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A NOVEL

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The
**BRITISH
BOOKSELLERS**

A NOVEL OF THE FORGOTTEN BLITZ

**KRISTY
CAMBRON**



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798



The British Booksellers

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*For the booksellers—
readers, writers, waymakers, and friends.
A heartfelt thank you for the stories we've shared.*



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Since 1798

GLOSSARY

AFS: Auxiliary Fire Service

ARP: Air Raid Precautions

BEF: British Expeditionary Force

Ha-ha wall: A low wall with a ditch just in front of it, keeping grazing animals out of more formal gardens while maintaining a view of the surrounding landscape

HE: High Explosive

RAF: Royal Air Force

SMLE: Short-Magazine Lee-Enfield rifle

WLA: Women's Land Army

Time, consoler of affliction and softener of anger.
—Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*



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PROLOGUE

*17 October 1908
Broadgate
Coventry, England*

How many times in life could a boy say he was risking his neck, doing the very last thing he'd expected . . . for a girl?

It was a first for Amos Darby, pounding on a shopkeeper's door to convince the old man to open up after dark. But to find himself standing in Coventry's most eccentric secondhand shop in the market square to sell a lady's property from a steamer trunk? Unimaginable. He'd not have believed it, save for the curiosities on all sides—a wall of clocks with mismatched chimes, towering book stacks, ladies' hats teetering dangerously close to the edge of the counter, and a moody raven chattering behind the brass bars of his cage—and the old shopkeeper taking his sweet time to inspect what Amos had brought in.

The plan to be in and out in ten minutes flat had been sorely tested.

If only he'd known, making it out of the shop would be the easy part. Now Amos very nearly regretted winning the cat-and-mouse game of haggling over the gilded goods. By the time he'd hauled the wooden cello case and a canvas bag full of books he'd bartered for down the length of the cobblestone street, he'd passed the confectioner, tobacconist, and greengrocer shops back to Greyfriars Lane with arms screaming all the way.

The carriage waited right where he'd left it, in the shadows of

the alley untouched by the glow of gas streetlamps.

A quick peek over his shoulder—praise be no one was about to notice them in the twilight—and Amos rapped on the door. Charlotte poked her head around the curtain on the door. And then, as if it had appeared by magic, her face brightened when she set eyes on the hefty brown instrument case leaning into his side.

The door flung wide on crying hinges. Charlotte pushed her riding cloak back off her arms to better reach for the cello. “Oh, I can’t believe it actually worked! He bought it all?”

“Everything, including your trunk. Here.” Amos eased the messenger bag strap from his aching shoulder and dropped the load onto the carriage floor. “You can thank me later. Just help me get this thing inside, and let’s get out of here before we’re spotted.”

This friend of his—golden hair and eyes both, bright as her infectious smile—seemed completely undone by the mere presence of the instrument. Charlotte set about angling the case so she might open it right then and there. And while Amos would have enjoyed nothing more than to let her, those clocks on the shop wall were still ticking.

“We’ve no time, Charlie.” Amos referenced the pet name he’d whittled down from “Lady Charlotte Terrington” some years prior. He climbed in and sat across from her, latched the door, and tapped his boot on the floor to signal the driver it was time to make tracks. “You’re certain the coachman will keep this to himself?”

The carriage lurched, and they were on their way to the outskirts of the city, back toward her family’s estate.

“Of course. He’d never betray us. I’ve been a pet of his since the day I was born.”

Satisfied for the moment, Amos nodded and leaned deeper into the seat cushion, plush velvet allowing him to rest taxed limbs. And breathe. And try not to wonder what had just occurred to him as Charlotte inspected the rosewood case in her arms . . .

Was she a sort of pet to Amos? Or worse, was he a mere pet to her too?

How else could this little slip of a twelve-year-old heiress convince a farmer's son, only three years older than she, to barter designer gowns to buy back the beloved cello her mother had sold? And he to obtain books he'd never have been able to afford in his lifetime? Amos had no answers. All he knew was by some miracle, they'd not been discovered—neither for this mad excursion to the city nor for the secret friendship they'd kept up since childhood.

"If your mother finds out I sold your dresses . . ."

"She won't. And you didn't—I sold them."

"And if she sees them in the shop window tomorrow?"

"Mother never comes into Coventry. Besides, I've so many she'll never notice they're gone. Only my maid would and she won't tell. Especially if I slip her a little something extra from our next London shopping excursion."

Charlotte waved the notion off, then went back to hugging the top of the case against her shoulder. She'd not soon let it go again.

"What did I tell you? Designer names like *Worth* and *Lucile* would be enough to convince the shopkeeper you knew more than he on the matter of their value. And here is my treasure, back in my arms. How can I ever thank you?"

"No need," Amos whispered, smiling to himself. "It was more your doing than mine anyway. I didn't know half of what I was saying about the cello, countering the shopkeeper with 'It's a Betts, but not a Stradivari model . . .'"

Charlotte was cleverer than her privileged upbringing gave her credit for. She had tracked down the shop her mother had sold the cello to, convinced their coachman to take them all the way into Coventry to fetch the valuable cello back, and feigned a headache so she and Amos could slip away while the earl and countess entertained manor guests for dinner. It was a plan worth appreciating, even if he'd have a crick in his neck and sore biceps the rest of the week.

"All I had to do was cast your lot's posh speech out and the shopkeeper bit. Pride convinced him he needed what Hanover's

shop didn't have down the street, more than holding on to a used cello and some old books."

"Yes—the books! I'd nearly forgotten." She gazed down at the prize in the canvas lump at their feet. "What did you get us?"

"Everything you asked for: Jane Austen, Emily Dickinson, the Brontës, Keats, and Kipling, though your mother wouldn't approve."

"Indeed she would not, for a young lady to fill her head with frivolities from romance novels when she could be learning the noble art of how to marry well. She doesn't see that Austen could actually be an instruction manual toward that end." Charlotte shifted the cello to one side and pulled a volume free from the bag. "*Dombey and Son*."

"Got a few I wanted too. For the risk, of course. If I'm going to own a shop one day—"

"We're going to own it." She tipped her brow. "Remember? Partners. An even split. That's what we said."

"Aye. If we're going to own a bookshop, we'd better read what we sell. Dickens seemed as good a place to start as any."

"I'd have advocated for Austen." She tried to look stern but gave up and crumpled her lips into a smile as she handed the book over. "But seeing as you've returned my treasure today, I cannot be cross. Though I won't sleep until I can slip away to the glasshouse and play all day tomorrow." She paused, then with a softer tone asked, "You will meet me?"

"I'll be there."

The glasshouse—their hideaway near Amos's farm on Holt Manor, in the garden bordering Charlotte's family estate. It would be the perfect hiding spot for the cello her mother claimed was unseemly for a young lady of breeding. And it would shelter the books Amos's Da said a farmer's son had no business wasting time over. But what did parents know? They might believe each child had a position in the hierarchy of life and ought to know what it was.

Yet in spite of it, Charlotte and Amos had always managed to

find a certain freedom in each other's company—she playing the cello to her heart's content, and he reading their books aloud. And neither thinking of how those days were numbered as calendar dates rolled by. Or how contentment was simple, and neither a palace of plenty nor a humble farmhouse could define it.

Amos's gaze drifted to the calloused hands in his lap without realizing. When he felt her eyes upon him, he looked up and crossed his arms over his chest to hide rough palms. Charlotte stared back with her index finger tapping a silent melody against the cello case, her gaze flat rather than delighted as she'd been mere moments before.

"What's wrong? I thought you'd be overjoyed right now."

"Do you wish to be a farmer?"

Sighing, he stretched long legs out on the bench, one over the other, the patch at his knee visible even in the shadows. "We don't need to talk about this now. Just be cheered by your prize."

His russet crown was already north of six feet; Amos knew he could pass for older. That—and the confidence of a steely glare—might have bought him bargaining power in the secondhand shop. But a permanent line of dirt under his fingernails and patched trousers didn't lie. Even inside a darkened carriage. A tenant farmer's son had no business dreaming beyond their childhood days, no matter how much he might have liked to with the earl's daughter, who wore Worth and Lucile and hatched harebrained schemes in her spare time.

"Do you?"

Easy to see she wouldn't back down. "Fine. No—I don't want to be a farmer."

"Yet you plan to take over your father's tenancy one day."

He shrugged. "Who else will do it?"

"I've borrowed nearly every book in my father's library for you. And you read more than any tutor I've ever had. Probably know more too. Why wouldn't you at least try to receive a formal education?"

“And with what living would I pay for it?” Amos laughed, for the absurdity of how Charlotte could think it possible for someone like him. “With a farmer from Newcastle as a da and a Coventry farmer’s daughter for a mum? Some of us are born into our lives before we’re even born. I don’t cry over it; it’s just the way it is.”

Charlotte leaned forward and, in her youthful way, could see none of the obstacles that offered Amos grueling hours spent in the fields day in, day out. She couldn’t understand that while walking a manor’s gilded halls or attending London shopping trips with endless streams of coin from the family coffers.

