

## Squires Gate, 11.39 a.m., Sunday 5th January, 1941

*I have four and a half hours to live. I am leaning against the wing of the yellow-bellied Airspeed Oxford, smoking contentedly while the ground crew chaps run their final checks. The freezing rain hisses as it hits the glowing coal of my cigarette, drums softly on the tin roof of the hangar. Call me Johnnie, by the way. Everyone does.*

*There is no changing fate, but when I look back at my last moments on earth I want to rush through the molecules of my body and shake off my reverie: I want to yell 'Wake up, you silly bugger, make the most of this! This is the last time you will feel the rain on your face, the ground beneath your feet.' But I didn't believe in premonitions and guardian angels so I doubt I would sense anything. Now I know better.*

*The flight to the RAF base at Kidlington in Oxfordshire should have been simple enough – ninety minutes at most. What I did with my last hours is a mystery. The journey is a government secret still. Maybe I'll tell you why I died 100 miles off course, maybe I won't. Why don't you make up your own mind?*



# WINTER



# 1

‘Ten, nine, eight ...’ Swing music and laughter from the party drifted out through the open door to Evie. As she walked down the long moonlit driveway to her father’s house, snowflakes caught on her eyelashes. Her footsteps on the frozen gravel fell into time with the big-band tune bubbling into the chill midnight air and she sang under her breath: ‘How High the Moon ...’ The Bentleys and Rolls Royces parked along the drive had a light coating of snow on them already, and in spite of her white fur coat she shivered with cold, her feet frozen in her silver evening shoes.

‘Miss Evelyn!’ The butler stepped forward to catch her mink coat as it slipped from her shoulders. As the staff door swung closed, Evie caught sight of the grey-uniformed chauffeurs smoking and chatting, one with the pink-cheeked housemaid on his knee sipping Guinness. ‘Your father has been asking for you,’ the butler said as she shook the snow from her glossy dark hair.

‘Has he, Ross?’ She smoothed her pale silver satin Schiaparelli gown, and raised her chin defiantly as a cheer went up.

‘1941!’ Leo ‘Lucky’ Chase cried out, one arm raising a glass of champagne, the other clutching Virginia, his latest wife.

‘I’m amazed he even noticed I’d gone.’ Evie nodded her thanks to Ross. She touched up her red lipstick in the hall mirror then

twisted her shoulder to adjust the long rope of diamonds that fell from her throat to the deep curved back of the dress. She glanced down at the hem of her gown and noticed for the first time how wet it was from trudging through the snow. 'In for a penny ...' she murmured.

Instead of going in to the party, Evie walked on across the marble hall. Heads turned as she passed, the silver dress rippling over her curves like mercury. She flung open the terrace windows and slipped off her shoes, swinging them nonchalantly in one hand. She dropped them at the edge of the steaming, heated pool. Leo liked it to be warm all year. A crowd gathered on the terrace as Evie executed a perfect dive, her body streaking underwater like a silver fish before surfacing at the other end. A cheer greeted her as she stepped elegantly up from the pool, squeezing the water from her hair.

'Evie! You're bonkers!' A young officer in uniform planted a kiss on her cheek and draped a blanket around her shoulders. 'Happy New Year!'

'Hello, Peter.' She slipped her arm through his.

'Come on, let's get you inside before you catch your death.'

He led her around the packed dance floor to the bar. People smiled indulgently as she passed – you could always count on Evie to make an entrance.

'Where have you been all night?'

A drunken girl in a pale blue bias-cut gown giggled as Peter handed Evie a brandy.

'I went to see Mary, Charles's mother.'

Evie put the glass on the mantelpiece and warmed her toes by the fire. Somehow she managed to make even a blanket look like an elegant wrap.

'How is she?' The smile fell from Peter's face as Evie pursed her lips and shrugged. 'Jolly decent of you to go out tonight.'

'I didn't like to think of her alone. She looked so awfully sad on Boxing Day.'

'Of all of us, I thought Charlie would make it through,' Peter said quietly. 'He was so full of life. I'll never forget the two of you

bombing down that black run in Chamonix. You were determined to beat him.'

Evie shook her head. 'He was like a brother to me. You never can tell which one of us is going to get bumped off next.'

'Evie!' Leo cut through the crowd towards her. He barely cleared five feet, but he was a dynamo of a man and whenever he bore down on her Evie pictured a missile skimming through water. Without her heels their gazes locked, eye to eye. He eyed her wet, clinging dress with exasperation.

She held up a hand. 'Before you start, I went to see Mary.'

Nonplussed, he thought quickly. 'She's only in the next village. What took so long?'

'I ran out of petrol.'

'Not again! How many times have I told you?'

'Daddy, I can't get used to this rationing ... I thought I had enough left.'

'You can't drive on fumes! Especially not at the speed you drive. Where's the Aston?'

'On the verge between here and White Waltham.'

He frowned. 'I'll send Cullen in the morning.'

