

Tidewater Maryland, April 1917

Chloe thought dying would be easier than what her father wanted her to do now. She'd just been lifted onto the open bed of a farm truck, where she gazed out from under the low brim of her straw hat. It framed the terrifying jumble of faces gawking up at her.

"Chloe," her father's voice rumbled a warning. Barrel-chested, wearing a custom-tailored suit, he hovered beside the truck fender while she stood above him trembling.

She parted her lips, desperate for air as all the faces ran together like wet watercolors.

"Chloe," her father repeated, chilling her.

She tried to think of the words that would please her father and also sway the people before her. But under her cream-lace bodice, she couldn't inflate her lungs. It was as if her corset had been laced too high and much too tight.

She tried to focus on the scene before her. The smell of fecund earth buffeted upward in warm waves. The dazzling, nearly blinding, spring sunshine glinted off the chrome of Model-T cars and trucks amidst a few old wagons and horses tethered here and there. She managed to draw in a teaspoon of the warm afternoon air.

"Chloe," her father prompted, his raw irritation bristling just under the surface.

"Klo-ee, Klo-ee!" Out in the crowd, a tall, towheaded boy called out her name and followed it up with a loud wolf whistle. An older man beside him cuffed the boy as a few chuckles and titters floated up to her, taunting her.

I can't do this. I can't—

You can do anythin', a clear, loud voice sliced through her mind.

Startled, her lungs found space to expand. Chloe sucked in air and hefted the megaphone to her mouth. “I’ve never done this before.” Her voice came out unnatural and hollow sounding. She swallowed, trying to wet her cotton-dry mouth.

You can do anythin’ you put your mind to and don’t let nobody tell you diff’nt. The plucky words gave her sudden confidence. Chloe lowered the megaphone. “I don’t think I need this,” she said in a loud voice. She forced a smile. “Can y’all hear me?” And she started to breathe.

As from faraway, approving murmurs from the watching crowd rippled up in reply. Men wearing denim overalls and straw hats slouched against blossoming trees, scant protection from the warm sunlight. Under the trees, women in starched print house dresses lounged primly on worn quilts where babies slept. Beside the schoolhouse, vacant on Saturday afternoon, barefoot children raced from the wooden swings to the slide and back again. Their yells and laughter drifted up to Chloe.

Still Chloe felt their eyes boring holes into her. Her father fidgeted. She sucked in air again.

“My daddy...asked me to talk to you today,” she blurted out the truth. “I really don’t know why...”

But that was near as could be to a lie. I’m here to turn everyone up sweet for Daddy. I knew something was up the minute I clapped eyes on the new clothes he brought home from D.C. The cream-colored cotton jaconet dress with its stylish, narrow skirt and high waist—the matching silk stockings, butter-soft kid shoes, and gloves —had made her edgy, not pleased.

“You’ll be comin’ with me,” he’d said before he’d left this morning’s breakfast table. And she’d felt herself shrivel inside.

Now she strangled the megaphone with both hands as if she could choke words out of it. “But maybe it’s ’cause I know him better than anyone else.” Another lie. Or was it?

The crowd looked interested. They waited.

Then she realized it had been her granny’s long-dead voice in her mind, urging her on, showing her how to talk to these folk. Her beloved granny, her daddy’s mother—the one person who had always made Chloe feel loved and valuable in her own right. This thought gave her courage. “My Granny Raney—” Her voice gained weight, “— always told me, ‘You can do anythin’ you make your mind up to. Just look at your daddy.’” Truth at last.

She heard her father’s chortle of approval. She sensed the men in the crowd listening to her. Her jittery heart still lodged in her throat, but somehow she spoke around it, striving to appear confident. “My daddy wasn’t born in a big house like we live in now.” Phrases from speeches she’d heard her father give over the years filtered through her nervous mind and out through her lips. “He didn’t get to go to college. He taught himself law. He passed the bar and became a district attorney, then he ran and won a seat in the state legislature.”

What next? She recalled the morning’s headline and grabbed at it. “In this dangerous time of the War to End All Wars, he wants to serve you as your first elected senator in Washington, D.C.”

Then her mind went dead. Plumb dead. She stared out at the faces, her lips parted. No words came. An awful silence swelled. Help me, Lord. Help me, Granny. I can’t do this!

“Does he want the women’s vote?” a female called out, provoking, sassy.

The question stirred the gathering. Heads twisted, craning as a not-too-friendly muttering swelled. Chloe shaded her eyes and glimpsed —way back in the crowd—a hand in a navy glove waving to her. “Kitty McCaslin!” Chloe called out. At the sight of her best friend, tears of relief wet her eyes. “Honey, don’t you know that amendment hasn’t passed yet?” The watchers chuckled and the tension eased. Chloe sensed their returning interest and voiced the next thing that came to mind. “Kitty, whatever are you doing here?”

“Causing trouble.” Kitty’s tone was teasing.

Chloe eyed Kitty. Her lifelong friend was her exact opposite—as dark as Chloe was fair-haired, petite as Chloe was tall, with brown eyes to Chloe’s china blues. In a chic navy-and-white outfit probably straight from New York City, Kitty pouted her rouged lips. Kitty knew how to wrap folks around her little finger, all right.

I just have to follow Kitty’s lead. Warm relief shot through Chloe. “The usual, you mean?” she countered, her hand on one hip. She gauged the crowd. They were enjoying the repartee. “What’s your daddy going to say to you, interrupting my first campaign speech?”

“What my daddy don’t know can’t hurt him,” Kitty quipped. “And your daddy won’t care as long as he gets elected!”

The crowd laughed, indulgent with the daughter of the local banker—even if Kitty was wild to a fault and had gone off to college in New York City. The general consensus was that Kitty’s father was out of his mind letting his daughter go off to college in the big city. Didn’t he know what could happen to innocent girls up there?

Chloe’s heart beat in ragtime. But she knew she was winning. The crowd was with her. “I’m surprised you aren’t running for senator yourself,” she teased Kitty as if they were alone.

“Give me thirty years and I will!” Kitty crowed.

Good-natured catcalls swirled over Chloe. She wagged a finger at Kitty and laughed aloud before looking at her father in mute appeal. When would he let her step down?

Judging her work done, her father levered himself up beside Chloe and captured the dangling megaphone from her. With one hand he put it to his lips and with the other he gathered her close to his side. This part of the routine she was used to. With practiced charm, she kissed his cheek, smiled broadly, and tilted her face as though cameras were flashing. She’d learned the pose at the age of four.

“Ain’t my little gal somethin’?” her father bellowed in his sandpaper voice.

The farmers applauded and the women nodded, studying her outfit, ready to copy it the next time they could afford yard goods.

“Thank ya, honey.” He pinched her cheek.

It was then that Chloe glimpsed the elegant stranger. At the sight of him all thought of winning elections flew from her mind. He was tall, lean, dressed in a gleaming white shirt and dark trousers with a suit jacket folded over his arm. His hair was raven black, slicked back from equally dark eyebrows. He stood there, surrounded by the crowd, and his eyes met hers. The contact was almost electric.