Theirs was a chasm between worlds. She couldn’t see so far to the other side.

“Books are an escape that beckons the reader from the heavy burdens of this world. Isn’t that what you told me once? They can challenge as well as comfort. Entertain and educate. Even save us in ways we’d never expect. You’ve used the words *art*, *oxygen*, and *life* all to describe them. Anyone who can see such value in these pages ought to also see that they could take him away from a future he doesn’t want. If anything, that is what Dickens writes for his characters. Isn’t that what you wish for yourself?”

“I said all that?” Though he knew he had. Amos cupped hands behind his head, his casual gaze attempting to defy every word. “Sounds rather poetic for someone like me. Perhaps I should read the Keats first.”

“I am perfectly serious, Amos.”

“As am I.” He gave her a shot of the same direct tone she’d handed him. “What would you have me do, Charlie? How could you possibly understand a future already planned out?”

Charlotte furrowed her brow a tick to register the jibe had hit its mark and lifted the edge of her skirt, questioning his choice of words.

Bad form, Amos.

“Right. My apologies.” The last thing they needed was a quarrel over a girl’s place in society when they each had constraints press-

ing on all sides. “You do understand. More than I could in your shoes, I suspect. But I have no trunks to sell. All I meant was we’ll grow up one day and may be forced to accept things as they are. And that’s why we’ll meet at the glasshouse. I’ll read my books. You’ll play your cello. As long as we can until reality sobers those dreams.”

She turned to the window, watching the landscape pass by under the shades of an ink sky and sprinkle of stars that inhabited it. “I still hope we never give up dreaming.”

“Even if we both know where our roads take us?”

“And where is that?”

Amos smiled. Always did when he was with Charlie—the heir-ess who hadn’t a clue of the things he didn’t say. That their shared dream was what kept him going. And he’d already decided, deep down, if there ever was a boy who’d risk his neck for a girl more than once in his lifetime, over and over again, it would be him for her.

All she had to do was ask.

“For now? Home—no matter what tomorrow brings.”

CHAPTER ONE

*24 December 1913
Brinklow Road
Coventry, England*

*I*f the party had started . . . his goose was cooked. It was a small consolation that Charlotte's family hadn't decided to hold a Christmas celebration at neighboring Terrington Hall, or Amos surely would have been spotted from the road. As it was, not a soul passed by as he led the packhorse to cut across the field on foot, toward the golden glow of Holt Manor, standing guard on the hill overlooking Brinklow Road.

Arriving late on the night of a Holt Manor party was never done. But to arrive at half past—frozen stiff with livery drenched in mud—was by all accounts unacceptable. Especially if Amos wanted to keep his position as footman for parties at the big house. The only plan now was to slip through the service door at the back of the manor and, by some miracle, do it unnoticed.

Amos checked around as he trudged into the yard, the horse stamping hooves in clip-clops behind him. He patted the poor beast, led it to the cover of the larder awning, and stopped to blow his breath into curled fists.

Anything to warm up, even if the cloud turned to frozen fog.

"Oy! Where you been?"

Amos turned at the cockney shout to find snowflakes gathered on Tate Fitzgibbons's baker boy hat and jacket, tweed-covered arms weighted down with a crate of produce from the larder. Lemons

and carrot stalks hung over the top of wooden slats, blowing in the wind as the junior footman balanced the load and curled his ankle around the door to kick it closed.

Tate gave them a once-over ending in a squinched face at Amos's presentation. "What happened then?"

"Cow was calving at Mum's. Thought I could get it sorted and be back in time for the party."

"No luck?"

Amos shook his head. "A broken axle sent us off the bridge into the bog. Had to leave the trap in the ditch and walk this poor chap the rest of the way over. I couldn't leave him out there to his death."

"Oh, mate." Tate rolled his eyes heavenward, understanding the working-class life all too well, even if he'd come from London's dockworker trade. "I knew that rubbish rig was goin' to be your downfall one day."

"Not today. I need this position."

Adjusting the load in his arms, the younger footman cast a fleeting glance to the service door. "I told 'em you were polishing a silver serving tray for the party. I knew you took care of that yesterday so it'd give you a few more ticks on the clock to get here. And with rumor of some big announcement from His Lordship tonight, they wouldn't notice the kitchen burnin' down, let alone a tardy footman and his horse wanderin' into the yard."

"Praise be for that." Amos got the poor old horse settled in the shelter, tying him up in a stall, then swiped a carrot for the animal from Tate's load and gave the horse a right good rub of the nose for being such a sport about it all. "What announcement?"

"Heaven knows. Something to do with the toffs. Here." Tate adjusted the load long enough to dig in his pocket and pull a key ring from his pocket. "I swiped the key to the silver cabinet. Get what you need for the party, then get out again quick as scat. And don't show up in the dining room lookin' as you do, or we'll both be queuin' at Daimler's hiring line come morn."

Amos slipped the key ring into his pocket. "Thanks, mate. I

keep a spare livery put by, so here's hoping it's enough. I don't have the foggiest idea what to do about shoes, though."

"Shoes are the least of your worries. Come on," Tate whispered, and he led Amos toward the glow of the kitchen windows. "I don't know where we can put you where staff won't see. The house is full up for the holidays, and lookie-loo valets and ladies' maids have taken up every spare corner of the servants' level."

"Then I'll change in the alcove of the downstairs library." Amos yanked the mud-caked bow tie from his neck with one hand as he followed. "Dark rugs and neglect ought to keep anyone from knowing I went that way. I've done it before."

"And if you're caught?"

"In an unused library? Not likely." Amos shrugged like it didn't matter, though they both knew it did. "But if I am, then you'll have to be promoted to first footman."

"You know I wouldn't take it. I'd rather make gum shoes in the factory than have to serve all these pompous nobs for the rest of me days. And certainly not without you to help endure it. Get on with you now." Tate tilted his head toward the service door and led the way back. "I'll distract Mrs. Cartwright until you show up in her kitchen with an extra platter in hand. Just be quick about it, yeah? And get that key back on its hook."

That should be the end of it.

Amos ought to find the library empty—it had only ever contained marble busts and the ghosts of past lords framed on the walls to witness what had become his would-be dressing room whenever he was in a pinch. He peeled off his wet shirt and stuffed it in the hiding place behind a row of books on a corner shelf. Then he shook out the fresh one with a wave of crisp linen floating on air.

"Ah, Da." Amos sighed. Slipped arms in. And gave a hasty fasten to the cuffs. "What would you think of your son bowing and scraping to a bunch of toffee-nosed peers? Praise be you're not here to see it."

"*Oh*—I am sorry."

Amos froze. Swallowed hard. And, grateful he hadn't dropped trousers, turned toward the soft voice. Like a punch to the gut, he found Lady Charlotte Terrington by the window behind the grand piano, trussed up in some crystal gown illuminated by moonlight and a diamond-studded crown thing holding her hair back.

As soon as their eyes met, she turned away, her gaze reverting to the play of snowfall drifting beyond the glass. Propriety, it seemed, made her realize a half-clothed man and a woman alone in the same library would be fatal should anyone discover them. Even if their meeting was an innocent run-in between old friends.

He turned his back and began a hasty button down the front of his livery shirt. "What are you doing here, Charlie? Shouldn't you be dancing somewhere?"

"I didn't know anyone was in this room or I wouldn't have . . ." she whispered, and then laughed. Actually laughed! Amos shot a glance over his shoulder as he fumbled with the livery buttons, hurrying only so he might protect her reputation. And all she could do was raise a gloved hand to her lips and try to cover that she found it terribly funny.

Rankled, Amos pulled the livery jacket free from the shelf, giving it a good shake to air out. "Something amusing?"

"No. I'm sorry. Truly. I just . . ." She cleared her throat and checked her composure, straightening shoulders to start again. "I thought the trousers were going to make this a bit of an awkward moment. You know—even if it is an unexpected reunion between childhood friends."

"Not much of a reunion when you saw me across the fields last week." He shook his head, hoping she got the hint of hurry in his tone. "And you don't see me now, or I'm in a heap of trouble if I don't appear in the dining hall in the next few minutes."

"So . . . toffee-nosed was it?"

"I didn't know anyone was here. I should have minded my tongue."

"But surely not your thoughts." Charlotte half turned. Peeked.

Found him clothed and turned the rest of the way again, looking back as the shadows of falling snow were cast over the side of her face. “Is that how you view me?”

“You know I don’t. But this is . . .” He stared at her, all trussed up in ballroom attire for the Holts’ grand Christmas to-do. And he, about to put on gloves to serve them. “Things are different. You’re Lady Charlotte tonight. And I’m the help.”

“I don’t recall you using titles when we used to hide away at the glasshouse. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten.”

“How could I?” He laughed, the memories of childhood still kind. “Da gave me a dressing down when he learned I was skipping out on chores to spend time with you. I never did find out if it was because he cared after the livestock, or more that I was daring to expose His Lordship’s daughter to books that told her she could think for herself.”

