I saw you talking to her."

"I was just offering to help her sweep up the glass."

"She cut her hand."

"Yes."

Emmy quickened their pace. Mum would surely give them grief about taking so long. But she likely wouldn't ask why.

Mum wasn't interested in why Emmy liked gazing into bridal shop windows.

Three

EMMY stood before the mirror in the upstairs bedroom she shared with Julia, analyzing the dress she'd plucked from Mum's wardrobe. She had pressed away the wrinkles, but there had been no way to iron away the trailing scent of Mum's perfume—a flowery, musty vapor that smelled like an invitation to other things. The midnight blue frock with its ivory collar and sleeve cuffs wasn't Emmy's favorite dress of her mother's, but it was more fashionable than anything hanging among her own clothes, and she was unashamedly hoping there was luck still lingering in its threads. Mum had worn the dress two years ago when she interviewed to be a kitchen maid for the millionaire widow Mrs. Billingsley and had come home with the job. Emmy might not have remembered that detail about the dress except that Nana was still alive then and had been visiting.

It had been a roasting-hot day in July, and the war then was nothing more than a nasty disagreement between a couple of countries on the Continent. Mum's mother, visiting from Devonshire, was teaching Emmy to embroider. The girls saw their grandmother only when she made the trip to visit, which wasn't often. Emmy liked it when Nana came, even though Nana and Mum fought about nearly everything. She was always sad when Nana left except for the fact that the arguing stopped. On that particular afternoon, Mum had emerged from her bedroom wearing the midnight blue dress, and she posed like a model in front of the girls and her mother. Julia laughed and Mum laughed with her. Nana shook her head and told Mum it wasn't wise to get her hopes too high. Mum had worked in a hotel laundry room up to that point. To Emmy's knowledge, she had never been a kitchen maid before. And she had certainly never worked for someone with money.

"And why shouldn't I?" Mum opened a compact mirror and ran a tube of lipstick across her lips. She sounded as confident as Emmy could ever remember.

"An upstanding heiress is a different employer than a busy hotel."

Mum snapped the mirror shut. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"You're an unmarried mother," Nana murmured, as though the walls of the kitchen might hear the scandalous truth and broadcast the news to the whole of London. "It matters. If this Mrs. Billingsley checks your references, she is sure to find out your daughters were fathered by two different men, neither of whom

you were married to."

Mum had narrowed her eyes and grinned at Emmy conspiratorially—the way an older sister might. She thanked Nana for such loving and motherly advice, and slammed the door as she left.

Nana had asked Emmy where her mother had gotten the dress.

Emmy hadn't known. Sometimes new clothes just appeared in Mum's wardrobe.

"Don't you wonder where she gets them?" Nana asked.

"She says the people she works with give them to her when they tire of them," Emmy answered.

"Sure they do," Nana muttered, and then she proceeded to show Emmy how to sew a perfect satin stitch.

An hour later, while Emmy worked on a dresser scarf and Nana showed Julia her wooden box full of colorful skeins of embroidery floss, Mum returned exuberant, and with a fancy black uniform over her arm.

Nana went pale. "They hired you?"

Emmy was astonished at the fear in her grandmother's voice.

"Don't act so surprised," Mum said. "I bloody well know how to boil water."

"I'm sure there are a lot of things you know how to do," Nana said, softly. It was almost a whisper, but not quite.

Mum turned from laying the uniform over the back of a kitchen chair. "What did you say?"

"Nothing."

Mum calmly walked to the front door and opened it wide. "I want you out."

Emmy had looked from one woman to the other; surely she had missed something.

Nana's lips flattened to a thin line. She slapped the wooden box of floss shut and slid it toward Emmy. "You work on those stitches, Emmeline," she had said. "It will give you something constructive to do while your mother is out earning her keep."

Nana kissed Julia good-bye and left. It was the last time Emmy saw her. Four months later she died of a massive heart attack. A telegram came to the flat from Mum's uncle Stuart, Nana's older brother and a man Emmy had never met, bearing the news of her passing. Mum read the telegram, lowered the piece of paper to the kitchen table, and then went into her room. Emmy didn't see her for hours. When she emerged, Emmy was full of questions. Julia, at five, had only one. Where was Nana now? But Mum didn't answer any of Emmy's questions. And to Julia, she said Nana was in heaven where everything was perfect, so she ought to feel right at home. Emmy didn't understand what her grandmother and Mum had fought about that last day. As far as she could tell, Mum had been hired to be a kitchen maid, and that was exactly what she became. Nana made it seem as though Mum was doing something bad in exchange for her new job but Mrs. Billingsley wasn't running a brothel; she was a respected widow. And there were no men in Annie Downtree's life; not since Julia's father had walked out on her a year before.