The moment became too much for Chloe. The heat, her fear, the sudden stirring she felt looking at this stranger... The air rushed out of her and she was rendered breathless again. She wavered within her father’s arm.

“Don’t faint, honey,” her father soothed, ever the solicitous father. “Here, Jackson, help her down. The sun’s gotten to her.”

Hands reached up for her and lowered her to the ground. Someone pushed a fan between her fingers. With a quick smile at those around her, she looked past them, but the man had vanished. Disappointment pierced her. Who in the world was this stranger? Why was she so affected by this man she'd never seen before?

\* \* \*

Later, in her upstairs bedroom, Chloe gazed out her window at Carlyle Place's grounds. Two hundred years ago it had been called Carlyle Plantation. The name had been changed by her mother's father near the end of the last century--more modern. But nothing much had changed.

Through the limbs of budding magnolia trees, she watched the day dim into twilight. Her view of the rolling spring-green lawn and ancient maples, oaks, and tulip trees usually eased her nerves. But not today. She'd survived her first speech—just barely. Sliding down to her knees, she cradled her aching stomach with one arm and rested her cheek on the cool white windowsill. “I can't do that again.”

Unbidden, a memory breathed through her. She was a little girl again. Fleeing another one of her parent's battles, she'd run weeping from the big house to the small cottage behind Carlyle Place. Granny Raney had been there in her old rocker, holding out her arms. Chloe slipped up onto her wide lap and buried her face in Granny's soft bosom, scented with camphor. Granny didn't ask any questions, just rocked and sang her favorite hymn in her low, soothing voice. And Chloe was comforted, as always.

Granny Raney had loved her, never failed her, and today, though she'd been gone for years, she'd brought Chloe through the speech-making.

Chloe closed her eyes, willing away the clammy feeling that hadn't quite left her. I won't do that again.

Of its own accord, her mind brought up the image of the handsome, dark stranger at the schoolyard. Who was he? Had he come with Kitty? Her beau from New York? Her stomach quivered. What did that matter to her if he were?

Downstairs, the dinner bell floated up like a death knell. Both her parents were at home at the same time. Which meant dinner would be a nightmare. She toyed with the idea of staying in her room, begging off with a stomach ache. But that would only bring them up to her room, not stop them. Nothing ever stopped them.

With effort, she pushed herself onto her feet again and went to the blue-and-white willow-patterned pitcher and bowl on the stand across the room. Like everything else in her mother's house, the ewer had been in the family nearly a century. She washed her hands and face in the cool water and wondered what it would be like not to live in a museum, not to know the history of each piece her mother revered. Then, with a long sigh, she turned to examine herself in the freestanding mirror she knew Jason Carlyle had ordered from England for his bride in 1774 on the eve of the Revolution.

I look like I've been off to war and back again. She brushed her fair hair back from her face, tucking stray strands into the hairpins in the knot at her nape. Sunlight from the window made her hair shimmer like fire. Pinching her cheeks, she brought color into her pale face. She smoothed the wrinkles in her cotton outfit and then re-gathered her white silk stockings above her knees and freshly rolled her pink garters. Another glance in the mirror. She drew herself up

into an elegant posture, her spine listing slightly backward, and proceeded to the hallway and the top of the stairs.

But there, a muffled feminine protest from below slapped Chloe like an open palm. She stiffened. Against her will she glanced down, already guessing what she'd see. Just below her, their maid, Minnie, stood looking up at her, a plea clear in her eyes. Chloe's father had his arms around Minnie. His hands curved along her bottom as he nuzzled her light-brown neck just above her white collar. Chloe recoiled, sickened.

Unbidden, an image flashed through Chloe's mind—the two of them, little girls, best of friends, running barefoot through wet grass while Minnie's brother chased them with a garter snake.

Another whimper. Staring up, Minnie mouthed, "Help. Please."

Chloe spun around, racing on tiptoe to her room. There she opened and shut her door—sharply this time. She waited, taking a deep, shuddering breath. Then she clicked her heels on the maple floor of the landing, returning to the top step. Below her, the hall had emptied.

Nauseated, she descended the stairs and entered the elegant white-and-robin's-egg-blue dining room with its chandelier glittering overhead. Her father had taken his place at the head of the long white-clothed table. Her mother's place at his right was vacant. Along with Mr. Kimball, Mason Jackson, his campaign manager, rose at her entrance. A nondescript man in his late thirties, Jackson stood to her left. With his help she took her seat, and then the men settled back into their chairs.



The butler, Haines, Minnie's white-haired uncle, hovered with dignity behind Mr. Kimball, ready to serve dinner. Chloe swallowed as the fragrance of roast beef snatched away the last whisper of her appetite.

"Haines," her father said in an approximation of politeness, "will you send someone up to see if Miz Kimball is going to grace us with her presence at dinner?"

"I'm here, Mr. Kimball." Chloe's frail-looking mother, dressed in a stylish gown of deep maroon, sauntered into the room. The men rose perfunctorily.

Chloe observed her silver-and-brown-haired mother from under lowered lashes. Only a trained eye like her own would detect her mother's slight inebriation. What was it? Just a matter of how Mrs. Kimball held her head so steady, cocked to one side? Or the way she hesitated slightly before setting one foot down and raising the other? Whatever it was, Chloe had seen it enough times before to know.

Mrs. Kimball let Haines seat her across from Chloe. "I hear—" Without preamble, she launched the opening salvo. "— the three of you've had a busy day."

Mr. Kimball ignored her and bowed his head. "Thank you, Lord, for this food. Amen."

Chloe's mother sniffed and opened her white damask napkin, dragging it onto her lap. "I hear you forced our daughter onto a farm truck, of all places. Jackson's idea, no doubt."

"No, my dear Lily, it was mine," Mr. Kimball responded acidly with a twisted grin.

Once, Chloe had seen a dog and cat fighting in the farmyard behind the house. The cat had hissed and scratched and the dog had barked and charged. The farm manager had broken up the fight by swinging a broom. Chloe wished she had a broom now. With white gloves gleaming,

Haines served a chilled fruit cup to her mother and then made the rounds of the table with the silver tray.

“Chloe’s a natural,” Jackson said, ignoring Mrs. Kimball’s jibe and eating the fruit cup methodically, piece by piece. “I knew she would be. Pretty, charming. The perfect Maryland belle—shy and hesitant, but able to speak like the people. That down-home accent you put on, Miss Chloe, was very convincing.”

“Why an accent?” her mother snapped. Her face, already pink, flushed brighter.

“Your daughter had the wit to talk like one of the people she was addressin’,” her father barked and then took a bite of fruit and nodded approvingly at Chloe. “Spoke about my mother—a woman of the people.”

Chloe spooned up a mandarin orange section. She had to appear to eat or draw fire to herself. She held the sweet wedge on her tongue, afraid to swallow and upset her stomach more.

Mrs. Kimball sniffed again. “Your mother never had the least use for politics and you know it. What I don’t like is Chloe being dragged to these...events. I tolerated it when she was a child, but she’s made her debut now. She—”

“She’ll do—” Chloe’s father overrode, “— what needs to be done to help her daddy get elected senator.”