“Yes. And when my governess found me with the cello, Mother threatened me with being locked away in a tower for the rest of my days after such a breach in decorum. Even if my father relented and let me keep it, if I promised never to play in public again.” Her smile faded. And even with the gaiety of party music lingering in the background, the air grew solemn. “I’m so sorry for your loss, Amos.”

And she did—sound sorry, that is.

Everyone of a certain class knew his da. Brendan Darby had been a fixture at The Lion’s Gate pub, in the fields he plowed for the Lord Holt at the estate adjoining hers, and in Coventry town long as anybody could remember. It wasn’t fodder for talk in an upscale ladies’ parlor, though, that a poor farmer had been laid in his grave months ago. How could she know?

“Thank you.”

“Please, will you convey my condolences to your mother?”

“I will.”

The mantel clock cut the air between them, its melodic chime filling the room.

Amos looked to the glow of light from the party at the bottom of the library double doors. The string quartet still played, but it wouldn't be much longer before dinner was served. He'd have to make tracks if he was going to beat it.

"Oh, yes. The time." Charlotte trailed a fingertip along the polished wood of the sofa back as she took hurried steps toward the door. "I'm afraid I needed some air from the party and found my way in here, looking for the book I'd misplaced. But seeing as I've now stumbled into a gentleman's . . . uh, solitude, I'll leave you to it."

Amos held firm. Stared back. "Which book?"

Charlotte let her fingertips drift from the doorknob and turned to face him. "*Dombey and Son*."

"I should have known."

"You remember our adventure to Coventry that time we came away with our first copy?" She smiled—that same genuine one that had always existed between them. Even as a young man, Amos had known it was an honor to receive a smile like that from her, because it was honest. And hard-won. And he'd believed once that a man could live from one blessed moment to the next, just on the hope she'd bestow it one more time.

"Aye."

Of course I do.

The Dickens novel had become their favorite escape. And with it, their own private world reading volumes of Shakespeare. Milton, Kipling, and Keats. The Brontës. Emily Dickinson and Jane Austen—the latter which he could barely stomach, if truth be told. Save for that Charlotte doted on *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*, and that meant they were trifles he'd force himself to endure.

Amos much preferred *Waverley*, being that Sir Walter Scott penned adventures a man could feel stirring down to his bones—even if Charlotte maintained the opening chapters were a snooze compared to the wit and high-stakes world of the Regency marriage market in Austen's novels.

It had remained the only disagreement between them.

Sitting in the glasshouse by the rose garden, the old structure kept them tucked away in the poplar grove, nestled behind the blackthorn wall that cut the Holts' and Terringtons' land. Their backs leaning against patina glass to hide from prying eyes of governesses and well-to-do parents. And enjoying the satire and humor of their favorite author, who had always been Dickens.

Charlotte had never made Amos feel less for having seen the underbelly of Dickens's world. And even for the gritty reality in the pages, the novels were able to draw them together like equals through vivid stories and characters and brilliantly wrought words. She'd sit in silence as he read aloud, picking at wildflower petals from seed pots. And Amos would tend the mini garden they'd grown in the glasshouse while she practiced her favorite Bach arrangements on the cello, the fumbling of notes for only him and stray starlings to hear.

"Do you remember that day in the glasshouse, when we finished the book for the first time? You were holding it when you promised we wouldn't give up on our dream to—"

"Own a bookshop one day. I remember."

She nodded, keeping her smile, as if the memories were still warm. "Half the shop would have a reading room where we'd keep my books—the ones all the customers would wish to buy. And yours could be on the other side."

"You mean the side with the titles no one wants to read?"

She shook her head. "Perhaps they're the ones the rest of us *should* read, if we were brave enough to venture outside of Austen's wit."

"And you were going to play the cello for heads of state in the world's grandest concert halls. Have your name in electric lights, and all that." Those eyes turned sad, and Charlotte looked down for a breath, like her gaze needed a place to land. "Well, it's a fine story. And all the more difficult to let go."

"Yes. It is. I'm sure I'll find the book somewhere." She turned

away, opened the door, and peeked into the hall. “Shall I ask the quartet to play a song or two before we move into the dining room? Would that give you enough time to . . . do what you must?”

“I’d appreciate that. Thank you.”

Light from the hall sparkled against the diamonds in her hair as she cracked the door but lingered with a gloved hand fused to the knob.

She looked back, that heart-stopping smile warming every inch of his insides as she whispered a final “Merry Christmas, Amos.”

He stared at the closed oak door for long seconds after she’d slipped through.

Merry Christmas, Charlie.

To let go of a beautiful story like that? Yes. It had been difficult. More difficult than she could ever know.



11 October 1940
 Bayley Lane
 Coventry, England

The brass bell chimed over the shop door.

Amos looked up from the books in the back office of Waverley Novels and swiped his pocket watch from his waistcoat, jamming his thumb against the etched knob. The cover popped, revealing the engraved initials on the inside cover and storybook designs of sun, moon, and stars ticking up to the three o’clock hour in a colorful arc over its gold-rimmed face.

The headache of it all.

A customer at five minutes to close . . .

All of Coventry know shops closed doors early to contend with the blackouts. Couldn’t customers come in at a decent hour? Or was it only when a man wished to lock his doors and rest weary bones by a warm fireplace that they decided it was time to have the latest bestselling title in hand?

He shoved the timepiece back in his waistcoat pocket and turned back to the page, trying to account for figures that refused to match up.

A blustery day with intermittent bouts of drenching rain meant the bookshop had seen precious few customers. And while Amos would rather have sent this one straight out the front door again for the grand annoyance of it all, something in him couldn't see fair enough to do it. Not when Eden Books across the way would certainly welcome a disgruntled customer from his shop. She'd probably make the poor sod a cup of tea and set him up in that gilded reading room of hers for as long as he wished to linger.

Lose even one customer to the Holts?

Amos couldn't have that. Best let the customer look. Find their title. And trust them to read the posted sign to leave the money by the register so he could keep to the solitude of the back office.

"Hello?"

The customer's shout caused Amos to scratch a jagged line through the figures he'd been working. He growled against having to give the column an eraser, the numbers muddling into a smudge of graphite on the page.

The customer gave a cheery *knock-knock* against the front counter. "Anyone there?"

Amos gave up, tossing the pencil in the binding before draining the last trace of amber liquid from the tumbler on his desk. He corked The Glenlivet and, together with the glass and accounts book, tucked all in the hidden hollow of the bottom desk drawer. The Scotch bottle gave its usual sound of rolling back into place when he closed it up.

Dusting palms against wool trousers as he stood, Amos tromped down the hall, the aged hardwoods groaning under the weight of each surly step.

"Aye," Amos called out, watching the gentleman from the edge of the shadows under the stairs and pointed to the sign hooked to the register: *We Close at 3:00 Sharp*. "But we're about to close up.

The blackouts, you see.”

Amos eyed him. Waiting. Annoyed. Then shifted to wondering after the fact that Coventry folk in their twenties didn’t dress like they’d just come from dinner at Buckingham Palace. Even with the rain having doused the lad’s trench and blond hair peeking out the back of a charcoal trilby, he’d obviously come from the gilded side of some palace gates.

“Oh—yes. Blackouts. Of course.” The lad cleared his throat and gave a fleeting glance to corners of the shop, as if checking they were alone. “I was told the bookshop on Bayley Lane is owned by the Holts. Is this true?”

“Aye. The Holts.”

“Good. I wonder if I might speak with Miss Eden Holt then.” A stranger wandering into a shop and tossing out one of Coventry’s marquee-family names was decidedly *not good*.

Even if Amos’s shop was at odds with the Holts’, locals didn’t take kindly to strangers during wartime. And the customer was exactly that—a posh young stranger in a part of the city where everybody knew everybody, down to the names of their great-grandparents and herding dogs on the family farm. Standing there with that suit, those sharp blue eyes scanning corners and asking for Eden in particular meant the lad wasn’t likely to be well received in any part of the city, let alone standing in a competing shop.

Amos stepped into the light—slow, bringing the added layer of the defensive wall he owned as he waited for the lad to quit digging through his briefcase. Aye, and notice what now stood before him.

“Ah—here it is. I have official business to conduct with Miss Eden Holt and . . .” The lad pulled out a wax-sealed envelope before he trailed off, his voice dying once he’d finally taken in the full imposing view of Amos Darby.

Go ahead. Take a long look.

Get it out of your system . . . then get out of my shop.

It was the usual flow of his interactions with the public.

Amos knew the combination of his height and a beastly profile

could intimidate anyone who came poking around. And they would on occasion—the schoolchildren tiptoeing outside to peek through the windows and steal a glimpse of the local recluse. And why not? There was a certain fascination with the macabre of a boorish middle-aged man with a mane of unkempt hair, deep russet-and-pepper beard, and angry scars that screamed up the right side of his neck and face.

Though this lad didn't flinch or try to hide his horror in the face of a monster as most did. Instead he stood firm. Near equal height. And strange, but he looked Amos square in the eye and simply waited. Like he had all day to stare down Amos if he so chose. And something told him if there'd been that battle between them, this lad could win.