Not long after Nana died, Emmy was at the kitchen table embroidering asters onto a pillowcase. Mum, on

her way out the door to go to work, had stopped to stare at the colorful collection of flosses in the box and then whacked the lid shut. Emmy kept the box in her and Julia's room after that.

Julia now appeared in the doorway as Emmy studied her reflection in the mirror. "I want to come to the bridal shop with you."

Emmy reached for her hairbrush on the dresser. "I need you to stay here."

"I don't want to."

"I'll be back soon, Jewels. I promise," Emmy said, running the brush through her hair with quick strokes.

"Take me with you."

Emmy replaced the brush, and then knelt by her sister and took her hands. "I'll only be gone for a little bit. I'll be back before you know it."

"But it will be dark soon."

"And I will be back before dark."

Julia's fear-filled eyes glistened with stubborn tears. Nights were the hardest. The sirens, when they whined, nearly only whined at night. They sounded like the agonized wail of the desolate.

"Be a love and get Nana's box of embroidery floss," Emmy said.

"Why?"

"I'll show you."

Julia walked to Emmy's bed, dropped to her knees, and thrust her hand under the bed skirt. She withdrew the wooden box and brought it back.

"Can you take all the threads out for me? Just dump them on my bed."

While Julia obeyed, Emmy reached for the satchel that she used for school, and then walked over to the bed and sat down next to her sister. In between them lay the pile of skeins, a tumble of color. From the satchel Emmy withdrew a folder marked *Geometry*, opened it, and pulled out a sheaf of sketches.

"What are you doing with your brides?" Julia asked.

"I might need to show them to the lady at the bridal shop."

"Why?"

"When I tell this lady that I've never worked in a dress shop, she might not want to hire me, but if I show her the brides, maybe she will."

Emmy reached for the empty box in Julia's lap. Its hinges and clasp, at one time golden-hued, had aged to a mossy brown. Etchings of flowering vines scrolled the front and sides, as did scuffs and scratches from its earlier uses. Emmy thumbed through the sketches, pulled out her earliest attempts, and then tossed these on the bed. She opened the lid and placed the best ones—a dozen of them—inside the box.

“There. That’s better than a geometry folder.”

“What if she says no?”

“Then I will be no worse off than if I hadn’t shown them to her, right?”

“What if she takes the brides from you?”

“She won’t.”

“But how do you know?”

“I don’t think she’s that kind of person. Besides, I won’t let her. I won’t let anyone take my drawings from me, okay?”

Julia nodded but a trace of doubt lingered on her face. It was as if she already knew good things had a way of being taken from someone—especially in a time of war.

“What about those?” Julia pointed to the rejects on the bed.

“How about while I am gone, you give those brides some bouquets to carry? You can use my colored pencils and put flowers in their hair and bouquets in their hands. Yes?”

Julia seemed pleased with this assignment. “What if I want to give them something else to carry? Does it have to be flowers?”

Emmy kissed the top of her sister’s fair head. “It can be whatever you want. Give them kangaroos to hold if that suits you.”

Julia laughed and Emmy pushed herself off the bed. “Do I look all right?”

“You look like Mum.”

Emmy nodded. Good enough. “I’ll be right back. Keep the door locked. Don’t answer the bell. Just work on those brides.”

She tucked the box under her arm and headed for the front door, her feet lifting slightly out of Mum’s too-big shoes with every step.

Four

THE broken glass had been swept away and several long sections of wood had been nailed to the window frame at Primrose Bridal. Emmy stepped inside the shop and the tinkling of two silver bells attached to the handle announced her arrival. Mrs. Crofton looked up from a white French provincial writing desk situated along the left wall. Two Queen Anne chairs upholstered in cobalt blue velvet sat opposite her. Emmy imagined one was for the bride, and the other for the bride’s mother or sister or maid of honor. Mrs. Crofton had probably consulted with a thousand brides from behind the desk.