“Chloe should be attracting young suitors, not traveling around the county, making a spectacle of herself.”

“Your daughter didn’t make a spectacle of herself,” Jackson interposed. “She spoke to a few citizens and made a very good impression. After all, women’s suffrage is just around the

corner and Chloe provides your husband with a golden opportunity to show his respect for women by letting his daughter speak for him.”

“Respect for women?” Mrs. Kimball was too genteel to snort, but her tone and expression together were the equivalent. “I can’t vote, Mr. Jackson. So don’t try to electioneer me. Chloe is a lady and ladies have nothing to do with politics.”

Chloe wished she could second this idea. But she wasn’t a participant here, just the captive witness.

“Chloe’s a lady,” Mr. Kimball blustered. “No one can doubt that. She’s your daughter after all, a Carlyle. And make no mistake, Lily Leigh, I’m going to win this election, so don’t bother tryin’ to persuade me not to take advantage of every ace I got.”

He turned to Chloe. “You did a good job today, sugar.” With a smile, he drew out a small jeweler’s box from his waistcoat pocket. “This is for you.”

Chloe accepted the small box and opened it. Inside the deep-blue velvet was a ring of dainty pearls and diamonds, set in platinum. The sight didn’t thrill her, but she knew better than to violate her father’s expectations. She looked up with a delighted smile in place. “Why, Daddy, you didn’t have to.”

“I know I didn’t.” He beamed his Santy Claus smile. “But you came through like a trooper today. At first, I thought Jackson had made a mistake. But he said you only learn to swim by being tossed into the river.” He chuckled deep in his throat, the sound like pebbles rolling in a wood box. “Today my little girl swam back to shore all by herself.”

Chloe pictured herself tossing Jackson into the nearby Patuxent River, swollen with spring rain and runoff. But she gave another false smile and slipped the ring onto her finger.

“Thank you, Daddy.” She rose and kissed his jowly cheek, another part of the ritual.

Her mother rolled her eyes. “I don’t want Chloe put on display any more—”

“She’ll do what I say and that’s that.” Mr. Kimball glared at his wife, bringing the discussion to an end.

“You never did understand how to treat a lady.”

Jackson stiffened next to Chloe. Her father scowled. Chloe concentrated on swallowing her second orange section. How much did Mother have to drink before dinner? Is that why she’s stepping over the line?

Her parents’ bickering tonight had followed the usual pattern. Jackson was such a frequent visitor during Mr. Kimball’s election campaigns that they no longer treated him like a guest. But why had her mother persisted tonight? According to custom, she should have subsided after Chloe received the ring from her father. Why hadn’t she?

“I want Chloe to make a good match, Mr. Kimball,” her mother declared, her voice beginning to slur slightly. “What gentleman wants his future wife making political speeches? That’s as distasteful as Kitty McCaslin marching with the suffragettes in New York City last year.”

“Kitty was there today,” Chloe said, making an attempt to sidetrack her mother.

“That doesn’t make it any better.” Mrs. Kimball shuddered with refinement. “That McCaslin girl is never going to make a credible match — ”

Mr. Kimball snorted. “Only if her daddy loses his bank.”

Jackson chortled behind the back of his hand.

“Oh, someone will marry her.” Mrs. Kimball waved her hand in the air. “But no man of distinction, of breeding.”

“Maybe she doesn’t want a man of...of breeding.” As if from a distance, Chloe heard the words come out of her mouth. Shocked, she fell silent. Why did I say that? Why didn’t I keep my mouth shut?

“Chloe,” her mother began in a scandalized tone.

“Miss Chloe’s got a point,” Jackson interrupted. “This is the twentieth century.”

“Jackson’s right,” her father cut in. “I wouldn’t want my daughter going to college, but McCaslin’s no fool. If he thinks Kitty needs college, college is what she’ll get.”

“He knows,” Jackson continued, “that men and women are going to be judged by their education in the future.”

“You’re both mistaken,” Mrs. Kimball said haughtily. “Men don’t like brainy girls and never will. A man of breeding gets an education but does not want his future wife getting her head turned by all these modern ideas. Voting, indeed. Soon you’ll tell me that you want Chloe to learn how to drive a car.”

Chloe kept her eyes lowered. Would they go back to the usual routine? Had mother finished at last?

Her father laughed. “Now that’s a flight of fancy. Why stop with an automobile? Why not fly an airplane?”

Jackson laughed, too.

“Why not?” a new voice interjected, startling the occupants of the dining room into silence. Grinning, Kitty McCaslin walked into the dining room. She winked at Chloe. “I think being a pilot would be fun.”

Chloe fumbled with her water glass and rescued it just before it spilled onto the tablecloth. “Kitty, I didn’t expect to see you tonight.”

“My apologies for comin’ in unannounced. We’re all such old friends and I was sure Haines would be busy servin’ dinner. I’m home just for a long weekend and wanted to see y’all.” Kitty advanced on Mr. Kimball. “Mr. Kimball, how’s the election going?”

“I’m going to be the first elected senator in this state,” he said as he rose and accepted Kitty’s polite kiss on his cheek.

“Good evening, Miss Lily.” Kitty nodded to the other woman. “Mr. Jackson.”

Chloe wondered if Kitty had overheard anything her mother had said about her. She hoped Kitty had just arrived.

Jackson had risen and now waited for Kitty to be seated. Kitty eyed Chloe. “Mr. Kimball, Miss Lily, I’ve come to steal your lovely, speechifyin’ daughter away with me. My brother’s out in the car. We’re on our way to the Palace. We’ve got to hurry or we’ll miss the first evening showing.”

“But Chloe hasn’t had her dinner yet,” Mrs. Kimball objected.

Rejoicing at this chance of escape, Chloe popped up. “Daddy,” she began, knowing she needed his support.

“You go right ahead, sugar,” he said without glancing at his wife. “Take a wrap. It’s still chilly at night.”

“Wait—” Mrs. Kimball held up a hand.

“You best hurry, sugar.”

With a smile, Chloe’s father waved her and Kitty out of the room.

Behind them, an undercurrent of angry, slurred words poured from her mother.

In the hallway, Chloe tugged on her hat and gloves in front of the mirrored hall tree as Haines appeared with a light coat. And then she was running after Kitty down the front steps, between the white, ivied columns into the deepening twilight.

Roarke’s new Model-T was parked in front. Roarke, also a good friend, was leaning against its driver’s side door, waiting with a smile. Beside him lounged the dark stranger.

## Chapter Two

Roarke stepped forward, removing his hat. “Evening, Miss Chloe.” He towered above her, broad-shouldered and large, unassuming and familiar. And, at the moment, totally overshadowed by the stranger.

But with a conscious effort, she looked up at her friend and smiled. “Evening, Roarke.” Then, of their own accord, her eyes drifted back to the stranger.

“Chloe.” Kitty took her arm, tugging her forward. “This is Theran Black. Theran, this is Miss Chloe.”

“Are you kidding me?” For the moment, the young man ignored Chloe and gave Kitty an amused glance. “We’re barely south of the Mason and Dixon line. Do you really call young ladies ‘Miss So and So’?”