Not afraid? Alright.

"You are Mr. Holt I take it?"

"Who's asking?"

"I am. Forgive me," the lad said, all polite-like as he removed his hat and set it on the counter next to the briefcase. "Jacob Cole, Esquire. Legal representative of Cole Jewelry Co. Ltd. By way of Detroit."

He tripped over adding the clarification of "in the United States" and then winced, it seemed, for judging Coventry as uneducated. He was, after all, in a bookshop with framed maps on the wall and scores of books in sections marked *Philosophy*, *Fine Arts*, and *Literature*.

"Sorry. I only meant that—"

"A long trip to make, especially during wartime." Amos moved closer, leaning his good palm on the countertop so he could casually drum fingertips against the worn English oak. "You couldn't have sent a wire?"

"No. Not for this, I'm afraid. It's a legal matter of a somewhat sensitive nature."

Amos's chest tightened.

He and Charlotte might have been at odds, for years now. But

something in him couldn't ignore when the Holts were pulled into any ill-dealings. Bookshop wars were one thing; legal matters with children were a whole other category of low he wasn't prepared to entertain.

"And if you're wondering, sir," the lad said, noting Amos's silence. "I'm obliged to state that I have reported my presence to Grosvenor Square, and the London consulate is aware of why I'm in the UK. I can't say your government trusts me completely, even if I am a full-fledged American citizen with nothing to hide."

"I can't say as I blame them, times being what they are. But you won't find the Holts here. Wrong shop, lad." Amos tipped his head the direction of the street and the Bayley Lane shopfronts painted in cardinal red, sunshine yellow, and French blue. "Over there. Blue shop with gold trim, posies, and pretention dressing the front window. Catty-corner, across the way."

"There are two bookshops." The lad looked over his shoulder to the street through the window before pocketing the envelope back into the briefcase.

"We have a library and cinema too, if you can believe that."

"Yes, of course. I'll just head across the street then." The young Mr. Cole replaced his trilby but paused to check his wristwatch. "Is there a hotel near here by chance? If your train timetables are correct, it's looking less likely I'll make the last one to London tonight."

Amos eyed the lad, finding a little flicker in the return stare that said a shade of vulnerability existed in him. And no doubt, they both knew why.

It was autumn 1940; London was embroiled in a hellfire of bombs from the sky nearly every night.

England had already seen Blitz bombs and buried some dead. Their fair country had already endured Dunkirk and the ongoing battle for England's skies. Even Coventry was preparing for the worst, with factories that shifted production from residential ice-boxes to Spitfire wheels and engines, and now manufactured gas

masks for near the whole of the king's country. Amos himself had helped dig the trenches in Primrose Hill Park that summer. They'd already sustained bombing damage in the city center in August and September both. Barrage balloons flew over the parks and factories. And they'd installed larger shelters—like the ones at Greyfriars Green and the local cricket pitch—only to turn around and repack plank and earth-lined ceilings with concrete when they'd learned the first ones wouldn't protect rogue bullets from hitting bodies.

This lad couldn't know the number of local boys who'd signed up and shipped off to war. Nor that a steady stream of farmers-turned-soldiers took flight from Coventry's train station, leaving the farms all but empty. The children soon followed, with tags tied to jumpers as they packed on trains and were sent away to be looked after by relatives—or even strangers—in the countryside. All that was left were crying sweethearts and bewildered mothers to amble through the fog of train platforms and trod past his bookshop windows on their way back to empty farms and city flats.

That was a highlight reel of all Hitler had stirred up since '38. And if Amos could judge anything about the city and the land and the good people of The Midlands he'd known all his life, it was that not one establishment in all of Coventry would offer a room to a man too faint-hearted to stay in London. Nor to one asking too many questions about the Holts.

Amos shook his head. "Not much to be speaking of."

"No rooms. In a city this size? With two bookshops *and* a cinema to its credit?"

Bully for that. This one is a solicitor after all.

"You could try Queen's Hotel on Hertford Street. But they're more than sure to be booked. Tipton's Roomin' House is over on Bishop. Down a ways." Amos waved his hand the vague direction of the ill-fated rooming house, knowing the owner and his paranoid wife might report this lad as a German spy the moment his blond-haired, blue-eyed mug and questions waltzed through their

door.

“Bishop Street, you say?”

“Aye. But . . . the scones are bricks. And the mutton stew’s enough to send a man to hospital. I wouldn’t recommend it unless you’ve got an iron stomach and a death wish to go with it. Best make tracks back to London. Or else be forced to eat the mutton and never live to tell the tale.”

Mr. Cole did smile then and patted the counter as if that was that. “I see. Well, perhaps you’re right, Mr. . . .”

“Darby.”

“Yes, Mr. Darby. It might be wise to go on to London tonight, even with the blackouts and night raids.” He extended his hand, offering a handshake. “You know what they say: ‘Hospitality to the exile, and broken bones to the tyrant.’ Wouldn’t want to overstay my welcome.”

Amos gave an unconscious tick of the brow at recognition of the quote from *Waverley* but kept his hand buried in his trouser pocket. The lad would, no doubt, misinterpret the refusal. But that couldn’t be helped.

“Which are you—the exile or the tyrant?”

The lad took his hand back in a soft-curved fist, tipped his hat, and offered a knowing smile. “I hardly know these days. But I thank you for your time just the same. Cheers.” He turned to leave.

“Wait. The Holts. They’re uh . . . good people.” Amos kicked the toe of his shoe against the baseboard behind the counter, where the lad couldn’t see. Defending the enemy again? Why could he not let anything go when on the remote possibility it might impact Charlotte or her family? “Whatever business you have, just be kind to them. But don’t say anyone put you up to it.”

“Lawyers are the soul of discretion, Mr. Darby. I assure you. They’ll hear naught on the subject from me.”

As if on cue, thunder rattled the roof. And Lord knows, Amos should have let the lad go out into the rain and brave it. After the paces Charlotte had put his shop through over the years, it was

fitting to send a solicitor her way. But before the lad could make it to the door, Amos felt his insides tug—something with a notion he couldn't silence. The same notion that had gotten him in trouble too many times before.

"You could come back here," he heard himself say. "If you don't fancy mutton."

There. I've said enough to regret the day I've been born.

Again.

As a member of the Home Guard, maybe he ought to keep this Mr. Cole close. See what he was really after.

"What?" The lad stopped, his brow questioning. "But I thought you just said—"

"I've a spare room." Amos sighed and pointed to the ceiling. "Rent it out when the rooming houses are full. Usually with the Coventry Stakes and all that, but sometimes on regular days too. Just don't be spreading it about."

"You'd rent me a room? Here in this shop?"

"Well, it's my home too, but if you need one. I've no telephone, mind. You have to breakfast at the pub. And the closest shelter's a few blocks down, so you'll have to hoof it if the sirens cry."

The lad raised an eyebrow. "And do the sirens cry, on the regular?"

"Nearly every night since summer. The American newspapers should have told you that's your lot in England. But I can offer clean sheets and a roof, if you're still brave enough to stay on."

"And you'd trust an exile just like that, would you?"

"In my experience, anyone who can quote Sir Walter Scott can't be all bad." Amos ticked a glance over to the shop's name on the sign hanging high on the wall, the thick Roman letters reading *Waverley Novels* in stark black paint. "Seems I'm willing to take my chances."

The lad eyed him. "Thank you then, Mr. Darby. I accept." He nodded and moved back toward the shop door, pausing to replace his hat against the deluge of a crying sky. "I'll be back. Just as soon

as business is taken care of.”

He stepped out then, the bell ringing loud as Amos slipped around the counter and hurried through the shop to the door. The pocket watch chimed through his vest, warning that time had ticked over three o'clock. He clamped a palm down on it as he stared out the front window, dulling the melody from filling his ears as he watched the suit walk away.

“Just as soon as business is taken care of . . .”

Whatever that means for the Holts, I'm not sure I want to find out.

Amos gave a hard flick of the door bolt and knotted the blackout curtains tight against the brass wall hook. Had he just sent more problems to Charlotte's shop, or had he invited them to invade his own in due time?

CHAPTER TWO

11 October 1940
Bayley Lane
Coventry, England

“He’s coming over.”
Ginny Brewster peeked through the rounded display window at Eden Books, her gaze glued to the Georgian shopfront of Waverley Novels across the way. She circled her fist over the glass, rubbing away condensation fogged there.

“Who is?” Eden gave a quick glance up from the manifest of their latest book shipment. “Let’s hope a customer.”

“You know who—the *suit*.” Ginny tucked an unruly wisp of hair from her chocolate bob behind her ear and readjusted rose-gold spectacles over a pert nose. “That gent who marched into Mr. Darby’s shop.” She flipped her wrist to check her watch. “Not five minutes ago.”

“Did he now? Imagine that. A customer went inside a bookshop. That ought to make tomorrow’s front page.”