'Sorry, Daddy.' Evie bit her lip.

'What am I going to do with you?' As Leo embraced her, Evie saw the scowl on Virginia's face and raised a triumphant eyebrow.

'Happy New Year.' She planted a quick kiss on his cheek before he hustled back into the party. Her father's cocksure, springing step reminded her of a Jack Russell out on the razzle, up to no good.

'I don't know how you do it.' Peter shook his head.

Evie watched her father in his element, surrounded by friends and hangers-on, and that old familiar loneliness crept in. 'Years of practice. So,' she said briskly, 'what have I missed?'

'It's been marvellous!' the drunken girl trilled. 'Lucky always throws the most wonderful parties. Tonight you'd never know there was a war on!' A young soldier grabbed her hand and pulled her onto the dance floor as the big band struck up 'In the Mood'.

Evie shook her head. ‘Silly girl.’

‘Come on old thing!’ Peter laughed. ‘You’re only twenty yourself! Have some fun.’

She shook her head. ‘No. I’m tired of ...’ She waved her hand. ‘All this. Talking to Mary tonight, I felt I must do something. Even the Countess of Wharncliffe is running a bomb factory, and I heard the Duchess of Norfolk is breeding rabbits.’

‘What do you know about bombs and rabbits?’

‘Nothing, but I could learn.’ Evie frowned.

Peter tilted his head, gently took her in his arms. ‘Don’t be blue. Charlie ...’ He sighed. ‘It’s just awful bad luck, but if we let every death get to us, we’ll never win this bloody war. We’ve got to be strong.’ His voice shook slightly. ‘Besides which, this is my last night of freedom, and I at least deserve to have some fun.’

‘I’m sorry, Peter.’ Evie shivered as she pulled the blanket around her. ‘I’d forgotten. When are you leaving?’

‘I have to be at Debden first thing.’

‘When I see all you chaps going off to fly, I wish—’

‘You’re a more natural pilot than I’ll ever be!’ Peter cut in. His gaze settled on a table of men in uniform on the other side of the dance floor. ‘Are you serious?’

‘About what?’

‘Doing something useful.’

‘Absolutely!’

‘Come on then.’ He took her arm and steered her through the crowd, stopping at the table. ‘Excuse me, sir.’ He leant down to talk to the distinguished-looking grey-haired officer smoking a pipe. ‘Squadron Leader Peter Taylor.’

The officer stood and shook his hand. ‘Pleased to meet you.’ He turned to Evie. ‘And this lovely young lady is Miss Chase, if I am not mistaken?’ He kissed her hand.

‘Evie, this is Captain Eric Bailey.’

‘But you can call me Badger, everyone does.’ He smiled as he smoothed the white streak in his hair. ‘At least behind my back.’

‘Miss Chase is a pilot, sir,’ Peter said.



Bailey eyed her wet dress. ‘Really? I’d have had you down as a sailor.’

‘Most amusing, sir.’

‘How many hours have you got?’ Bailey sucked at his pipe.

‘Oh, not—’ Evie’s eyes opened wide.

‘She’s a very good pilot,’ Peter interrupted. Turning to Evie he said pointedly, ‘Captain Bailey helps run the Air Transport Auxiliary at White Waltham.’

‘The ferry pilots?’ She held Peter’s gaze. He nodded.

‘What have you flown?’ Bailey folded his arms.

‘Tiger Moths mainly.’ She tried to sound confident. *Tiger Moths only*, she thought, *and a couple of hundred hours at that.*

‘Well, Miss Chase, we need good pilots. Why don’t you come over to White Waltham one morning and see what you think?’

‘Really?’

‘It’s not what you’re used to. But we need all the chaps ...’ he corrected himself, ‘and gals we can get our hands on. In fact, we have some new recruits arriving tomorrow. Why don’t you join them, come along for a test flight and see what you think? Ask for Commander Pauline Gower.’ He shook their hands and rejoined his table.

‘Why didn’t Daddy tell me he was going to be here?’ she said to Peter as they stepped onto the dance floor.

Peter laughed as he swung her around to the music. ‘Probably because he knew you’d jump at the chance of signing up.’

In the early hours, as dawn broke over the frozen fields and cars negotiated their way up the driveway, thin beams of blacked-out headlights guiding the way, Evie and Peter stood in the porch. He tucked his cap under his arm. ‘Well, old girl, here we are again.’ He forced a smile. ‘I’ll see you in the spring, if I’m lucky.’

She screwed her eyes tight shut as she embraced him. ‘Silly boy, of course you will.’

His lips brushed her hairline. ‘You remember our promise? If you’re not married by your twenty-first ...’

Evie laughed as she stepped back. ‘Oh, Peter, we were just children.’ She saw the pain in his eyes, and pulled her fur coat close around her. ‘You’re serious, aren’t you?’ she said, as Leo and Virginia showed the last guests to their cars.

