

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Painswick. September 1940

*Veronica*

Veronica listened to the war reports on the wireless at work and at home. She loved hearing Winston Churchill's eloquent speeches and his sonorous voice of authority. It seemed that The Battle of Britain so far had subdued the Germans. Her heart warmed with a glimmer of hope, but that hope was short-lived. On September seventh London was hit hard. Bombs fell on the docks and surrounding areas where East End Londoners lived.

In the evening, after the flurry of the first onslaught of attacks, the phone in the kitchen rang. Veronica dropped her book and rushed to pick up the receiver.

"Hello, Vee. Only got a minute. I miss you so much."

Veronica almost cried with relief to hear Richard's deep voice. "Oh, darling, are you alright?" She listened carefully to detect the signs of slurring with booze or nerves frayed and on edge. He sounded normal.

"I'm hanging in. Not much sleep as usual. Things are getting bad here. I can't tell you much. You know that."

"But, darling. I need to know something. Where are you? Are you in danger? It's terrible just to listen to the news and not know anything about you." Veronica paced in the kitchen as far as the twisty extension cord would allow.

The phone was silent for a moment. "Vee. You know what I am doing. Flying, fighting, and training new boys."

"I worry so much. I hope you aren't being too much of a hero. I want you home alive."

“I do what I have to do. Don’t even think of coming anywhere near London or the coast where I am. It’s just not safe. I can’t tell you what we are doing, but it’s going to be ugly.” That was the most information he could give out. He sounded serious and stern.

“When can I see you, though? I miss you so much.”

“I have absolutely no idea, Vee. I doubt there will be any time off for a long while. This is war. I have to go now. Just take care of yourself.”

“I am safe here in the country, I suppose. I hope you get some sleep. I love you.”

“I love you, darling. Stay out of London”. He clicked off.

Veronica felt the tears constrict her throat. She wondered if she would ever see Richard again. She shuddered at the thought of the lives lost with London as a target and fearful for all the friends she had left behind. She knew her job would escalate again with another exodus of children and families from the war zones.

She busied herself with the evening chores. Then with everything tidied—Susie, Teddy, and the chickens at rest—Veronica made a final pot of tea before heading off to bed. The usual ritual: boil the water, heat the pot, steep the tea leaves just right, pour the steaming tea, stir the milk and sugar into her favorite teacup, Granny’s pattern, did nothing to calm her nerves this time. The hollow feeling of fear and emptiness refused to dissipate. The constant war bulletins on the wireless fueled her anxiety. It was understandable to her that booze and cigarettes would become almost a necessity to calm the nerves of the men at the front. She saw how Richard drank the last time he visited. Fortunately, she found cigarettes and tea usually did the trick for her, afraid to drink alcohol alone in case it became a habit. But tonight she wished she could numb her emotions.

She missed Heather, who knew her innermost thoughts. Despite the cost of the long

distance call, she lit a cigarette, took a long drag, and phoned her best friend. After a couple of rings, she heard her friend's cheery, smoky, husky, upper-class voice. She felt better.

Heather gushed. "Hello, darling heart. How are you out in the country? You're missing all the fun and games here."

"Oh Heather, I'm so glad you are home! What's happening in London? You can't say it's fun. I won't believe you," Veronica said.

"It's better to laugh than cry, they say."

"Don't be flippant, Heather. I'm worried sick about you, Rachel, everyone. Tell me what's happening. What's it like with those bombs? Are they close to you?"

Heather's voice dropped its levity. "The ghastly screeching sirens go off, and we scurry around in panic to go to the nearest shelter. It's hard to move fast in the day with so many people around. Some people say they don't worry and want to carry on. We don't have a choice really. We have to make do. It's a bit confusing. A lot of hits and fires all over Town. It's pretty bad.

"Darling, it's just horrid. It's bloody scary because we have no idea where they will hit next. It used to be only the edge of town, the ports, and airfields. East End is getting the worst of it."

Veronica's heart sank. "Oh, goodness. Rachel must be near there. You must both get out surely? You can come here if you want, you know that."

"Well, surprise! I just got my papers. My job isn't critical for the war effort. No acting or speech therapy needs at present. I've been called up to the Land Army. I can finish this stint with the current play, then I am off. I'm going to Kent to work on a farm soon. Sarah is staying here in the flat, in your old room. By the way, she's not taken your place in my heart, dear girl. No need to be jealous."

“Silly. I know you are my best friend.” Veronica thought if someone could hear Heather’s way of talking they might think they were lovers. She loved the theatrics.