It was Eden’s part to wink at Ginny’s cheek yet still play the incurious manager bent on nudging her back to the new titles awaiting uncrating in the fiction section. If only she could discourage their fourteen-year-old apprentice’s preoccupation with goings on at Darby’s shop. But in truth, Eden couldn’t ignore the curiosity of it either. Her long ebony waves were pinned back tight at the nape so she could scan the first page of their new shipment receipt unobstructed. And she did—three times already—only with no clue as

to what titles she'd just read over. Perhaps it was time to give it up and enter Ginny's world of subterfuge; neither shop was looking to have a banner day with sales, raining as it was.

"He went in, sure enough."

"There you have it, Ginny. Espionage in its purest form." Eden ticked another mark on her list. Pity—no copies of *Twilight in Delhi* this month either. And they had customers clamoring for it. "You know, it's a sad state of affairs Hogarth Press has had to contend with in Bloomsbury. Imagine Virginia Woolf's house being hit with bombs. Twice! It's a mercy no one was hurt when the building finally did collapse."

"The suit's been tossed out of the shop like his tailored trousers are afire!"

"What?" That did garner Eden's attention.

In their experience a gentlemen in a tailored suit only happened to their end of the cobblestone street for one of three reasons: He was a solicitor, a banker, or lost on the road to London. Though Coventry's industrial sector had been booming with automobile production for a decade, most of the shopkeepers had weathered a rough patch these last years, and many were clinging to a shoestring just to keep their doors open. A suit meant trouble. And if Mr. Darby had thrown the gentleman out, there must be a reason. Eden could only pray there wasn't unrest with any of their friends' shops along the street.

"He's coming this way. With no umbrella, mind. That's frightfully determined, marching through a downpour like this." Ginny rubbed the glass again and waved Eden over to the display window. "Come see."

Eden gave up, abandoning her clipboard on the front counter so she might squeeze in next to Ginny and peer out from behind tied-back blackout curtains. And there he was—the suit. With his trilby bent under the briefcase he held over his head, dodging puddles in the street. A tall, broad-shouldered man was indeed crossing catty-corner to their side of Bayley Lane. And looked as determined as

Ginny had said.

“What on earth do you suppose he’s doing?” Ginny remarked when his shoe plunged into a puddle against the low curb, and he stopped, both hands holding the briefcase over his head as he danced in full view of their window.

“Um . . . I’m not exactly sure.” Eden stifled a chuckle. And tried not to find humor in the poor chap shaking off a sopping trouser cuff. He looked lost. And sorry as could be in such a dreadful downpour, with leaves whisking by the window and his trench getting caught up on a furious gust.

“He must really want a book,” Eden offered. Though Ginny didn’t bite. All she did was give an exacting glare through her spectacles.

“And I still say the gentleman is lucky to be alive. We ought to warn him never to step through that man’s door again. Her Ladyship would.”

“That’s enough cheek from you, miss.” Eden flipped the ends of the girl’s hair. “I know Mr. Darby and Mama don’t exactly see eye to eye where book sales are concerned. But it’s more the talk of the town that keeps this rift alive than it is either of our shops. And I should think you’d show a little more charity, given Mr. Darby’s circumstances.”

“Charity we have. In spades. But that man? Never.” Always adding punctuation to her opinions, Ginny crossed her arms over her chest and huffed as they continued staring down the street at the red brick façade with slim Georgian windows and an oversized door of leaded glass. “All the world is at war in Mr. Darby’s eyes—and that was before we had a real one to contend with.”

“Then I’d wager he’s seen enough of it. He fought in one and we haven’t.”

The girl sighed, only hers was a coltish girls-aren’t-allowed-to-fight kind of bluster that said she’d have joined the Home Guard in a thrice were she allowed. But in Mr. Darby’s case . . . all Eden could think was that in war—even that which engaged bookshop owners—perhaps the world had not been particularly kind to *him*.

For a steadfast foe, the oddest of contradictions seemed to follow the man.

There was a rumor that Mr. Darby wouldn't hear of an ungenerous word spoken against the Holts. Yet his method of battling her mother was far more subtle. And equally as shrewd. In a wave of brackishness that swept across the street, the bookseller managed to anticipate their every sales push or author visit with maddening accuracy.

If Eden Books secured a visit from an author in September, Waverley Novels had already entertained them by August. To advertise bigger and better was his strategy, and he did—even in wartime—by besting the ad space her mother bought in every newspaper's ad section within one hundred kilometers. And all the while, Mr. Darby held a boorish air that said though he'd advertised for them to come, if patrons actually did show at his door, they might find it slammed in their face.

It was a wonder the man managed to stay in business at all.

And so it went. For years.

Hop and scotch. Tick and tack. The back-and-forth continued until every stool at the famed Lion's Gate pub circulated the blather of the bookshop wars each night. And though Eden hastened to admit it, Mr. Darby seemed the oddest contradiction of shielding them from the tittle-tattle yet keeping it going at the very same time.

"What if 'The Beast' sent him to act as a spy?" Ginny whispered and pulled back from the window, giving the drapes a good shimmy back into place.

"Please do not call Mr. Darby that name. It's cruel." Eden placed a palm to the shoulder of Ginny's homespun sweater and squeezed.

"I didn't say it. It's what my brothers say they call him at the schoolhouse, because of his—"

"I know why they say it."

"But I still don't understand why you take up for the man. He's nothing to us."

Eden sighed. No—Mr. Darby was nothing official to them,

especially given the strife between shops. But unofficially, there was something about Mr. Darby that Eden couldn't discount. He seemed a grump without much to do or anyone in particular to grump at. The man lived alone, kept tucked away with his books and his airs. Maybe that was enough that they ought to show the man some measure of kindness.

"Everyone is something to someone. Remember that. The scars we bear should make us more worthy of understanding, not less."

The brass bell chimed loud as the man in the suit blustered through the front door, shaking rain from his trench.

"Off with you now," Eden whispered, and she slipped behind the register. "Look smart."

Ginny skirted back to the fiction section, pretending to give attention to uncrating their new releases, though her investigative eye was employed in flitting back and forth to the entry, like a stray hummingbird had gotten lost there.

The man removed his hat as he approached the counter. "I'm sorry for the mess."

"It's quite alright." Eden beamed friendliness in return as she arranged customers' orders along the back counter. "We're used to the weather's shifting moods around here."

"Shifting moods . . . indeed."

Ginny shot Eden a simper that said every bit of "I told you! Mr. Darby threw him out . . ."

Eden shook her head in a silent "hush," telling Ms. Brewster to be about stacking while she engaged their customer.

"May I?" he said, asking to set his hat on the counter. A smile from him—even a small one—was a good sign.

"Of course."

"I wonder if you might help me, miss? I'm looking for the shop owners—the Holts."

Ginny popped up to stand on the far side of her book table. And eyed him with a little too stout a measure of Scotland Yard about her.

“You’re in luck. I am one such owner.”

He swept a folded docket of papers and envelope from the inside pocket of his overcoat and set them on the counter. Followed by a small oxblood leather-bound book that he opened and scanned a page marked with a ribbon in the binding.

“Are you from the bank?” Ginny chimed in. As if Eden could stop her. Curiosity had pulled her to hover by the counter like a ghost, a stack of books still cradled in her arms.

The man’s eyes—the lightest blue, clear, and . . . kind?—sparkled in response to Ginny’s forthright query. Thank goodness he wasn’t offended.

He turned to Ginny. “The bank, miss?”

Ginny set the books on the counter and rested elbows on the stack. She intended to stay until she got answers, adding with a splash of vinegar, “Yes. We don’t get a lot of strangers around here. And you look like every banker I’ve ever seen.”

“*Uh*, don’t mind us.” Eden tried to cover the girl’s blunt edges with a quick step forward, drawing his attention back. “Coventry is a ‘small town city.’ We don’t often entertain customers save for the regulars we’ve known for a long time.”

“Right. Well, I’m not from a bank. I’m from Detroit, actually. It’s Cole,” he said to Eden as he opened the briefcase and began sorting through its insides. “Jacob Cole, Esquire—legal representative of the Cole Jewelry Co. Ltd. I can provide identification.”

“Thank you, Mr. Cole. But I don’t think we’ll be needing all that. You’ve obviously come quite a long way just to speak with us. How can I help you?”

He glanced to the back of the shop, past the long row of two-story shelves and the impressive rolling ladder system that stretched back to disappearing against the stairs, and the peacock-walled reading room where her mother’s famed collection of rare books were kept safe from the damaging rays of the sun.

“Are you Miss Eden Holt, only child to the estate of William Holt III?”

"I'm the one," she said, with Ginny correcting "Lady Eden Holt" in the background—emphasis on the *Lady*.

He glanced up to the sign above the counter, its cheery French blue matched to the paneling on the outside of the shop, as if to say, "Eden Books?"

"My mother was rather romantic in her younger years. Always wanted a bookshop of her own, apparently. And what do you do when you're young and idealistic but name a dream after your only child?" Her cheeks warmed. Heavens knew why. Everyone in Coventry knew how the shop got its moniker. Eden had no idea why the notion struck her as humbling now.

"Yes, well." He exhaled a weighty sigh. "I wish that could put a different color on it."

"A different color on what?"