Chloe was surprised that he'd ignored their introduction. Why? From under her low brim, she studied Kitty and Theran, trying to divine how they felt about each other.

"You should be addressing my sister as Miss Kitty," Roarke spoke up in his deep, lazy voice. "And you haven't yet acknowledged Miss Chloe."

"Well, I do declare," Theran mocked. "Evenin', Miss Chloe. And I apologize, Miss Kitty, for my gross misconduct."

Kitty shoved his shoulder. "Don't talk nonsense. You call me Miss Kitty on campus and I'll black your eye. Let's get going. I don't want to be late for Mary Pickford."

"Oh, yes, we mustn't be late for America's Sweetheart." With a snort of laughter, Theran opened the car door and allowed Kitty to slide into the backseat before joining her. Roarke escorted Chloe around to the passenger side and ushered her into the front seat, then returned to the driver's seat and started the car. They were off.

In the short walk around the car, Chloe had gone numb inside. Theran and Kitty evidently must be an item. Kitty taking a seat beside him and Roarke claiming Chloe to sit up front with him made that a certainty. And Roarke had had to force the northerner to even say hello to her.

Then a slim hope flickered and flared. Maybe Kitty just didn't want to sit beside her brother? Perhaps that was it. But. . . perhaps it wasn't. She stared out at the maples and poplars spinning by, biting her lower lip and trying to rationalize things. Why did I think a college man from New York City would even look twice at me with Kitty around? At least there's one good thing: being invisible here is better than an evening at home with Mother and Daddy.



In no time at all, Roarke was parking the car on the main street of Croftown. The First National Bank —Kitty’s father’s bank—stood imposingly on the street corner. Nearby, a glittering marquee blazoned “THE POOR LITTLE RICH GIRL.”

Chloe let Roarke help her out of the car. With a solicitous arm under her elbow, he walked her up to the ticket window. She smiled at him fondly. Roarke never made her feel uncomfortable or uncertain. He was a rock in her life, the closest thing to a brother she had. She glanced from him to Theran, who was chuckling over some joke with Kitty behind them. Chloe was surprised at how much she wanted him to notice her. But what could she do about it? Was she the kind of girl who’d steal a friend’s beau? Unfortunately, no.

With only moments to spare, the four of them entered at the rear of the crowded auditorium. The aroma of buttered popcorn, the chatter of a hundred voices, and the hurry to get seats together compounded Chloe’s uneasiness. Roarke found four seats in a row. He entered the aisle first, knowing Chloe hated sitting next to a stranger, and she smiled up at him for remembering. She expected Kitty to follow her in, putting herself next to Theran. But instead Kitty motioned Theran to precede her. Why? Why would Kitty want Chloe to sit next to her beau?

Chloe glanced surreptitiously at Theran and was startled when he winked at her. Confused, she sat down. Pins and needles raced up and down her arms at his nearness. On her other side, Roarke opened the box of candy almonds he’d purchased at the snack counter. He proffered the open box with a subtle rattle. She tried to say no, but the words wouldn’t come. So she just shook her head and tried to smile naturally. Then the organist began to play urgently,

loudly from behind them. The theater went inky black and flickering light flashed on the screen at the front.

She trained her eyes forward. She didn't want to embarrass herself with a wrong move, so she propped one elbow on the armrest between her and Roarke and tried to follow first the newsreel about the war in Europe and then the movie. But she couldn't focus on the flickering images. Her entire body was waging a battle to hide her interest in Theran. One thought filled her mind: if the dark stranger was interested in Kitty, then why had he winked at her?

\* \* \*

Theran scanned the dim, barn-like interior of the roadhouse as Roarke ushered the four of them inside to a table at one end. Theran was accustomed to much smaller honky-tonks in New York. He'd never been to a place quite like this one. But here, just as in the city, society types like Kitty and Chloe mingled with painted ladies and some slick-looking customers. The addition of redneck farmers and their fresh-faced sweethearts added a new note.

Near them, a banjo player, a fiddler, and a piano player—the only black faces in the crowd—were pouring out excellent syncopated ragtime. Couples dancing the turkey trot crowded the floor. The place smelled of cigarettes, dime-store perfume, and liquor. “This sure isn't the Harlem,” he said to Kitty.

Kitty gurgled. “No, but this place hops.”

Theran glanced at Chloe. The pretty blonde had spent the evening looking everywhere but at him. Very classy, very cool. He wanted to get to know her. He wondered, would he be able to break through the aloof distance she maintained? He'd enjoy trying. “Would your parents

disapprove of your coming to a place like this, Miss Chloe?" he teased as she and Kitty sat down at a tiny table.

She flashed a look at him. Huge blue eyes edged with dark lashes and such white, white skin. Mary Pickford had nothing on Chloe Kimball. His mouth went dry just looking at her.

"I've never been here before, Mr. Black," she replied, her chin down.

Her low, sweet voice in that southern-belle murmur did things to him. He looked over at Roarke, who was at the bar placing their drink orders. Did the banker's son have an interest in Miss Chloe? If so, too bad.

Kitty giggled again. "Call him Theran, Chloe. Your mama isn't here."

Roarke came back with four glasses clutched in his hands. "Allow me." He handed glasses of amber liquid topped with white foam to Kitty and Theran. But the one he set in front of Chloe was darker and matched the one he kept for himself. "What's that?" Theran pointed at the darker brew.

"Root beer," Roarke replied without hesitation, taking a sip. "I'm driving tonight."

Chloe gave the junior banker a tight, grateful smile and took a polite little sip. Her every movement caught at Theran, made his pulse spike. He chuckled to show Roarke he appreciated the joke. Who would have thought Kitty McCaslin would have a teetotaler for a big brother? But Theran didn't want Kitty. She was cute and fun, but... In the dimly lit room, the blonde next to him glittered like a Roman candle.

She looked at him over her glass. "Is this your first visit to Maryland, Mr. Black?"

"Theran. Call me Theran. Mr. Black's my dad."

Ever since this afternoon when he'd seen her back-talking Kitty from the bed of that truck, he'd wanted to touch Chloe Kimball, hold her close and breathe in her perfume. But how could he get her away from her arch protector, the banker's son? "Kitty thought I should see something besides New York for a change." He played for time. "This is my bold adventure south of the Mason and Dixon."

Chloe blushed and sipped again. The turkey trot ended and the couples moved back to tables or the bar.

"Hey, Kitty, Roarke." Breathless from dancing, another couple dragged over chairs and plunked down at the small table, crowding everyone closer together. Theran wished Kitty had maneuvered him next to Chloe like she had at the movies. He didn't pay much attention as Kitty introduced the new couple, giving them no more than a nod. Then he realized the new arrivals had solved his problem. Now he could ask the blonde to dance without leaving Kitty to sit here or dance with her brother.

Theran stood and motioned toward the piano player. "Hey, Mac, how about a tango?" The pianist nodded and hit the ivories. The fiddler joined in. "Let's dance." Theran claimed Chloe's gloved hand.

"I can't tango." She held back.

