

CHAPTER 25

June 1944

Katherine

She thought about that afternoon on Teddington Footbridge the rest of her life. Katherine had the memory of it tucked away with the others, sharing them with her children and grandchildren throughout the years. They were young people brought up watching movies and television. What she went through then, what they all went through wasn't romantic, it was terrifying.

Katherine remembered watching the two men hold on to each other and felt the tears come to her eyes. Jack came back to the jeep afterwards and they walked along the Thames towards the bridge. It was a beautiful spring day as she remembered it, the rays of sun glistened on the surface of the water. They held hands strolling along as many lovers had done throughout the years. There was nothing on the surface that was out of the ordinary except for the purpose of this particular walk. "I'm sorry," he said, "that you have to face your parents without me. They'll be upset won't they?"

Of course they were upset, her father screamed at her while her mother wept. Their only child had fallen from grace. "It'll be alright," she said to Jack, "they're good people and will understand." They had stopped for a moment on the footbridge and watched. He'd stood behind her with his arms wrapped about her waist and cupped her belly with his hands. The child within her kicked in response as if he or she sensed their father and wanted to say, "Here I am." She could feel Jack stiffen shortly after and knew what he was about to say, "If something happens..." he began, and she thought her heart would break, "...if something happens Jamie will be there for you. No matter what, my whole family will be."

She'd begun crying, the tears streaming down her cheeks and felt as if her legs were about to give way. "Don't say that," she'd begged, please don't say it." Katherine remembered thinking that if they just didn't say the words and they only thought about being together again, being a family, the universe would somehow hear and that's the way it would be.

Jack somehow sensed how close she was to falling apart, changed the subject and took a different tack. He put his hand back on her belly, "What will we name her or him?"

This made her smile, "If it's a boy I was thinking we'd name him after you and if it's a girl I'd like to name her Susan after my mother. Is that alright?"

It seemed to her then that he was pleased and began talking about what he wanted to share with his children, how he couldn't wait to show her the ranch, meet his mother, and Matoskah. Jack talked about how much she'd like Lizzie; how the two of them would be such close friends and that certainly turned out to be true. The two of them eventually became connected in ways much closer than sisters.

When they couldn't postpone it any longer Jack kissed her goodbye and walked away. She stood there on the bridge and watched him go farther beyond her reach by the second. There was never a time in her life before that day when she felt more alone, more isolated from happiness. Katherine stayed in that same spot for the longest time watching the late afternoon shadows, a part of her still hoping that by some miracle he'd just be next to her again. It was Jamie's voice that brought her back, "Katherine," he said, "it's time to go."

After the screaming stopped her father fell silent and her mother tried in her subservient way to patch the damage between the three of them. That's the way it was day after day until the morning Katherine woke up and had had enough. She bought a train ticket to Prescott, Arizona, with the intent of leaving the blame, guilt, and shame piled onto her behind. Kathy couldn't stand spending another day being criticized while rumors of the upcoming invasion spread, and her worry for what might happen to Jack increased. Kathy needed to be close to someone, anyone, who knew him, was afraid for him, and loved him as she did.

The train pulled out of Chicago at ten-thirty on a Tuesday morning during the first week of June. She looked out the window, listening to the rhythmic movement across the rails, and watched the farm land of Illinois make way toward those of Iowa and Missouri. This was the first time in her life she'd been across the river to see the vast prairie land in the heartland of America whose wheat fields stretched from Oklahoma to Saskatchewan. The openness took her breath away; it was like an ocean that rolled across the land to the horizon as far as she could see.

The sun began to set as they were pulling out of North Platte, Nebraska across the Colorado border, past the small towns along the river heading towards Denver. There were a number of travelers who attempted to engage her in conversation but Katherine politely

refused. She had her fill of questions, remarks, and polite sympathy to last a very long time. It was dark by the time they came to a stop at Union Station in Denver and Katherine began gathering her belongings. She had a layover for more than an hour before the train to Albuquerque was scheduled to leave.

As she stepped down to the platform, a porter approached her and asked if he could help with the baggage. He was a tall, nice looking forty-six year old black man. Years of carrying luggage in good weather and bad were beginning to take its toll on his lanky frame but the work helped provide for his wife and three children. The porter had met his wife right here on this platform twenty-three years before. She had come to the city from her family's farm to visit her sister. Her family was late picking her up and the young woman seemed lost and vulnerable to him. He comforted her until the sister and brother-in-law arrived. After they were gone it seemed to him an impossibility that he would ever see her again but fate intervened the following Sunday when he looked down from the choir box to see her looking up at him.

While the two of them waited for Katherine's luggage to be unloaded he thought that the young white woman reminded him of his wife on that first night. Their race and background were different but the woman had that same lost and scared look about her. He told himself to forget about it, that it was best to leave white people be, particularly women. The streets of Harlem in New York City where he'd grown up weren't kind to black men that made that mistake.

It was time for him to go home to his family for supper but the young woman still concerned him. He helped check her baggage at the station and found a place for her to wait until it was time to board the train to Albuquerque, which was unfortunately delayed. She seemed to be all done in and appeared to be pregnant. Her tip was generous even though he suspected she couldn't afford it. The porter called his wife from a pay phone, told her about the young woman, and said that he'd be late. It wasn't that he was a strict believer in synchronicity or fate but there was a part of him that refused to disregard these events as coincidence. He went to the newsstand, bought the evening edition of the Denver Post, a Life Magazine and took them over to Katherine. "Excuse me mam but I thought you might like a little something ta read while ya wait."

She looked up at him thinking how kind his face seemed to be. Not wanting to appear ungrateful Katherine said, "Thank you very much. How much do I owe you?"

"That's alright mam I just thought you might appreciate somethin ta pass the time."

Tears began to well up in her eyes as she opened the paper. In large type it read INVASION BEGINS and underneath there was a map of Britain and the Normandy coastline with arrows that indicated the approximate location of various units. Her voice was flat and weak, "I've seen the papers today," she pointed to a spot on the map, "my husband's unit should be here. They call it Omaha Beach. The train passed through Omaha today and I thought what a strange name it was for them to use." She looked up from the paper into the black man's eyes, "He's my whole life you see. I can't lose him now."