"I'm sorry to do this, miss, but . . ." He took an envelope from the briefcase and slid it across the counter, then presented a leather-bound book with its center part and lined paper lying spread-eagle. He pointed to a line halfway down on the page, beneath a host of scrawled names. "These belong to you. Sign here."

"I don't understand. Sign what? What is this?"

He shifted his stance in obvious discomfort. "Your legal rights in the United States, and in the state of Michigan. In the sealed envelope is the official docket for the case pending against you."

"What case against us? The bookshop?"

Ginny slipped in beside Eden and opened the crease of the folded papers to begin nosing her way through. "Not us. *You*, Eden."

Mr. Cole cleared his throat and tapped the blank line in his little book. "Sign here, please. It's required for our records."

Was that why Mr. Darby had sent him over this way?

Oh no. When her mother found out about this . . . it would toss a truckload of paraffin on the flames between shops. Eden turned to the window and gazed out at the bookshop across the street. The edge of the blackout curtains shimmered behind the man's front window, then swept back into place.

“Why that double-crossing tyrant!” Ginny refolded the papers, slammed the book shut on them, and slid the lot back across the counter to the saboteur. “Her Ladyship was right when she said we oughtn’t trust that man.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Oh, you needn’t be sorry, Mr. Cole.” Eden attempted to smile. Awkwardly, she knew. Because Ginny was fighting mad as her mother would have been, and with efforts Eden had been trying to mitigate between shops, any headway seemed all for naught now. “Our young employee here has just read too many Sherlock Holmes novels in her spare time. Sets her on the hunt for intrigue whether it’s warranted or not.”

“Intrigue my eye,” Ginny cut in. “You can tell Mr. Darby that the Holts won’t sign—not even in our blood. If it is a war he wants, he’ll have it!”

Mr. Cole cleared his throat. Adjusted his stance. And truth be told, it looked as though he was battling back an unexpected grin at the girl’s moxie. “And are you a Holt, miss?”

“An honorary one,” she insisted, arms crossed tight over her chest again.

“I think I know what this is about.” Eden tested her ability to cool tempers before things spiraled completely out of control. “You see, when the incident occurred at Waverley Novels this summer, I was the one who walked across the street to make peace with Mr. Darby. Even when the mix-up wasn’t entirely our fault. I apologized for flooding his shop—”

His eyes widened. “You flooded his shop?”

“Not intentionally, of course. It seems some crates of books we’d ordered were mistakenly delivered to his shop. I had them carried back across the street—trying to be a good neighbor. And though it wasn’t our fault, I still offered twenty pounds to cover the water damage.”

“Water damage . . .” He didn’t bother to cover the chuckle under his breath this time.

"That's right. Something fell and blocked the back door from closing properly, and the next day's rain flooded the back of Mr. Darby's shop. Improper drainage in the alley. It really was an honest mistake."

"Yes, but we take it all back," Ginny cut in. "On behalf of Lady Harcourt, we demand . . ."

"Who is Lady Harcourt?" he whispered to Eden, as Ginny kept steamrolling.

"My mother," she answered back, in time to catch the end of Ginny's declaration.

". . . and we will not give *that* man the satisfaction. If Mr. Darby wishes to take this to the next level, then you tell him the Holts shall see him in court."

"Ginny!" Eden blasted back.

"Yes—and he ought to be ready for the war he's started!" she sparked back with a pumped fist in the air, emboldened that the time for talking was quite over.

"Ladies, I assure you . . . I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about. I don't represent Mr. Darby."

Eden blinked, deadpanning, "You don't."

"No. But begging your pardon, I'd be reconsidering if it meant crossing anyone in this shop." He offered a wide grin this time, in perfectly annoying amusement that chose that instant to appear unfettered upon his face. "In fact, I just met the gentleman. And while Mr. Darby can be a little . . . intimidating, he actually seemed a decent fellow."

"I'm sorry. I don't understand. If it's not Mr. Darby, then who is suing us?"

Suits meant trouble. Eden should have marked Ginny's words on that. And had her mother been here, no doubt Charlotte Terrington-Holt would have echoed the sentiment full throttle.

As it was, the stranger sighed, and the kindness that had been in those eyes left again as he offered nothing but the brutal truth. "I am."

CHAPTER THREE

24 December 1913
Brinklow Road
Coventry, England

Look for fluttering fans and batting eyelashes . . .

Charlotte had thought only to buy Amos more time when she'd left the library and made quick work of scanning the Holt Manor ballroom. But the heir to the Holts' vast holdings was the one who could delay dinner if Charlotte could pull William from his latest conquest of the night.

Pears danced on the ends of crimson ribbons, and brilliant baubles of glass and gold frosted the great Nordmann's fir at the end of the ballroom. The rich scents of juniper, cinnamon, and mulled wine spiced the air. A string quartet played. Couples danced. And candlelight illuminated the holly-decked mantel where she finally found Will—and his enviable good looks—positioned by the hearth.

He'd wrangled an ebony crown into submission with a tight part off his brow, and with long, lean lines filling his white-tie dress, mischief in a dimpled and far-too-dashing smile, and that spark in deep-emerald eyes, his air was certain to leave many a young lady hoping to be chosen for the next dance.

With a break in the dresses, Charlotte caught Will's eye and tilted her head to draw him over. He shrugged, dismissing, as if he couldn't get away from the sea of satin and smiles.

How in character.

Since their childhood days, Will had accepted that his place in life was to charm the whole of England. More than that, he meant to have a jolly-good time doing it. One might have thought he aspired to hold a seat in Parliament for the way he massaged public opinion. Yet it was watching the gaggle of ladies who invariably closed in on him, Will transfixing the lot, and the quartet slowing their playing for the dinner hour that bolstered Charlotte enough to make the split-second decision . . .

This would work if anything could.

Charlotte wove her way through the crowd to the quartet. It took some convincing for the cellist to comprehend why a lady of breeding should need to borrow his instrument. But to the shock of the musicians, the ballroom—and the never-ending horror of her mother—she swept the hem of her ballgown out of the way, pressed the elegant long lines of the cello against her body, and began to play before anyone could stop her.

Until . . . playing the cello again proved to be magic—on Christmas Eve, or any other day. Once Charlotte had removed her gloves and the bow touched skin, all games were lost. She didn't require sheet music, not when muscle memory sent her fingers flying across the fingerboard and the bow to caress the strings with ease. She just played, so the chords of music sank low within her where nothing existed but the tool and its master and the magic they could create together.

The crowd hushed as notes carried across the room, first from the deep-chested tones of the instrument itself and then as the melody careened with the height of the coffered ceilings and, no doubt, with a stupor when they realized who was playing.

Yet with heart swelling and the exquisite tension of the strings beneath her touch, Charlotte managed to blot out the images of where she was. It was everything to fall back into the rhythm of playing, reveling in the nearness of a beloved friend.

To Will, the shocking display seemed a private intrigue. And that, more than anything, was the brand of amusement he had

always favored. He'd drifted to the edge of the dance floor and seemed to delight not at the gaggle near him, but at the ladies' seething envy that the prize of the night had turned his attention Charlotte's way.

Entering the arena of competition for Will's glances was no lure to her. But to play the cello again? To have an opportunity to do what she'd loved most in all the world? That was another matter entirely. And if it would do anything to help Amos—and feed her heart at the same time—Charlotte could not deny herself.

“Go on,” Will goaded, as the shouts of “Encore!” filtered around the room. And in a surprising show of support, he winked, leaned down to the cellist's chair, and whispered against Charlotte's ear, “Show those ladies what true accomplishment looks like.”

Playing through to the final note of the second arrangement, the guests paused, then offered polite applause enough to draw her back. And with a pang of guilt, Charlotte realized she'd fallen so far into herself that she'd forgotten all else. Her father was waving a fan in front of her mother's ashen face. Will appeared delighted and thundered his applause seemingly without care for the air of shock rebounding across the room. Dinner had indeed been halted, as even the service staff had stopped and gaped at the Terrington heiress's ghastly breach of propriety.

Yet Will grinned like a victor and took her hand to claim her for the dance floor as some unspoken prize. “So how does it feel?”

Snapped back from counting her dance steps, Charlotte looked up to Will. “*Hmm?*”

“I said, how does it feel to have single-handedly commanded the attention of an entire ballroom? You'd think a young lady would bask in such adoration.”

“I'm not so certain it's adoration. I can't believe I just did that. My mother . . .”

“Your mother will be pleased all eyes have turned in our direction. And yet of all the young ladies in this ballroom, I find I'm dancing with the only one who looks everywhere but at the man

who's holding her in his arms. Should I take that personally?"

"Of course not." *Think fast.* She painted a sweet smile on her lips and shrugged instead of searching the background for Amos. "It's just that the room is enchanting. Truly. Your mother has made everyone feel so at home. And I was overcome with wanting to play at Christmas, like I did once as a young girl."

"Enchanting?" He stared down at her with that little measure of play in his eyes—so characteristic of the veteran playboy from down the lane. "I agree. The view is that."