"You can." He pulled her to her feet and then onto the dance floor. "Easy as pie. Just step-step-step-close. You'll be doing it in no time." He tucked her close to him, pressing her against him in the provocative tango posture. "Just follow my lead."

\* \* \*

As her body learned the sensual movements of the Latin dance, Chloe's senses reeled—shocked, thrilled. She clung to the dark stranger, moving with him. Within his arms, she'd been plunged into a tropical sea and the swells were carrying her away. She struggled to hear his words above the beating of her heart.

“Press your cheek to mine,” he instructed. “It's a must when you tango.”

Slowly, she let her face drift nearer his until...What would Kitty say? She froze, holding to decorum. But he closed the inches between them and firmed his hand over the small of her back. “Relax. This is fun.”

Chloe surrendered and felt as if her skin had been slipped off. All her senses were heightened, sharpened. Intense sensations she'd never felt bombarded her. They were exhilarating, more devastating than anything she'd ever known.

The compelling two-four beat of the Latin dance pounded through her mind. She clung to Theran and moved in time with him. Through a blur, she glimpsed other couples joining them. Kitty waved as she pressed herself to the other young man from their table. Wondering what her friend was thinking, Chloe misstepped.

“Relax,” Theran whispered, “you're a natural. Get ready. I'm going to dip you. Just let go and let me move you. It'll be great.”

He dipped her and she reveled in the strength he exerted over her. She felt suddenly that if he wanted to he could levitate her to the ceiling or even outside into the dark sky. He was a magician and he was working his magic on her. He turned her.

With a confidence she'd never known, she followed his slightest shift, molding her body to his, letting him carry them through the bold, stylized pauses. He sang to her under his breath. And she felt unlike herself—for once daring and free.

All day, she'd tried not to imagine what it would be like to have Theran's arms around her and now she was in his embrace. Surely, he couldn't hold her like this and be Kitty's beau. Surely not.

The final chords of the song vibrated in the air. No, don't let it end. But the next thing she knew Theran had spun her out the back door and they were alone in the chill moonlight. And the way he looked at her...

"No," she said, her face suddenly burning. Anyone could have seen them leave. Would this reach her parents' ears? She tried to pull away. "What will Kitty say?"

But he still held her in his arms as if about to dance. "Kitty and I are just friends."

"Does Kitty know that?" she managed to ask.

He laughed. "Yes, we dated awhile, but decided we'd make better friends than lovers."

Lovers? The concept rocked Chloe. She'd heard all the whispered gossip about Kitty going to college up north. But Kitty wouldn't take lovers, would she?

Theran leaned his mouth to her ear. "You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen."

She was struck dumb at the look in his eyes and could manage only a shake of her head.

He took her hand and she let him draw her away from the light over the back entrance to the dubious shelter between two cars. "Hey, I mean it. Surely you know how gorgeous you are?"

She gave him her profile. She knew she had features that were pleasant to the eye—her father’s use of her for political reasons was proof of that—but no one had ever talked to her this way. His flattery left her bemused. Was he teasing her?

His hands claimed her shoulders and he turned her to face him. “You’re beautiful, really lovely.” His voice was low, urgent, sincere “Kitty told me about you but I didn’t believe it. That’s why I came home with her this weekend—to meet her friend Chloe.”

In the shadows, Chloe shook her head at him. She wanted to believe him, but it all seemed so unreal—to have seen this man for the first time only this morning, and yet to have him whispering in her ear now. “You can’t be serious,” she finally managed, trying to add a dose of commonsense to the moment.

He bent his face over hers and held it just inches away. Chloe had time to think, He’s going to kiss me. Then his lips brushed hers and her knees became jelly. She clung to his shoulders. She’d received chaste kisses before. But there was nothing chaste about the way Theran’s kiss progressed. He assaulted her mouth, insisting, invading. She was without defense. So she answered his every demand, letting her mouth become a part of his, and his a part of hers.

Finally he ended the kiss and folded her close. She heard his breathing—ragged, hard—as she rubbed her cheek against his stiff white collar and the smooth fabric of his suit jacket. Her hat fell to the earth and she didn’t care. She sniffed his collar and caught the scents of soap, starch, and him, his flesh. “No one’s ever kissed me like that,” she admitted, unable to stop herself.

“I believe it. You’re like an angel. Sweet, innocent, lovely. A man would think twice about touching you.”

“You keep that up, sir—” She tried to protect herself by lightening the tone, “—and you’ll turn my head.”

“But I don’t want an angel,” he went on as if she hadn’t spoken, “I want you as a woman.”

His candid words shook her. What did he mean, he wanted her as a woman? “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Out of her depth again, she tugged free of him.

“I’m rushing you, aren’t I?” He prevented her from leaving. His gaze captured hers as he cradled her face between his strong hands.

“You...you...I’m not used to men talking this way.” She recalled the way her father made up to women sometimes when he didn’t know she was listening. “Is that how gentlemen talk to ladies in New York? Is this your version of sweet talk?”

“This is no sweet talk,” Theran whispered close to her face, his breath warm against her skin. “Kitty dared me to meet you and not fall for you. She was right. You are my doom.”

“Why your doom?” Chloe felt as if she’d caught the tail end of a hurricane. Nothing he said was making sense. Surely he wasn’t serious? “Is that bad or good?”

“I know I’m rushing you, but I don’t have time. I saw this war coming and I enlisted. I didn’t want to miss a war from being slow. In a week, I report to training camp. I’ll be heading to France in a few months.”

The news struck her as if she’d known him forever—that his leaving would render her bereft and heartbroken. She reached for him. He moved closer, enfolding her, and she rested her hands on his lapels. “No.”



“Yes, I told Kitty that guys who enlisted and then fell in love were idiots. A man should have better control over himself—not leave a girl behind.” He shook his head. “But Kitty dared me to meet you and not fall for you. I should have known better. Kitty’s as sharp as they come.”

“You don’t know me.” Chloe slid her forefingers up and down his notched lapels. “I don’t know you.” This isn’t happening, she thought.

“How long does it take to fall in love?” He lowered his mouth and paused, leaving only a breath between their lips.

She stared at his chest, at the white shirt front against the black coat, gleaming in the low light. She shook her head.

“It only took me one minute.” He claimed her mouth again.

Every part of Chloe’s body was jolted once more into that peculiar heightened consciousness. She clung to his lapels as the world around her softened and blended. It felt as though she had become part of the night, of Theran and earthy spring. She pressed closer to him, letting his heat flow into her, warming her against the clammy, chill April evening.

The crunch of footsteps on gravel and a low voice inserted itself into Chloe’s consciousness.

“Miss Chloe,” Roarke said politely.

She jerked away from Theran, allowing one startled glance at him before bringing her hand to her lips and turning away, unable to look either man in the eye. She heard Theran swear softly.

Roarke acted as if he hadn’t just caught them kissing. Calmly, he bent and picked up Chloe’s hat and offered it to her. “It’s time we went home.”

“It’s early yet,” Theran objected, his chin jutting toward the young banker. “We’ll come back inside. I’ll play by your rules.”

Chloe tucked her hair under her hat, flaming and vibrating with embarrassment.