‘I adore you, Evie, I always have.’ He took her hand. ‘No, don’t say anything, please. I know we had fun, deb’s delight and all that, but you mean more than that to me. I just wanted you to know, that’s all, in case—’

‘Don’t.’ She touched his lips. ‘I’ll see you in the spring.’

‘Are you off now, Peter?’ As Leo strode over, they moved apart.

‘Yes, sir. Thank you for a marvellous send-off.’

‘You be safe now.’ Leo shook his hand. ‘Go give Jerry what for!’

‘Good luck, Evie.’ Peter turned towards her as he walked away, his footsteps crunching along the dark driveway. ‘You will write and let me know how you get on tomorrow?’ he called.

‘What are you doing tomorrow?’ Leo slipped his arm around Virginia’s waist.

‘I’ve a test flight with the ATA at White Waltham.’ Evie waited for the explosion.

‘Over my dead body!’

‘Daddy, I’m twenty years old, you can’t stop me.’

‘If you go I’ll cut off your allowance.’

As Ross closed the heavy wooden door behind them, he coughed discreetly. ‘Will that be all, sir?’

‘Yes thank you, Ross,’ Leo said. ‘The Aston’s stranded on the White Waltham road. Would you ask Cullen to pick it up in the morning?’

‘Yes, sir.’

The moment the kitchen door swung closed, Leo turned on his daughter. ‘Right. What’s all this nonsense?’ The colour rose in his cheeks. ‘What do you think you’re going to do? Deliver planes around the country in all weathers, with no guns?’

‘I think it’s a marvellous idea.’ Virginia folded her arms.

‘What?’ Leo and Evie said simultaneously.

‘Lucky, darling, Evie’s been saying for months she wants to do something to help the war effort, and she does love to fly.’

‘No!’ Leo clenched his fists. ‘I’m not having it. We’ll talk about this in the morning.’

Virginia calmly reached for a cigarette from the silver box on the hall table as he stormed upstairs. ‘I’ll talk to him.’ She leant against the table as she exhaled a plume of blue smoke.

‘Why are you being so reasonable about this?’ Evie said.

‘Why do you think? I want you out of our house.’

Evie’s temper flared. ‘Your house? Since when? This is my father’s house, I have every right—’

‘Oh, Evie, of course you do.’ Virginia’s voice was sweet, cajoling. With Evie, she often felt like she was talking to a petulant toddler. At least once a day Virginia found herself clinging, white-knuckled, to her patience. She smiled sweetly as she counted to ten. ‘But think of your father. You know how hard he’s been working, how tired he is—’

‘Tired? Daddy? What rot.’ Evie shook her head as she laughed.

‘You’re always gadding around here with your friends, you won’t have noticed.’ Virginia smiled sweetly. ‘It would be so much better for your father to have some peace and quiet for a change. Quite frankly, you want to fly, and I want you to fly the nest.’ She flapped her hands. ‘Do we have a deal?’

‘Where do the ATA girls stay anyway?’ Evie bit the inside of her cheek.

‘Oh, I don’t know.’ Virginia stifled a yawn. ‘No doubt there are some ghastly barracks or something. It will do you good to rough it for a change.’ Her eyes glinted as Evie headed towards the stairs. ‘I bet you won’t last a day.’

On the first step, Evie paused and turned, the light of the chandelier catching on the rope of diamonds at her throat. She walked back towards her stepmother. ‘You want to bet?’

‘What’s the wager?’

‘If I win,’ she said, ‘if I don’t get bumped off before this horrible war is over, you leave.’

Virginia gazed down at her, an amused smile twitching on her lips. ‘And if I win? If you give up?’

*Kate Lord Brown*

‘Then I’ll move out anyway, join the Red Cross in town or something.’

‘You have a deal,’ she said as she stubbed out her cigarette. ‘Not that I can imagine you folding bandages for a moment.’ She clicked her fingers. ‘The diamonds, please.’

‘These were my mother’s!’

‘If Leo’s going to cut you off I don’t want them ending up at some dreadful pawn shop.’

‘I don’t want the diamonds, or the money. You’re welcome to them.’ Evie yanked off the jewels and thrust them into Virginia’s waiting hand. She watched as her stepmother looped the glittering necklace around her wrist and held it to the light. As the diamonds gleamed coldly against her skin, Virginia wondered if it had all been worth it. Once, jewels, money had been all she had ever wanted. Now they were all she had. It seemed to her that her life as Mrs Leo Chase was like a clock slowly winding down. These days he came home at night less and less. Even her attempts to make him jealous went unnoticed now. She had tried with Lucky, she *really* had – and with Evie for that matter. She saw the angry defiance in Evie’s face and wondered whether she had ever really given her a chance.

Virginia pressed her lips into a tight smile and patted Evie’s cheek slowly – once, twice. ‘Now, run along. You’ll need a good night’s sleep.’ She watched as Evie turned on her heel and stalked up the stairs. ‘Sweet dreams,’ she called, her smile fading as she turned out the lights.