

CHAPTER 9

June 1, 1944 – Afternoon. Skegness, Lincolnshire, England.

Flight Lieutenant Steven Kane

Flight Lieutenant Steven Kane guided his little open-top car along the winding country lanes of Lincolnshire, the engine purring warmly beneath the wide June sky. The hedgerows rose high and green, dotted with wildflowers that trembled as the breeze washed over them. Sunlight slipped through drifting clouds, dappling the lanes in patches of gold and shadow. The inspiration for Kane's enjoyment wasn't the scenery, or the one sunny day amongst the many recent wet days, but the beautiful woman sitting beside him in the passenger seat.

Enid Porter laughed joyously with the exhilaration of speed. Her long auburn hair streamed behind her like a ribbon of copper fire catching the afternoon light.

"Faster!" she urged, gripping the side of the car.

Kane laughed along with her. "Are you trying to get us killed?"

"You fly that blasted bomber of yours faster than this."

"True but that's different," he said, as the car bounced over another rut in the road, the picnic hamper in the back seat rattling against the chassis. "It's not the speed that worries me. That bottle of red might not survive another pothole."

"Well, we wouldn't want that now, would we?" she teased, touching the back of his hand lightly. The brief contact sent a warm little jolt up his arm, a small reminder of how much he treasured every second with her.

He eased off the accelerator and the car slowed.

“Damn wine cost me a fortune,” he said. “It’s French you know and in case you hadn’t noticed, France is full of Jerries.”

The car broke through the line of trees and into the open. Ahead, about half a mile, was Skegness beach, the pale sand soft and inviting, the sea shimmering like speckled silver in the shifting light. Kane brought the vehicle to a slow stop and applied the hand break. He looked up at the sun occasionally blotted out by the slowly scudding clouds.

“Don’t worry, darling,” she said, reassuringly. “It won’t rain.”

“The forecast...” he began.

“Oh tish,” she snapped back playfully. She pointed skyward with theatrical authority. “We don’t get much chance these days so I’ve called in a favour.”

As though sensing her words, the sun broke through another bank of clouds and the golden light streamed down, its warmth bathing them both.

“Quick,” he said. “Let’s get the hamper out and start this picnic while he’s in a good mood.” He mimicked Enid’s actions, jerking his thumb at the sky.

They carried the hamper through some sparse undergrowth and further towards the beach with the sea lapping at the shore. They set it down in the soft sand. Enid opened the lid and spread the striped tablecloth in a graceful sweep, fixing it in place with smooth stones. Kane unpacked the sandwiches, fruit, and the coveted bottle of wine, placing it proudly between two tall, fluted glasses.

“A feast fit for a princess,” he said, staring lovingly at his companion.

And beautiful she was. Her almond eyes, soft and alive, her cheeks flushed by the sea breeze, her auburn hair curling around her neck and shoulders like warm silk. She wore a knee-length

pleated blue skirt and a white blouse, flat shoes and ankle socks. She had taken to wearing what she called the American look. He was sure she'd look just as stunning in sack cloth.

They sat on either edge of the table cloth eating the sandwiches and just staring at each other. Kane popped the cork on the wine and poured two glasses. They toasted each other and drank the wine. Enid choked on the brutal tannins.

"Is it supposed to taste like this?" she asked. "It's so bitter."

He shrugged. "No idea, never tasted red wine before."

"Why did you buy it then?"

"Because it's French," he said, meekly, as if that alone justified everything. "French is the language of passion and love, and wine is supposed to be sophisticated and romantic. And it was on the black market, which sort of makes it appealing."

"It tastes awful," she said, screwing her face up with another sip.

"It is terrible," he agreed. "But it cost me a week's wages."

Enid finished the remaining wine in one swallow, gasping at the harsh aftertaste. She held out the glass for a refill. "Well, if its French and romantic and so damn expensive, the least we can do is drink the blasted stuff."

