

May 1944

Kitty had fallen from the bicycle on Tuesday evening and by Saturday morning her knees had hardened into dark-red scabs. She stood in front of the full-length mirror, holding up her skirt while Dora and Gwendolyn peered over her shoulders and studied her reflection.

‘It’s not too bad, chick,’ said Gwen. ‘Skirt lengths are shorter but we’ll still cover those knees up.’

Gwendolyn took up the paper parcel that Kitty had brought with her. Aunt Vi had given her two old dresses for Gwendolyn to refashion. Though the dresses no longer fitted Aunt Vi, they were much too

big for Kitty. Dora giggled as Gwendolyn held them up.

‘Don’t laugh, Dee, darling, this lemon is gorgeous material – it’ll look lovely against your dark hair, Kitty. And it’s good that there’s plenty of it and so little of you – if I cut it right, you’ll get a dress and a little jacket to cover your shoulders.’

She placed it on the bed and shook out a long grey dress and pulled a face. ‘Cor, this one’s not much fun, is it? Still, we’ll get you a nice skirt or two out of it.’ Gwendolyn turned her attention to Dora. ‘So, what have you got, sis?’

Dora’s face fell. ‘I thought you were bringing something . . .’ Her voice trailed away. Gwendolyn went to a case that was placed on a chair beside the bed.

‘Something like this you mean?’ she said, holding up a blue coat dress.

‘Oh Gwen, Gwennie it’s lovely!’ Dora squealed.

‘Well, it’s got a bit tight on me – I reckon I’m the only girl in London getting fat on rations! It’ll look lovely on you, Dor – we’ll add a dark-blue trim on the cuffs and pockets. I’ll show you how to do it.’

Gwendolyn went downstairs to fetch the sewing

machine and, while she was gone, Kitty told Dora about Sammy finding her after the accident. Dora was beside herself with excitement.

‘Are you going to see him again?’ she asked.

‘See who again?’ Gwen asked, returning to the bedroom and lifting the sewing machine on to a writing desk in the window.

‘Kitty has an American pilot!’ said Dora before Kitty could speak.

Kitty laughed and blushed. ‘What she means is that an American pilot found me – when I fell off my brother’s bicycle. He helped me home.’

‘Sounds like Dora’s right for once,’ Gwendolyn said, smiling. ‘I’m sure you have got him, Kitty – smart move throwing yourself at his feet!’

‘Oh, but I didn’t, I mean he hadn’t arrived when – I had no idea he was there!’

Gwendolyn laughed. ‘I’m only teasing you, you know.’

‘I looked like a scarecrow and my knees were bleeding.’ Kitty shuddered at the memory.

‘You’re so lucky,’ sighed Dora. ‘An American pilot. I’d give anything to be rescued by an American pilot! What’s his name?’

‘Sammy Ray Bailey,’ Kitty said and couldn’t help smiling when she said it.

‘Oh, it’s such a wonderful name! Isn’t that a wonderful name, Gwennie? Is he handsome?’

Before Kitty could reply, Gwendolyn took her by the shoulders and sat her down at the dressing table.

‘Right, Kitty, if your young man isn’t smitten, he soon will be. Now, let’s look at you. You’ve got lovely hair, look how it curls – now that’s what I’d give anything for.’ Then to her sister she said, ‘Don’t be daft, Dora, of course he’ll be handsome, I’ve not met one yet who isn’t.’ Gwen picked up her hairbrush and began brushing Kitty’s hair.

‘He’ll be able to get you nylons – be sure to ask him, they get ever so much money, so he won’t mind. They really know how to have a good time the American boys do – they like to take a girl dancing, treat her right.’

Dora wandered over to her sister’s bed and picked up a pair of stockings and let them trail through her fingers.

‘Did an American give you these, Gwen?’

Gwendolyn glanced over her shoulder and Kitty grimaced as she accidentally tugged at her hair.

‘Don’t you go snagging them, Dor! Well, yes as it happens, they were a present from an admirer.’ Gwendolyn laughed at the younger girls who both stared expectantly at her. ‘Ooh, aren’t you a right nosey pair!’

Kitty studied herself in the mirror while Gwen styled her hair, rolling it back at her brow and temples and fixing it in place with hairpins. She could see that it made her look older and she lengthened her neck and held her head carefully. It was a strange feeling, as if her own face were no longer familiar to her and she were looking at someone else. When Gwen announced that she had finished, Kitty thanked her and moved out of the chair so that Dora could take her place.

Kitty sat on the edge of the bed and listened while the sisters chattered. She stole quick glimpses of herself in the mirror and decided that she liked her new hairstyle, and she even dared to think that she was pretty. When she thought about Sammy seeing her like this, she felt a wave of happiness and anticipation, but a sinking feeling of dismay quickly followed it. He had noticed her because she was hurt and crying and lying in the road beside a broken

bicycle. She did not dare to imagine that he would have shown any interest in her otherwise.

And what did she know of proper grown-up relationships between men and women? She could not see herself being taken to a dance hall and nor could she imagine ever asking Sammy to buy her stockings. She watched Gwendolyn's beautiful face as she teased Dora and felt certain beyond doubt that Sammy would prefer a glamorous girl like Gwendolyn to a choir girl with scabs on her knees.