Will's words were silky, as always, well-chosen, and practiced. He knew what to say and when to say it. But Will's attention had always been focused elsewhere. And because she knew him so well, Charlotte could dance with the understanding that in the end, it wouldn't mean anything.

He'd flit to the next young lady in line—a line she'd never join.

"Charlotte?"

"*Hmm?*"

"Could you at least try to look like it's not painful to be in my arms?" Will's brilliant smile greeted her, and he gave her waist a playful squeeze. "I was only joking."

"I know. I just haven't played in public. *Ever.* I think it's left me flustered."

"Oh, I knew you could play. Just not like that. I thought you'd given it up." The beaming faded, and he scanned the breadth and depth of the crowd instead. "Did you see their faces? Green with envy, I tell you. Every last female in here. And some of the men too, that you had the backbone to show everyone up. I don't know whether to scold or congratulate you for such a row."

"Your flattery is noted." She tried to find the right words that would keep her on safe and solid ground, with the backhanded compliment and whispering guests having pricked her ire.

"So, what's captured your notice tonight? Because we both know it isn't me."

"Nothing. It's just hot on the dance floor."

He slowed their pace. “You’re ready to go through then?”

“Of course. If it’s time.”

“Good. I’ll alert Mother. She’s been holding dinner for you.”

“For me?”

Charlotte looked over to the marble hearth where the Earl of Harcourt stood, and with him the queen of the palatial Holt Manor looked on, preening at the sight of her son twirling Charlotte across the floor.

“Why would your mother do such a thing? She is hostess.”

He shrugged, like the answer was obvious. “I wanted a dance. And I always collect what I set my mind upon.”

“But I’m a guest.”

The hand at the small of her back squeezed—a little too tight this time, with his thumb brushing in a caress that nearly burned through the fabric of her dress. And leaned in. Closer. *A little too close* for his intentions to be masked. And with a gaze that melted from playful to something it had never dared before.

“A very important guest,” Will whispered, and he moved so the inches left between their postures were snuffed out. “Do you think I care a fig about a shocking display like that? As long as I’m the one who gets to dance with you now.”

Confidence fled, leaving only warning bells to ring in her head. Charlotte leaned back, trying to put space back between them even as Will pressed the side of his face to brush the soft wisps of hair at her temple.

“What do you mean?”

With the heat of his breath against her neck, he whispered, “Don’t you see? Everyone is here tonight for us.”

“Us,” she whispered, only just connecting dots to the whispers that seemed to follow them around the room, making her body go rigid in his arms.

“Yes, Charlotte. *Us*.” He laughed. As if it were a joke. And yet he didn’t deny it.

Will gave her arms a little squeeze. “Roast goose is on the menu,

when the Holts have a Christmas tradition of orange duck and mousseline. We've Lady Charlotte Terrington's favorite peaches in brandy and hazelnut cake for dessert, when Mother sorely dislikes both. My place card sits next to yours. And umpteen boxes from Harrods are nestled under the tree with your name in gold leaf on the tags."

"But you already gave me a gift." *The book*. Which . . . she'd promptly left somewhere, checked the library for, and had the unexpected encounter with Amos instead.

"And there are so many more things I could give if you'd let me. Why do think that is?"

"I couldn't guess."

Only she could. And didn't dare wish to.

No, no, no . . . Not me.

Not now. Not ever.

"It's to be announced at dinner." Will tipped his brow, like she ought to have been cleverer. She ought to have expected it. And have no qualms with what that announcement would be. "Are you honestly saying . . . Charlotte? I thought you knew."

"How could I?"

"But you can't say you're surprised."

"Of course I am. I was under the impression that our family had been invited to Holt Manor as in years past, for holiday cheer with friends and family. Nothing more."

"Family. As you are. As I wish you to be."

"You can't think that this could be decided—*marriage*." She swallowed, lest she choke on the word. "Not without at least consulting both parties who would stand before God to pledge their lives to one another?"

"My dear, look over there." Will nodded in the direction of the earls nursing their tumblers of port by the tree, their quiet discourse seemingly focused upon the dance floor. "Our fathers share the belief that they do not need consent to arrange the futures of their children. When it was posed to me in this manner, I said that

I shouldn't have to go as far as London—or heaven knows, to New York—to find a suitable wife. I've no need for an heiress. Not when the best option is right here in Coventry." Will gave her waist a little shake of encouragement as his grip drifted another few inches down. "The very angel in my arms."

"Will . . . Please."

"What is it? We've known this would happen since we were children."

"We're not children anymore. And . . . you don't love me."

Will had a heart. She knew it. Perhaps deep down, it was concealed under layers of levity and white-tie dress. And entreating to it now was the only way Charlotte could see breaking through his words. She searched his eyes, because—shouldn't he listen? Oughtn't they feel some measure of love if they were expected to do this?

"Do you? Love me?"

"How could you ask such a question?"

Evasion tactic. Classic Will.

"You're a friend, Will. A brother. And a very dear one, of which you always should be." Charlotte moved her hand to rest on his shoulder, pressing in punctuation. "That will not change. But I could never presume to take the position of your wife—"

"You may presume, Charlotte. All you like. And for as long as you wish. Just say you'll marry me in the end."

The strings faded to a soft, melodic close. And Charlotte exhaled when he took her hand and pressed a kiss to it, keeping his lips in an intentional graze over her knuckles as the room fell silent. She battled to reconcile this—like he hadn't just asked a woman to share the rest of his life, nor waited for her answer.

The walk from the ballroom to dinner was a blur of guests' smiles and holiday splendor. The flicker of candlelight shone against gold-rimmed chinaware, spotless crystal, and candelabras laced with ivory poinsettias. As guests found their seats, Charlotte looked to the livery uniforms hovering on the fringes of the

room—desperate for a lifeline.

The sight of her must have said too much too fast; Amos furrowed his brow as Will led her by on his arm. And she caught the tiniest flinch from him as Will made a grand show of pulling out her chair. Charlotte moved to sit—and would have—until she saw the copy of *Dombey and Son* lying on the seat.

Will looked to her and for one split second, all color drained from his face. Only one other person would know the significance of the book. And now, clearing his throat, he refused to acknowledge the sting of wounded pride that there was a secret understanding between Amos and her.

With an annoyed shimmy of the brown leather binding in the air, Will gave a silent bid for the service staff to respond.

The butler snapped to attention. “I’ll take it for you, sir. With my sincere apologies for whoever left it there.”

“No apology is necessary.” Silky words made their appearance again, though Will’s manners weren’t as good-humored as they’d been on the dance floor. He waited for Charlotte to sit and, when she did, gave a rough push to the chairback until she was up against the table so tight, the fluted wood pressed a sharp edge to her bodice.

“Far be it for us to deny the working class their lofty aspirations, even if they are futile in the end.” Will’s words were light and cheery and loud, obviously for the benefit of the room. Though his eyes were girded with steel as his glance shot to Amos’s place in the service staff line. “It seems Dickens inspires their lot better than we ever could. Am I right, Lady Charlotte?”

Laughter cooled the room. And Will refused to acknowledge her after, putting all effort into charming the table and treating her as an impetuous child caught with her hand in the biscuit jar. And when it came time for Lord Harcourt to clink a fork to a crystal flute and declare that the gift their family was most happy to receive in the new year would be a new daughter-in-law, Will leaned forward to shake congratulatory hands while Charlotte sat offering silent

smiles around the table. And all the while, she hadn't meant for her gaze to drift to the service staff line again.

Their eyes locked through the candlelight.

Amos stared back for a few steady . . . long . . . and dreaded breaths.

They lingered there, suspended together, until the party raised glasses of bubbly and toasted the happy couple. Charlotte was left with only two things she knew to be sure: Will had chosen her that night. But her heart had made its choice long ago.

And it could never be the man she was now pledged to marry.



11 October 1940
Bayley Lane
Coventry, England

The Philco sang from the reading room down the hall—Bach's Cello Suite no. 1 in G Major that Charlotte could still pick out by ear.

She clicked the bookshop's back door closed and pressed her forehead to the wood. Rain tapped a melody against the row of leaded glass windows behind the shop, where book club ladies had just hurried out under umbrellas bobbing along the path that snaked to the exit gate on Bayley Lane. And with the last guest having gone, that meant the façade Charlotte had kept up could crumble behind the safe haven of the bookshop door.

With invasion fears looming and sirens crying every blessed night, book club was supposed to be a frolic of distraction. Even though *Cold Comfort Farm* had been published several years prior, the ladies were keen for discussion of a lighthearted comedy clash between a Londoner's metropolitan ideals and the rural sensibilities of folk in a Sussex village. Of their literary circle, the ladies saw themselves with a foot in both worlds like heroine Flora Poste and were aflutter to exchange their own interpretations of the best-

selling story. And what had begun innocently enough sparked like petrol to a flame within Charlotte. That, and the fact the Earl Grey was stale, and rationed flour and sugar meant the tea biscuits that Mrs. Farley had brought from their family's bakery down the lane dropped like lead in the stomach.