They both laughed at the absurdity of it. Kane topped up both glasses. An hour later the bottle was empty and laying on its side in the sand as the two of them lay on their backs, their shoulders touching. The sky above them shifted in slow, lazy shapes. Enid's hand slipped naturally into his, their fingers weaving together.

"It grew on me in the end," she confessed. "The last glass was a touch less repugnant than the first."

“I kept wishing I had a nice glass of single malt whisky instead,” he said.

“And people drink this stuff all the time?” she asked.

“They do in France.”

“And they eat snails and things,” she said. “No wonder they’re always so angry.”

“They’d probably think our black pudding is disgusting.”

Enid screwed up her face and said, “Even I think black pudding is disgusting.”

They were quiet for a moment. Kane could tell there was something on her mind but he didn’t want to break the spell. He heard her draw in a deep breath.

“Darling?” she said, finally. “When do you have to be back?”

“I have three days,” he answered. “Then one final sortie. My 30th mission. They will put me to work on the ground somewhere after that. Assuming there *is* an after that.”

She understood what he meant by that statement. There was an invasion imminent. She didn’t know details or dates but she knew the hospital where she worked was gearing up to send nurses south to receive casualties, so it was to be soon. Many more than normal by the equipment and extra staff being sent down.

“I’m glad,” she said. “Damn war has gone on too long. Will you be happy to be on the ground?” she asked.

She knew he loved flying, loved the service. He had even talked about staying in after the war or flying for one of the commercial airlines.

“If you’d have asked me that a few years ago, I would have said absolutely not,” he said. “But I’ve seen too many of my friends die and I want to do this last one, get my men back in one piece and then do something safe and boring for once.”

“Amen to that,” she said.

He rolled over on his stomach, propped himself up on one elbow and stared at her. “While we’re on the subject of safe and boring,” he began.

She turned herself to face him, to be greeted by a small, hinged suede box. He opened it to reveal a ring, the diamond in the gold clasp glinting in the sun’s rays.

“How do you fancy being the boring wife of a boring commercial airline pilot?” he asked.

She felt her breath catch in her throat, her heart thumping against her chest so hard she was sure he would be able to hear it.

She tried to keep her voice steady, casual, affecting a scornful tone as she said, “A boring house in the country with a couple of boring kids?”

“I’ll even throw in a boring dog,” he said.

“And a nice boring garden with tedious rose bushes?”

“A shed where I can smoke my pipe in peace when you’re nagging me.”

She felt the first tear prick her eye and run unheeded down her cheek.

“You sweet-talking bastard.”

He slid the ring onto her trembling hand, his own thumb brushing the back of her fingers in a tender, lingering touch. “Is that a yes, then?”

“It was a yes after our first date,” she confessed.

He broke into a wide smile and said, “Beat you. It was a yes for me the first time I saw you in the hospital.”

She swatted his shoulder, half laughing, half crying. “You were unconscious most of that day.”

“I must have been,” he murmured. “I can’t imagine forgetting the moment I saw you.”

She rolled over on top of him. “It’s common for wounded servicemen to fall in love with their nurses,” she said.

He frowned. “You weren’t my nurse. That big bruiser of a matron was my nurse.”

She shrugged. “I know.” She kissed him hard on the lips and added, “Good job she was already married or you’d be crushed about now.”

She rested her cheek against his. For a long moment they simply breathed the same air, the sea murmuring softly beside them. They were still folded around each other when a squadron of bombers roared overhead. Kane pulled back slightly, watching the formation as it cut across the sky.

“Wellingtons,” he said, quietly.

Enid watched his face more than the aircraft. There was so much hidden behind his eyes—fear, resignation. After today there might be hope, a renewed desire to come back to her alive.

When the last engine rumble had faded, she stood and kicked off her shoes. “Come on. We can’t come all this way and not dip our toes.”

Kane rolled up his trousers and took her hand, and together they ran into the waves, laughing, the cold water splashing around their ankles, the war briefly forgotten.