On Sunday, Kitty dressed carefully in her new dress and rolled and pinned her hair the way Gwendolyn had done it. She watched from her bedroom window and when she saw Sammy turn the corner, she ran downstairs and went out to meet him. But when she reached the gate, there was no sign of him. He must have stopped, or worse, turned heel and gone away. Kitty wished herself back indoors but couldn't move; she was rooted to the ground by a mixture of embarrassment and disappointment. Then suddenly, there he was and Kitty lurched forward, any possibility of behaving naturally now completely lost to her. She reached for the latch at the same time

as him and there was an awkward moment as they worked out who should open it. As Sammy's hand brushed against her fingers, Kitty felt the sensation of his touch to be shockingly exaggerated. For some reason, she heard Gwendolyn's voice in her head. *Smitten – he'll be smitten!* Kitty blushed scarlet and lowered her head.

'Do come in.' Her voice struck her own ears as impossibly pompous. *Do come in! Do come in?!* Who did she think she was? The Queen?

Aunt Vi stood at the open door smiling, her apron dusty with flour.

'Come on, Kitty, bring the young man inside for his tea, don't keep him standing in the garden!'

'How're your knees?' Sammy asked, then immediately regretted it when he saw Kitty's face flushed with embarrassment.

He ducked though the doorway behind Kitty and followed her into a small room where the table was laid for tea. Sammy glanced at it – homemade biscuits, a loaf of bread, some cheese and a cake. He guessed they didn't always eat a tea like this. Hovering over the table was a teenage boy who looked like he would happily scoff the lot.

Sammy held out his hand.

‘You must be Charlie – pleased to meet you.’

Charlie extended his hand slowly and, after quickly scanning the uniform, he stared hard at the serviceman’s face. This was the first American that he had seen close up. His main experience was from the cinema and this specimen was disappointing – no suntanned swagger, no chiselled features; nothing at all to suggest a hero. He was not especially tall, his hair was mid-brown and his eyes were more of a non-colour than anything that might catch your attention. His complexion was pale and he had dark circles beneath his eyes. There was nothing that told Charlie that he was in the presence of a fighter pilot. In fact this lean young man was barely more grown-up than Charlie was himself.

Yet, once he had hold of Charlie’s hand, the American grinned and a pair of creases ran in curves, from the corners of his eyes to the widely drawn edges of his mouth. Charlie smiled back.

‘I have something that belongs to you outside. D’you wanna come and see what you think?’ Sammy gestured towards the front of the house with a nod of his head.

‘My bicycle?’ Charlie’s voice faltered and he flashed Kitty a quick look. ‘Is it all right?’

‘I’ve got the kettle on,’ Aunt Vi called from the kitchen as they moved to leave the house. ‘Uncle Geoff will be home in a minute and then we’ll have our tea, so don’t you be long out there.’

Once outside, Sammy strode up the path and out the gate followed by Charlie and then Kitty. He reached the rowan tree that had been allowed to grow through the hedge. Propped against it was Charlie’s bicycle and Kitty understood why it had taken longer than she had expected for him to arrive at the gate.

With his back to them, Sammy took hold of the saddle and handlebars and lifted the bicycle round and placed it in front of Charlie as if he were presenting him with a prize.

‘I know the colour’s not right but it’s all I could find,’ Sammy said. ‘It’s what’s used on the Spitfires if they need touching up.’

‘Spitfires,’ Charlie repeated. ‘Spitfires? Oh my gosh, oh my gosh! Spitfires!’

He took hold of the bicycle, swung himself on to the saddle and pedalled away down the road.

Sammy laughed. ‘Well, he seems pleased with it.’ He turned to Kitty. ‘Looks like he won’t kill you after all.’

Kitty thanked him and smiled back. They stood in front of each other smiling, while Kitty thought to herself, *Say something else, stop staring like a fool and say something* – but she could do nothing but hold his gaze and smile. Charlie came cycling towards them, his arms out like wings, and they laughed.

They returned to the gate and met Uncle Geoff coming the other way. Charlie had dismounted and was inspecting the stripes of white paint that now adorned his mudguards.

‘So you can be seen at night,’ Sammy said, ‘in the blackout.’

‘Charlie’s only fifteen – we don’t let him ride about at night,’ Uncle Geoff said quietly.

‘No sir, I only thought – you know, maybe in wintertime for when it’s darker.’

Sammy stood straight and gave the older man his full attention. Kitty held her breath. She desperately wanted Uncle Geoff to like him.

‘Well, maybe he won’t need them come the winter,’ Uncle Geoff said. ‘Now that we have the help of the

United States Army, this war will be over by Christmas – isn't that what people are saying?'

'Sammy joined up as soon as he was old enough – he's been here since '41,' Kitty said. Uncle Geoff looked at her and away again.

'Look,' Charlie said, wheeling the bicycle towards his uncle. 'Sammy's painted the frame with Spitfire paint.'

'Has he now?' said Uncle Geoff, glancing down at the bicycle then back at Sammy. 'I wouldn't have thought the Air Force had paint to spare for boys' bicycles.'

Kitty's heart sank; she could see no hope for Sammy now.

'Well, no sir, you're absolutely right – it hasn't. I waited for the ground crew to finish a repair and I kind of worked the brush clean on Charlie's bicycle.'

There was a pause and Uncle Geoff nodded and held out his hand.

'Mr Bellamy.'

'Samuel Bailey, sir – pleased to make your acquaintance.'

Aunt Vi called them in for tea and Kitty stole an admiring glance at Sammy – it might be too soon to

say, but it seemed to her as though he had just achieved the impossible and won round Uncle Geoff. He caught her looking at him and smiled.