Leave it to author Stella Gibbons to tilt their world even further off its axis.

The novel had flung open Charlotte's own woodshed doors she'd thought long since locked, drudging up memories of that Christmas Eve when all in her world had changed. So that by the end of the hour, she'd taken to crossing and uncrossing her legs, shifting in her chair, and twirling her fingertips around the string of pearls at her collar as she begged the mantel clock to tick time at double speed.

Thunder rumbled—*blessed be*—and the ladies agreed they ought to adjourn early this month. Charlotte was left to see them out with a serene smile, only to dig her fingernails into the wood of the closed door as she battled back tears the instant they'd gone.

Push the memories away . . .

Charlotte turned back to the reading room.

It greeted her with the usual solitude: peacock walls and velvet curtains surrounded by built-in bookshelves, an iron ladder system flanking a great stone fireplace, and a soft glow from the lamps on tables spaced on either side of a cerulean sofa. Her cello case stood alone, hidden away in a dark corner where no one noticed it now. Nor remembered the county gossip of an unscrupulous display one Christmas Eve so long ago.

Charlotte collected stray teacups, flicked off lamps to conserve electricity. And fell into the ritual of refilling the robin's-egg blue bakery box with leftovers she always sent home with Ginny at the end of her shift—which, if the clock on the mantel had any say about it, was now.

The Philco sang from its post against the wall with usual symphonies that the ladies insisted added the "cultured ambiance" of

their literary gatherings, but all it did now was prick Charlotte's heart with cruel remembrances. She glared at it, stalked over, and flicked the knob with a sharp turn to kill the music. The silence revealed raised voices in the shop.

"Ginny?" Charlotte muttered. "Is that you?"

Not like their young apprentice at all. And unlike Eden not to have an orderly peace out front.

Eden was determined in anything she undertook—a carbon copy of her late father not just in looks, but in that respect as well. In interactions with their neighbors, Eden was an unfailing model of kindness. From spending an inordinate amount of time to match a reader with the perfect title for them, or to the many times she'd gift a free *Farmers' Almanac* to the penny-pinched farmers who ambled into the shop. The customers came first, full stop.

As for her dedication to Holt Manor and her late father's legacy . . . in that her passionate nature was unmatched. No heiress could have been more fervent or humbler at the same time. Eden Holt could be found in a milking pen by day and at a *thé dansant* by night—and refused to put on airs with either. It was a mash-up of the things Charlotte loved most about her girl, a tempest spirit if ever there was one. But something must have gone terribly wrong to have sparked a blow-up in the shop under her watch.

"Milady?" Ginny rapped on the reading room door and, not waiting, bound into the room.

"What's all the bluster? Are we in a bookshop or a barnyard?"

Ginny waved Charlotte over, urging her through the door. "You'd best come quick, milady. Or else I think we may finally have to do it."

Charlotte set the last teacup on the tray and hurried over to the arched doorway that led out to the shop. "Do what?"

"Murder that tyrant at Waverley Novels, that's what."

Amos?

Oh dear. What in the world have you done now?

Charlotte whisked out of the reading room to the long rows of

polished oak shelves bordering the stairs, Ginny tracking alongside. Customers dotted the aisles, opening covers and making their selections before closing, but also remaining just discreet enough to toss furtive glances to the voices growing in decibel at the front.

This would feed the beast of gossip between shops if anything would.

“Whatever’s happened?”

“Mr. Darby sent a solicitor, Your Ladyship. And the man says he’s come with a legal summons for Lady Eden.”

“He wouldn’t dare . . .” Charlotte eased them out to the hall, taking furtive steps.

“The solicitor claims not to represent Mr. Darby, but he has mentioned Lady Eden’s inheritance. Seems he’s brought some sort of claim against Holt Manor. Lady Eden was cordial to the gentleman until she heard that. And then it set fire to her tongue and temper both.”

Set fire indeed.

The poor gentleman hadn’t a clue what he’d just done if he’d threatened to take away the one thing her daughter loved in all the world more than their bookshop. It would be no small feat to douse the flames he’d sparked if he’d threatened Eden’s beloved Holt Manor.

“Who is this solicitor? Do we know him?”

They rounded the corner of the poetry section to where the shop opened up and Eden’s voice echoed through the aisles. And to the few customers she could see making a quick exit from the shop, Charlotte could surmise the reason was the spirited exchange coming from the front counter.

“He’s not from Coventry. He claims to be a Mr. Cole—Esquire. From America,” Ginny whispered, as the front of the shop came into view.

“Is that so?”

“Yes. He started across the street at Mr. Darby’s shop, then trekked over here through the gale outside. Sounds as if he’s been

asking questions about the shop owners on Bayley Lane. I should think someone will report him as a spy to the Home Guard if he's not careful."

"Well, I shouldn't worry about that. I'll speak with the local authorities if I must."

"And Mr. Darby?" Ginny's brow was furrowed. "What will we do to him?"

"We will do nothing, dear." Charlotte slowed them at the edge of the action with a gentle hand to Ginny's shoulder. Sure enough, there was her Eden, standing cross-armed and pink-cheeked as she glared at a man in a sharp suit and frozen posture. "I'll see it's sorted. Now, scoot."

"Are you sure, milady?"

"Quite." Charlotte patted the spot where her hand lay, nudging the girl back toward the hall. "Go on now. Your biscuits are waiting in the reading room. I'll send Eden to join you in a moment. You two can go out the back door today."

"Yes, milady." Ginny's shoulders drooped, disappointment weighing them.

Charlotte stepped out with what she hoped was a sparkling smile. "Eden, dear. May I be of help?"

"Mama. Hello." Her face softened as Charlotte stepped into the foreground. "I'm sorry if we disturbed the book club meeting."

"Not at all. We ended on time today on account of the weather." She tapped the watch brooch pinned to her breast pocket. "But oughtn't you be on your way? Your appointment . . ."

"Oh yes." Eden glanced at the wall clock and grimaced to find it ticked past three o'clock. "And now I'm late."

Stepping around the front counter until she was shoulder-to-shoulder with Eden, Charlotte caught her first look at the gentleman. For his part, the man didn't appear threatening. He was young—couldn't be much more than Eden's own twenty-five years. Quite handsome. Tall, and if her instinct was correct, with something akin to forbearance in clear-blue eyes. And with a candor in

his silence that said he'd taken no pleasure in whatever legal summons he'd relayed.

"Mr. Cole, this is Lady Charlotte Terrington-Holt, the Dowager Countess of Harcourt—my mother. Owner of this shop." Eden paused to issue a last glare at the man before she shoved books and the shop's paperwork in her leather satchel. "And the other person who will fight you tooth and nail to preserve my father's estate, if need be."

He cleared his throat and tipped an invisible hat, his still on the counter. "Your Ladyship."

"Hello, Mr. Cole. Eden—you and Ginny can be off, out the back." Charlotte spotted the Waldybag strung over a chair, hooked the strap in her palm, and held it out to her daughter. "Don't forget this. I'll close up and see you at home for dinner."

Thunder boomed and rain rattled the display window as Eden nodded, sparing one last furrowed brow to Mr. Cole as she accepted the gas mask bag. The gentleman looked from them to the deluge beyond the front window.

"But should you go out now? Perhaps if you wait for the bus . . . ?"

"If you can endure the weather, Mr. Cole, then I assure you we can as well. But we thank you for the concern just the same." Eden pulled her trench off the coatrack hook and slid arms in. "I believe we would much prefer our bicycles than to trouble you any further."

Tipping her brow to her daughter, Charlotte asking—*bicycles?*

It wasn't a curiosity the bus hadn't kept to its time. Train and bus schedules were near nonexistent now that petrol had been rationed, and sirens sang in the streets day in and day out. But sure enough, her daughter seemed determined not to wait for the wheeled savior to appear on the corner of Bayley Lane.

"Good day, Mr. Cole." Eden looked to her mother, the silent charge of understanding passing between them before she turned and disappeared down the hall.

Yes—regret was a formidable foe.

“Mr. Cole. It seems you’ve come a dreadful long way to Coventry.” Charlotte offered a smile to the young man. But instead of disclosing her real intention—to find out if Amos Darby had in fact started a new battle between their shops—she did what one would expect and played her part as the hospitable lady of Coventry’s famed reading room. “Might I offer you a cup of tea?”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Author photo © Whitney Neal Studios

KRISTY CAMBRON is an award-winning author of historical fiction, including her best-selling debut *The Butterfly and the Violin*, and an author of nonfiction, including the Verse Mapping Series Bibles and Bible studies. Kristy's work has been named to *Publishers Weekly* Religion & Spirituality TOP 10, *Library Journal's* Best Books, *RT Reviewers' Choice Awards*, received 2015 & 2017 INSPY Award nominations, and has been featured at CBN, Lifeway Women, Jesus Calling, *Country Woman* magazine, *MICI Magazine*, Faithwire, Declare, (in)Courage, and Bible Gateway. She holds a degree in art history / research writing and lives in Indiana with her husband and three sons, where she can probably be bribed with a peppermint mocha latte and a good read.



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