“Flip the Closed sign, will you?” she said. “And set the latch.”

Emmy turned back to the door and did what Mrs. Crofton asked, using the few seconds to still the niggling

nervousness that had suddenly bloomed inside her chest.

“Please have a seat, Miss—I’m sorry I’ve forgotten your name,” Mrs. Crofton said as Emmy completed the task. “Too maddening of a day.”

“Emmeline. Emmeline Downtree.” Emmy closed the distance between them and sat down on one of the chairs.

Mrs. Crofton finished making notations in a leather-covered ledger and closed it gently with a bandaged hand. “Eloise Crofton. If it’s not a drunkard crashing his car into my window, it’s daft suppliers who think just because there is a war, women aren’t getting married.”

Emmy had said as much to Mum earlier that day and nodded.

Mrs. Crofton set her pen down. “War makes brides as easily as it makes widows, Miss Downtree. And do you know why?”

“Because people still fall in love?” Emmy said hopefully.

“Because people need to believe love is stronger than war. A soldier marries before he marches off so that the ring on his finger will remind him who he is when he’s crouched in a trench with his weapon raised to kill. You don’t want to forget who you are then.” She opened a drawer and slipped the ledger inside it. “Now, then. Tell me how long you’ve been admiring my shop?”

“I guess as long as we’ve lived in Whitechapel. We moved here two summers ago when my mother got a new job.”

The woman waited for more and Emmy knew in an instant she’d probably already said too much. To mention a mother’s new job and say nothing of the father meant there was something amiss.

“Oh. I see. How very nice.” Mrs. Crofton tipped her head and Emmy saw the unspoken question in her eyes.

“Yes, I’ve walked past your shop every Saturday morning since then. I love your gowns. They’re just so beautiful. And . . . so full of promise.”

Mrs. Crofton regarded the dresses hanging all around them on hangers and dress forms and lithe mannequins. “Yes. They are very pretty. The prettiest dress a girl will ever wear on a day like no other.” She turned her focus back to Emmy. “And what is your experience?”

Emmy cleared her throat of the knob of anxiety bobbing there. “Well, my grandmother taught me all the stitches for hand-sewing. I know the satin, cross, whip, running, chain, blanket stitch—all of them, really.”

Mrs. Crofton leaned forward and steepled one hand under her chin. “What I meant was, what kind of retail experience have you had?”

The nervous knob bubbled its way back and Emmy tamped it back down. “None. But I’d be happy to show you my stitches. Your advertisement says you need someone to do hand-sewing and alterations, not someone with retail experience.”

Mrs. Crofton smiled. “Fair enough. Come with me.”

The woman rose from her chair and Emmy followed her into a back room. A long table was set up in the

middle and a gown was lying across it. A black and gold Singer sat in one corner. Bolts of tulle and lace crowded into one another. Baskets of white thread, cards of silvery hooks and eyes, and little glass bowls of pearl buttons and rhinestones sat on the top of a cabinet in the farthest corner.

“I’ll give you twenty minutes to finish the blind hem on that wedding dress. If I like what you do, I’ll hire you on a trial basis. If I don’t, you have to take out all the stitches before you leave so that I can do it later. Deal?”

It took supreme effort not to hug Mrs. Crofton when Emmy told her yes.

“I’ll come back in twenty minutes, then,” Mrs. Crofton said.

Emmy sat down in front of the dress, a feather-soft chiffon, and placed her box of brides at her feet, a bit disappointed that she hadn’t needed to show them to Mrs. Crofton. The hem was a quarter of the way completed, the tiny pricks of the needle nearly invisible. Emmy lifted the gown to her lap, prayed to God Almighty for divine favor, and took up where the stitching had stopped. She made her stitches as even as the ones before hers, and as weightless. She was finished in seventeen minutes.

Emmy found a hanger and was just placing the dress on a hook on the wall when Mrs. Crofton came back into the room with a blue-and-white teacup in her hand. The air immediately became fragrant with the aroma of Earl Grey.

“My, my. Done already?” She set the teacup down, lifted the skirt, and studied the hem. “You’ve a nice touch with a needle, Emmeline.”

“Thank you.”

“Did your grandmother happen to also teach you how to use a sewing machine?”