“Anyway, Sarah’s staying put in the flat, which is a good thing if I’m not here. She is going to work with the ambulances. It might not be as safe for her, but she is excited about helping. She’s already trained and picked up some bodies. Sickening. I can’t bear to think of it. She has a lot of guts. Lots more injuries if this keeps up. Tell Richard he’s got to do a better job of shooting these planes down. London is getting hammered.”

“Hey. You’ve no idea what Richard is going through. He is pretty tight-lipped about it all. Those men are doing their best. It certainly sounds like it’s getting ugly.” Veronica saw gruesome pictures in her mind. “My goodness, Heather. I can’t imagine you working on a farm. You haven’t got a clue. It doesn’t seem to be right for you—my glamour puss! You will get dirty and wear men’s clothing.”

“Yes, what a bore. I don’t suppose it will be a fashion show on the land. There won’t be any eligible men around. That’s the whole point. The men are all off trying to be soldiers, and the farms are untended. London still needs food. We women are told to step in and do their jobs. I suppose I will milk cows and feed pigs, dig up potatoes, stuff like that.” Heather made an attempt to be cheerful.

“At least you will get fit. You might eat good food too if you are living on a farm.”

“I will still have ration cards, though. Maybe I will lose a few pounds. That won’t be such a bad thing.” Heather laughed. “We are all city girls going out there, so we will need to learn the ropes. It’s going to be quite a shock for us all. I don’t think I could do what Sarah does. I don’t think the broken bones and blood part would be much fun.”

“It’s all overwhelming for me to hear this. Do you think you will be able to do that type

of work? We don't think of city women doing labour. It's tough enough for men with muscles."

"I don't have a choice. I'm not too happy about the uniform, though. It's very mannish."

"Heather, you look fabulous in anything. You won't need stockings, even if you had any, for mucking out pigs. You will save money on those."

"Right, that's a good thing. Do you think I'm going to be man-starved for ages, stuck out in the country?"

"There are lots of RAF bases around down south. I am sure the men will be let out sometimes. You will have to find out where they go. They will need some female attention, no doubt. Save your stockings for the days off. I am sure they will want to go to the pub or the pictures for fun too. It's not like you are going out to the middle of nowhere."

"It feels like the middle of nowhere to me. It's a bit silly to think of stockings while people are dying here." Heather's voice softened.

"Oh, of course. I also thought about Rachel. She's in a factory, so I think she will be at risk too. I worry about how to keep in touch with her, now you are going to be gone."

"I will pop over sometime before I go. I will see how she is doing and ask her to phone you. Okay? Does that make you feel better?"

"Thanks, darling. She is a bit naughty, as I don't hear from her much. I get cross about her sometimes."

"I know. Did you tell her that?"

"No. Quite honestly, I find it hard to talk to her about her actions, or how they affect me. She gets so prickly so fast. I never can tell if she is going to bite my head off or walk out the door."

"I know what you mean. She is more relaxed with me I think, as I'm not family, and so I

don't threaten her.

Veronica felt defensive. "Hmm, as if I threaten her."

"Relax, Vee. She seemed happy the last time I saw her. Her life is so different now. I'll go and see her soon, and I'll let you know how things are. Maybe I can persuade her to call you once a week or something like that. Okay?"

"That's great, Heather. Now be careful out there and say 'Hello' to The Boys for me. I hear they are going to be conscientious objectors, right?"

"Yes, I believe so. They are all high and mighty about war and killing people. No reasoning with them. They are too idealistic. I don't think it will be easy for them if they insist on taking a moral stand. They probably wouldn't do well in the army either, I suppose, being queers. They wouldn't be able to hide it. I'm not sure what will happen, prison or hard labor, maybe digging potatoes too?"

"Those darlings will find a way to survive somehow. This bloody war. It messes with everyone's lives. I hope it will be over soon, and it will all be worth it."

"That bastard Hitler has to be stopped. He's the killing machine. I'm going to do my bit with the pigs. Got to go. This is costing you a fortune. It's lovely to hear you, Vee. Ta. Ta."

Heather hung up.

It took Veronica a while to go to sleep. She tossed and turned in bed. The conversations with Richard and Heather and her worries circled in her mind. Whenever she spoke to Richard, she felt an emptiness and longing within. She ached to have him with her and was wakeful off and on, not able to calm her mind. Whenever she spoke to Heather, it reminded her of their long friendship and how they talked their troubles out together. She missed the fun of her female friend and the freedom she had in London. Everything was new and different in her life now.

Maybe the village was safe from the bombs and death, but her husband was gone to face all that horror. Her heart felt cold and heavy with nobody to hold and soothe her. Loneliness crept in.