“It’s time we got the ladies home.” Roarke took out his pocket watch and swung it in front of Theran. “After all, tomorrow is Sunday and church.”

With no further comment, Roarke turned for the car. Afraid to look at Theran, Chloe followed him. Mute, eyes downcast, she walked beside Roarke, her hands tucked into her elbows, her thoughts jumbled. What did Roarke think of her kissing a man she’d just met? And kissing like that—so wantonly? What if her mother ever found out? Chloe hadn’t behaved herself as a Carlyle of Carlyle Place should. Silent in her humiliation, she let Roarke lead her to his Model-T.

Kitty was waiting for them beside it. “Well, Mr. Black, was I right or what?” She ignored Roarke’s quick, angry look.

“You win, Kit—Miss Kitty,” Theran answered lightly. “I went down in flames.” At that, Chloe saw Roarke’s lips tighten as he handed her into the car.

For her own part, Chloe collected this strange exchange of words and promised herself she’d think them over later. Right now, all she could handle was the explosion of feeling inside her—the awareness of Theran that refused to quiet and the appalling realization that she hadn’t conducted herself as a lady should. Roarke’s stolid presence beside her in the car made the riot inside her even more acute.

Unaffected, Theran and Kitty chattered in the backseat while Chloe and Roarke rode in silence. After a moment, without a word, Roarke's large comforting hand covered Chloe's on the seat. It was like an unspoken acceptance of her, of her actions.

She glanced at Roarke's profile. Then, within his grasp, she turned her hand up and linked her fingers between his. He squeezed her hand and held it. And Chloe relaxed. Roarke, her dear friend, didn't think less of her and that meant a lot. Theran could go back to New York and brag about how he'd sweet-talked and kissed a Maryland girl. But she'd be okay.

\* \* \*

In the paneled church sanctuary the next morning, Chloe sat in the Carlyle pew, the one her family had occupied since the new church had been built in 1827. The worn maple pew cradled her between her parents as she tried not to fidget. Her father always attended church during elections. Her mother attended when she was at Carlyle Place. She liked to scan her neighbors and pick out who was letting herself go, and who was flirting with whom.

Usually Chloe listened obediently to the formal liturgy and then the homily, trying to draw near to God. After all, that's what she came to church for, wasn't it? But today all her concentration honed in on the McCaslin family pew, which was to her right and several pews forward. In navy trousers and matching blazer Theran Black had come to church with the McCaslins. She couldn't take her eyes off the back of his well-shaped head.

She wondered what thoughts were going on inside that head. She felt herself burn at the thought of the kisses they'd exchanged and at her own shameless willingness. She hadn't acted like the lady she'd been raised to be. And she'd barely slept last night, going over and over what

he'd said, why she'd given way like that. He was just sweet-talking me, she decided. I know that. I should just be glad for the fun of dancing the tango and having a college boy kiss me.

But it hadn't felt like fun. He'd said things no man had ever said to her. At her debut, shy young men had danced at arm's length with her and brought her glasses of punch and told her what colleges they would be attending. A few had come calling and sat with her mother and her in the parlor and drunk tea politely. But none of them had kissed her the way Theran had. None of them had talked of love and leaving for war.

Could she believe anything he'd said last night?

Everyone around her rose to say the Nicean Creed. Chloe was caught not paying attention and got to her feet a phrase into the Creed. Her mother looked at her suspiciously. Chloe closed her eyes as if in devout meditation and recited the words, "... very God of very God begotten not made being of one substance of the Father by whom all things were made ..."

The service proceeded. The priest celebrated communion and then the organ swelled with a majestic postlude. Chloe walked between her parents up the aisle. She was very aware of the fact that Theran Black strode behind them. Was he watching her, following her? A dangerous and delicious shiver slithered up her spine.

At the door of the church, her mother greeted the priest languidly and asked after his wife. Chloe shook hands with him and her father pounded him on the shoulder. "Good sermon, preacher."

Her mother's lip curled.

As they moved away down the steps, Kitty accosted them. "Mr. Kimball, Miss Lily, I don't think you've met my classmate Theran Black."

Shaken, Chloe kept her eyes downcast as Theran bowed over her mother's gloved hand and shook her father's. "It's an honor to meet you, sir. I caught part of your speech yesterday. Good luck on your candidacy."

The older man beamed.

"But," Theran said, claiming Chloe's hand, "I was most impressed by your daughter's speech for you. You, sir, are fortunate indeed to have such a lovely supporter."

Chloe couldn't stop the blush that warmed her cheeks as she gazed up at him, tongue-tied, knowing every gossip in the county had cocked an ear her way.

"You have a discerning eye, sir," her father approved. "It's too bad you're leavin' for New York today or we'd invite you to Carlyle Place."

"As it turns out, we will be taking a later train." Theran turned to the McCaslins. "Kitty here wants to stay just a bit longer. She'll miss her early Monday classes, but it will give me a chance to get to know your lovely daughter better."

For once, her father didn't appear to have a ready reply. "May I call on you this afternoon, Miss Chloe?" Theran asked, a grin in his eyes.

Chloe glanced at her father and then her mother. Both looked startled. She took advantage of this. "Yes, of course, Mr. Black. I—My parents and I look forward to receiving you."

### Chapter Three

Later that afternoon, Theran sat beside Chloe on the edge of an antique settee. Rich mahogany and warm maple gleamed with a mellow polish and he was aware that the room must be filled with old family pieces. The exterior alone of Chloe's home, a white-pillared and ivied manor, should have been enough to tell him he was out of his league. But the interior bespoke a

daunting history of wealth and family heritage. Now, in the formal parlor, the atmosphere wasn't chilly. It was frigid.

Mrs. Kimball's nose was in the air. Across from him, she sat like the queen, her back stiffly held away from touching the matching love seat. She'd just poured tea from a sterling silver tea service. Having refused a cup, Mr. Kimball stood by the fireplace. He had one hand on the ornate mantel and one hand in his jacket pocket and looked as if he were about to begin a speech.

Edging forward on the settee, Theran turned sideways to face both the parents. Chloe sat frozen beside him like a store mannequin. Was she having second thoughts? Her pale loveliness had captivated him all over again. She had "beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear." He didn't have words of his own to describe her, so he was left quoting Shakespeare. But she'd barely looked at him when he'd been announced by the Negro butler. He couldn't believe Chloe had a butler. Not even Kitty's family had a butler. He'd only seen butlers in moving pictures. Meeting Haines at the door had thrown him. And a young, pretty black maid in uniform had brought in the tea tray. Had he come on a fool's errand?

He stiffened his resolve and suppressed the urge to tug at his tight white collar. "Faint heart ne'er won fair lady," or something like that. He grinned. He'd never been beaten yet.

"Excellent tea, Mrs. Kimball," he said and gave the grande dame his most charming smile—one that usually sweetened up mothers and austere aunts.

"What are you studyin' up at that college?" Chloe's father asked, giving him the beady eye.

Theran smiled to himself. The old man didn't want him taking anything for granted. "I'm a civil engineering major." Theran remembered Kitty's coaching and added, "sir."