Emmy gazed at the Singer in the corner. “I didn’t get to see her very often. She died a couple years ago.”

“Ah.” Mrs. Crofton released the skirt and studied the way it fell from the hanger. “Very nice. Quite nice, actually. Perhaps you might work out after all.”

Emmy looked at Mrs. Crofton’s face to make sure there was no joking sentiment behind the words. “Are you hiring me?”

“Let’s say Tuesdays and Thursdays, two to six. A Saturday or two a month, depending. Twenty shillings a week. At the end of the month, we’ll see where we’re at. It’s an uncertain world right now.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Crofton. You won’t be sorry.” Again Emmy’s eyes were drawn to the Singer in the corner. “Might I be able . . . That is, perhaps you wouldn’t mind if . . .” But she couldn’t finish. Surely it was too soon to beg for favors.

Mrs. Crofton followed Emmy’s gaze. “You want to learn how to use my machine?”

“If it’s not too much to ask.”

“I can teach you a few things if you like. I’m thinking you’d pick it up fast enough. It would actually be better for me if you knew how to use it.”

The opportunity to learn to sew on a machine was more than Emmy had hoped for. She felt her mouth drop

open in grateful wonder.

And then out of Emmy's mouth burst words she hadn't needed to say. They seemed to gush from the spring of elation that was bubbling inside her and there was no stopping them. "Mrs. Crofton, may I show you something?"

"Yes? What is it?"

Emmy reached for the box at her feet, undid the clasp, and handed the woman the sketches.

After paging through a couple of the drawings, Mrs. Crofton cocked her head, intrigue etched in her expression. "Where did these come from?"

"They—they came from me." Emmy was unsure whether Mrs. Crofton's wide-eyed gaze was one of delight or dismay.

"Are you telling me you drew these? You didn't copy them from a magazine?"

Emmy nodded.

Mrs. Crofton leafed through the sketches a second time. She stopped at the one Emmy liked best, a form-fitted gown that fell from a ruched bodice with a dropped waistline into a petaled skirt. "This one reminds me of a dress I had in the window this past spring."

"The one you had had a scooped neck and high waist. It was pretty but no one with long legs would have looked good in it." Emmy's heart skipped a beat. She had said too much.

Mrs. Crofton raised an eyebrow, but her eyes were smiling. "Is that so? And how did you come to that conclusion?"

"Because I look at how women wear dresses. I always have. Even when I was drawing paper dolls for my sister. All dresses start out the same. A bodice, sleeves, skirt, and waistline. But not everyone can wear the same dress. A wedding dress is still a dress."

Emmy felt she was rambling but Mrs. Crofton seemed to be fascinated.

"And you've never touched a sewing machine?"

"I can learn. I want to learn."

Mrs. Crofton looked down at the drawings in her hand. "It's no small feat to sew a gown that you have to make the pattern for. You'll have your work cut out for you, that's for sure, if you want to sew one of these. Is that what you're thinking?"

"I am. That is, if you think they're good enough?"

"I like this one. And this one." Mrs. Crofton held up two sketches, one of a billowy tea-length gown with an Empire waist and bell-shaped push-up sleeves; the other of a full-length draped confection with an open back and sleeves of illusion. "Where did you learn to sketch, if I may ask? Do you have an art teacher at school? Or maybe one of your parents taught you?"

A laugh crawled up Emmy's throat and she squashed it. "No. No art teacher."

“And your parents?”

She cleared her throat so the laugh wouldn’t escape. “My mother doesn’t . . . She doesn’t draw.”

“And your father? Does he?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

An awkward silence followed. It was a wordless tension Emmy was familiar with when someone asked her a question about her father and she had no answer. Since she had already fibbed about her age easily enough, what was another fabrication of the truth? And she wanted Mrs. Crofton to have no reason to regret hiring her. “He’s dead.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“I don’t even remember him. It happened a long time ago. I taught myself to sketch, Mrs. Crofton. I checked books out of the library and I practiced on any blank piece of paper I could find. And then we moved here and I saw the dresses in your shop and I knew I wanted to design my own wedding gowns. This is what I want to do with my life.”

Mrs. Crofton paused for a moment before continuing. “I’m afraid I can’t help you make any of the patterns you’ll need. That’s a different skill. You’re going to need a dressmaker to help you with that.”

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