"And what does a civil engineer do?" Mr. Kimball gave Theran his full and unflattering attention. Theran was reminded of a bulldog.

"The automobile is going to change the way America travels." Theran infused his voice with confidence. "I'll be planning bridges, routes, viaducts for the new highways automobile travel will demand."

Chloe looked sideways at him. "That sounds interesting, don't you think, Daddy —"

"Think you'll make a good living at that?" Her father cut her off and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet.

Theran gave Chloe a reassuring smile. "I'm glad you asked that, sir. Yes, I'll make a good living and will be able to support a wife. You see, that's why I'm here. I want to ask your permission to court your lovely daughter."

Chloe's lips parted, but she said nothing.

Theran wondered why. She'd acted the shy little thing yesterday —but only until he'd kissed her. After last night, she couldn't be opposed to his suit, could she? Not after the way she'd returned his kisses. His blood warmed nicely at the remembrance.

Mrs. Kimball sat up straighter and gave Theran an affronted look. "You presume too much, young man —"

Mr. Kimball was laughing. "No, he doesn't. If he'd presumed too much, he wouldn't have asked for permission."

“Just so, sir.” Theran’s thin china cup and saucer rattled briefly as he set them down on the piecrust table beside him. “I realize that you don’t know me, but I can give you references if you wish. If Chloe were a New York coed, this would be easier. We’d date awhile and then I’d be taken home to meet her parents. But Kitty explained to me that courtship is a little more old-fashioned out of the city.”

“We certainly don’t act as rashly as this,” Mrs. Kimball said in a dismissive voice. “You just met Chloe last night and we know nothing of your background, your family. You can’t make me believe that you — ”

“He’s young.” Her husband cut her off, his voice a slashing counterpoint to her heated tone.

Theran had never heard his quiet, dignified father use that tone of voice to Theran’s mother. He looked back and forth between man and wife.

“And there’s a war on.” Mr. Kimball paced back and forth in front of the fireplace. “He’ll be drafted soon—”

“I’ve enlisted, sir,” Theran said. “And I’ll leave for officer’s training camp in a week’s time.” He stood and faced Chloe’s father squarely. “I took my final exams early and my degree will be mailed to my parents after the commencement in May. I’ll be in uniform by then, trained and ready to sail for France.”

“Indeed?” Mr. Kimball lifted both eyebrows, but a cagey look lingered in his eyes.

Theran didn’t have time to try to figure out what that meant. “Yes, I couldn’t wait around for the draft board. I like to be in the thick of things.”

“Then your suit is most certainly out of the question,” Mrs. Kimball declared.



“I won’t be gone long.” Theran turned to her. “The Germans are hanging on by their fingernails. A few sorties by fresh American troops and they’ll lay down their arms and surrender. Germany is nearly bankrupt.”

“I honor you, young man.” Kimball used the same voice Theran had heard him use at yesterday’s speech. “Europeans will be no match for our doughboys.”

“That is neither here nor there,” Mrs. Kimball snapped. “I’m sure you are a patriotic and even admirable young man, but my daughter will marry a gentleman — ”

“Mrs. Kimball — ” Theran interrupted, but to no avail.

The grande dame marched on. “The Carlyles, my family, have lived in this house for over two hundred years. Our ancestors arrived on the Dove, one of the first two ships to arrive in Maryland.” She lifted her voice and squared her slender shoulders. “We have connections to the peerage in England. Who are your parents, Mr. Black?”

“My father owns a grocery store in Buffalo, New York.” Theran looked her directly in the eye. “He’s of Scottish descent. My parents don’t appear on any social register.”

“A grocer?” Mrs. Kimball looked aghast.

“It’s an honest way to make a living.” Theran was stung by her expression. “My father has a large library and is an intelligent man but circumstances prevented him from fulfilling his dream of a college education. I’m benefiting from his ambition and so will my sister. I am not now nor will I ever be ashamed of my parentage.”

Mrs. Kimball frowned and glared at the same time. “No doubt, but Chloe has been to finishing school.”

“Well, I won’t hold that against her.” Theran grinned. He couldn’t be too angry with Chloe’s mother. After all, his mother wouldn’t be thrilled to hear he’d fallen in love with a girl she’d never even met.

Chloe smiled then, sparkling suddenly like a diamond catching the light.

Mr. Kimball burst into dry laughter. “I always told you, Lily, you make too much out of pedigree. If you’d held yourself to the same ambition you have for Chloe to marry a gentleman”—Kimball’s tone taunted his wife—“you wouldn’t have married me. May I remind you that you had Carlyle Place, but I had money?”

This exchange, as before, made Theran uncomfortable. He’d never heard his dad use that tone to his mother or anyone else. I don’t like you, Kimball, he thought suddenly.

Her face rosy, Mrs. Kimball pursed her lips.

Theran felt a little sorry for her, even if she was a snob. “Mr. and Mrs. Kimball, all I want is your permission to get to know Chloe. May I correspond with her?”

“No.” Chloe’s mother raised her voice.

“Yes, of course.” Mr. Kimball raised his louder.

His wife averted her face.

“There’s no harm in a few letters.” Kimball continued. “You’ll be leavin’ for France soon and a patriotic American girl should give a soldier all the encouragement she can. I think I can reply for my Chloe that she’d be honored to receive your letters and write a few of her own.”

Theran moved forward to shake Kimball’s hand. Maybe he’s just an old blow hard after all. Perhaps all politicians were like this. “May I take Miss Chloe for a short walk?”

“Certainly, certainly.” Mr. Kimball waved them away. Mrs. Kimball scowled but said nothing, refusing even to look his way. He didn’t really care.

Outside, Chloe walked silently beside Theran. She led him into the garden at the rear of the manse. High, blazing-yellow forsythia bushes shielded them from the windows. Red and yellow tulips edged flower beds and the sun warmed Theran’s back. The pastoral setting suited Chloe. She was as achingly lovely as she had been the day before. Something inside him wanted to reach out and touch her, make certain she was real. Her continued silence disconcerted him, however. Was she having second thoughts? “Chloe, what are you thinking?”

She merely paused but didn’t look up.

He recalled the way he’d kissed her and how she had kissed him in return. Her passion had been sweet, innocent, stirring. Everything about her reached out to him, called for him to claim her again. This was love, wasn’t it? “Last night you led me to believe that you were not averse to my...suit.” He kicked himself mentally for sounding like a hero in a melodrama.

“Oh, Theran.” With a sigh she took his hand and drew it up to her cheek. “Sometimes I hate them so.”

Her touch flared through him. But her words halted him. “Who?” What had he missed?

“My parents.” She frowned pensively. “I don’t know how you had the...courage to stand up to them like that.”

“They’re just parents,” Theran said, kissing her hand. “I didn’t expect them to be crazy about the idea of a poor soldier falling for their daughter. Your mother probably thinks I’m a fortune hunter. But they’ll get used to me. They’ll be forced to. I’m not changing my mind.”

Chloe looked into his eyes. “Will you take me away from them? Truly?”

What was she trying to find out with that searching look? “Sure. If I could, I’d marry you right after I finish training. But I don’t think that would be fair to you. In any event, the war won’t last long and I’ll be back. We’ll marry then. You’ll want a nice wedding and honeymoon.”

\* \* \*

Chloe listened in wonder to Theran’s confident words as he made plans for their future. It amazed her how easily he made decisions, without any hesitation. “I don’t care a thing about all that,” she blurted out. “You said, last night... You said ...” Her gaze implored Theran and she wished she might be able to read his mind. Did he really care for her? It still seemed so improbable that all this was happening.

“I said I’d fallen in love with you.” He squeezed her hand. “I meant it then. I mean it now. I love you, Chloe Kimball, and I’m going to make you my wife.”

Chloe folded her arms around his neck and leaned her cheek against his. “Then take me away, Theran,” she pleaded. “If you love me, take me away from here.”

Theran pulled back. “You sound...unhappy. What’s wrong?”

Chloe tried to think how she could make him understand what her life was like. She couldn’t. He wouldn’t understand. He was a straight arrow. How could she explain the games her parents played with her in order to wound the other? How insignificant they made her feel. “I’m not happy here,” she whispered, knowing it wasn’t enough.

Theran studied her for a moment, then nodded. “Then you won’t have to stay here any longer than you must,” he said, folding her into his arms. “I’ll come back for you after I finish training. The recruiter said I’d get a long weekend at least between training and reporting for duty. I’ll head down here and come for you. We’ll marry on the way back to New York. I won’t

get rid of my room at the boarding house. We'll go and I'll set you up to stay there." He stopped and stroked Chloe's shoulder. "That is, if you really don't care if it's nothing fancy. My boarding house isn't up to what you're used to." He nodded his head toward Carlyle Place.

"That doesn't matter." Chloe stared up at him, still disbelieving. "I've never met anyone like you before. I expected you to make excuses."

He pulled her close and kissed her. "I'm not a talker. I'm a do-er. Trust me?" He kissed her again.

She didn't feel like herself. In Theran's arms, she was a new creature. In his arms she believed she could leave behind the sad shell of her life. "Yes, I trust you." A lightness, an airiness, bubbled up inside her.

"Will you be my bride, Chloe Kimball?"

"Yes." She let herself tousle his hair over his ears. "With all my heart, yes."

"Then leave everything to me."

Chloe closed her eyes and pressed closer to him. She knew everything was moving dangerously fast. But going ahead could only be better than letting this unlooked-for chance pass her by.

\* \* \*

Days later Chloe stood watching Roarke drive away on the road behind Carlyle Place. She clutched the letter he'd just hand-delivered to her this morning. Ten very long and silent days had passed since Theran had proposed to her. April had deepened, reveling in sun-splashed leaves and tiny blue violets in the green grass. But Chloe's heavy heart had clung to gray winter. Now, she looked down and read the brief note once again:

Dear Chloe, my sweet love,

I have written to you every day since I returned to New York City. I've received no reply from you. I cannot believe that you have not tried to contact me.

I'm sending this letter in a note to Kitty's brother and have asked him to hand deliver it to you away from your family. If you have changed your mind and have decided to scorn my love for you, at least give Roarke a note to that effect. I count on your love, though, my little darling. All my heart forever, Theran.

"My sweet love." It was as if Theran had caressed her with his words. He didn't make a fool of me. The relief came, so powerful that momentarily she felt it suck all strength from her. But how would she be able to face her mother over luncheon without tossing this note in her face?

Chloe turned to Minnie. "Let's go." Sudden anger propelling her, Chloe stalked down the dirt road toward one of her family's sharecropper's cabin.

In her maid's uniform, Minnie trotted beside her, carrying a basket of food and a blue cotton flannel layette for the sharecropper's new baby son. Minnie touched her arm, startling her. "I think I know what's in that letter Mr. Roarke just brought you." Minnie paused, watchful.

Chloe halted and stared at Minnie. "You do?"

Obviously reassured by Chloe's response, Minnie continued, "My uncle's burnin' your letters from that man. Your mama told him to. You figured that out, right?"

Chloe could only stare at her. I should have guessed.

Minnie looked her straight in the eye. "Are you ser'ous about that man, Miss Chloe?"

Chloe nodded, surprised Minnie was talking so openly.

“Your fam’ly never let you marry him. If you want that man, you got to run off.”

“I...know.” Chloe looked at Minnie, realizing that this was the open way they’d talked to each other as children —before Chloe had been sent away to boarding school at thirteen. After that, her old playmate had addressed her as “Miss Chloe” and rarely looked her in the eye.

“You need he’p to get away. You can’t make a move they don’t know ’bout.”

“I’m going to marry him.” Chloe let her determination flow harshly into her words.

“Then I’ll help you...if you help me.”

Their eyes met again and Chloe couldn’t mistake the message in Minnie’s eyes. It had been the same one she’d seen—over and over—during the past year whenever her father cornered Minnie. Chloe despised her father’s coarse behavior. She didn’t have to ask why Minnie wanted to get away from Carlyle Place. “How?” Chloe asked, her lungs painfully constricted.

“You got to talk that banker’s son up sweet. He got a car. He can help us get away.”

Chloe frowned. “Mr. Black’s promised to come for me and marry me after he finishes army training.”

Minnie began walking again. “That ain’t good enough. If he come here, your daddy can stop him, could even have him arrested. You know he got the whole county in his pocket or on his payroll.”

Chloe hurried to catch up. “I know, Minnie.”

“Mr. Roarke’s the only one can help us. You got to sweet talk him—”

“But I don’t want to mislead Mr. Roarke.”

“I’m not talkin’ about you vamping him. I’m talkin’ about — ” Minnie changed her voice, sweetening it. “Roarke, please I’m so in love. Help me.”

Chloe was forced to smile. “I don’t think that would work, but I think an appeal to his sense of right and wrong would.”

“You mean it ain’t right that your parents burn your letters?”

“Yes. And I know Roarke’s family doesn’t like my father.”

“Who do?”

Minnie’s cool assessment of Mr. Kimball was a revelation to Chloe. Did everyone dislike her father as much as she did?

“Okay.” Minnie started walking even faster. “I’ll start sneakin’ some of your things out little bit by little bit to my fam’ly’s place. That way you be able to leave without rousin’ no ’spicion. And then I’ll run away with you.”

Chloe hurried along with Minnie. She only nodded, unable to say all she was thinking. “Mr. Roarke said he’d let me know tomorrow if he’d help me.”

“That be all right. Miss Lily like Mr. Roarke, think you’d make a nice banker’s wife and then you be settled just down the road right close to home. They be keepin’ a sharp eye on you. Miss Lily tell my uncle not to let you go out alone. That’s why I’m with you. Today he tole me to tell him if you see anybody else or if you just go to the cropper’s house like you say.”

“And will you?”

“I di’n’t see nobody talk to you.” Then Minnie’s face split into a wide smile. “You sweet talk Mr. Roarke and I take care of the rest.”



Chloe realized she was clasping and unclasping her hands. She forced herself to take a deep breath and grin at Minnie. Hope flickered once again. But everything hinged on Roarke McCaslin.