

Chapter 1: NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE, ENGLAND. JULY 1953

THE THIN RAIN sparkling on the café windows in the summer sunshine didn't dampen Marjorie's spirits. She seemed to buzz with excitement, barely able to be still as she drank her tea and waited for the time she would leave to start her evening.

Sitting across the small, plastic covered table from Marjorie, Pauline Riddell mentally shook her head in dismay. She liked Marjorie, had done since that first day at the Gosforth Secretarial College, but couldn't quite understand how Marjorie lost her head over any man who gave her a moment's notice. This latest infatuation was the worst of them all.

"Marjorie," Pauline said, quietly for the café was busy with other women from the company offices, "you must take care."

"I always take care," Marjorie said, grinning. She opened her handbag to show Pauline the small, flat packet with its plain white cover.

Pauline reddened. "That's not what I mean," she said. "This man won't meet you anywhere public and doesn't want you to tell anyone who he is. Something's not right."

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"Maybe he's married," Marjorie said, grinning at Pauline's shocked expression. "And we'll walk out together publicly when his divorce comes through." She smiled in a way that made Pauline want to slap her.

"Don't be a fool," Pauline whispered. "He's playing you along for what he can get." Marjorie had hinted at this more than once but never quite so loudly in a crowded place.

Marjorie's face registered immediate anger. "You've no right to say that. You don't know Eric," she said. "He's an old-fashioned gentleman and wouldn't behave that way."

Pauline was silent. She studied her friend: pretty, vivacious, with beautiful blue eyes in a model's face. Everything Pauline was not, as she often thought whenever they were together. It was the old story of the pretty girl and the plain girl, each helping the other catch the eye of the boys and she knew, wistfully, which role she would always play in this partnership.

What amazed Pauline most was that Marjorie came from a poor family in the city while she, Pauline, came from a better off farming family in the country. Not that anyone cared for such things nowadays. After two world wars and a depression, everyone was equally poor, classes were all mixed up and anyone could become someone. Still, it was hard to imagine a gem like Marjorie growing up in a rundown part of a fading city. She should have been an aristocrat's daughter if there was any justice in the world.

Her own background was easier to understand. Her brothers were either in one of Britain's navies, merchant or Royal, or they were tenant farmers, while her sisters were nurses. Unwilling to become a nurse or a teacher, the only options she was being pushed toward, she had gone off into the world of

business and had already achieved some success. She'd been hired as a secretary for two lower managers before being promoted to the executive secretary ranks, all

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within a year. At twenty, she was the youngest by far of the executive secretaries in the company. She quickly learned how much jealousy existed in an organization. Had she been prettier, she'd have suspected an ulterior – or would that be an interior – motive by the director. As it was, she was sure she got it on merit. After all, she'd spotted a potentially devastating mess in communications and fixed it before it became widely known, saving the department director's job. He'd promoted her as soon as he'd made provision for his aging, now retired, secretary.

"Pauline! I'm talking to you."

"Sorry. What?" Pauline again realized she'd been miles away and missed Marjorie speaking.

"You could make an effort to listen," Marjorie snapped.

Seeing her friend was upset, Pauline said, "I'm sorry. It's been a hard day and I'm a bit shell-shocked."

"Oh, you and your important work."

Realizing she'd said exactly the wrong thing, touching upon her own recent promotion and Marjorie's still being little more than typing pool, Pauline tried again.

"What was it you were saying?"

"It doesn't matter now," Marjorie said, crossly, "I'll tell you tomorrow." She rose abruptly from the table, almost toppling the chair, and looped her headscarf over her head to protect her elaborately waved hair.

"Lunch time tomorrow?" Pauline asked.

"Why not. Maybe you'll be in the mood to listen then," Marjorie said. She took her coat from the peg, and with a brief dismissive wave to Pauline, walked quickly out of the café door.

Pauline sighed. She liked Marjorie a lot, but she was very up and down in her emotions. This brief exchange was an example. When they'd entered the café, Marjorie had been excited, too excited, at seeing her new man and was now,

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less than an hour later, explosively angry when she'd left. Pauline's inattention certainly hadn't helped, but Pauline thought that wasn't what had made the change. It was something Marjorie had said that Pauline hadn't heard. Deliberately hadn't heard, for she strongly disapproved of adulterous affairs, even ones that may just be pretend or a way to wind her up, but now Pauline wished she'd listened. There'd been something beyond Marjorie's usual prattle and now she felt uneasy. Foreboding was the word that came to mind.

Foreboding was probably too strong a word, Pauline thought, pushing aside the feeling as she gathered up the cups and plates, before returning them to the counter. When she'd first come to the city, the idea of clearing her own dishes in a café was a surprise. The teashops her mother saved so hard to occasionally enjoy and had introduced Pauline to when she was old enough to share her mother's appreciation of the treat, had waitresses who did that. Pauline had believed every teashop did. But those other teashops also had cotton table clothes and nice china, Pauline thought with a grin, rather than plain plastic covers and 'works canteen' crockery. And the dainty cakes, pastries and sandwiches they offered were also considerably more visually attractive than the fare in this small café in an industrial neighborhood, though they weren't any tastier.

She returned to her seat and peered through the window. Marjorie was marching up the street in a determined stride that threatened to take the heels off her ridiculous shoes, a gift no doubt from Eric, as was the whole outfit Marjorie was wearing. He certainly had good taste. The blue dress and paler blue coat had both brought out the color in Marjorie's bright eyes. Pauline watched Marjorie growing steadily smaller as she drew near to the farther end of the street and the major road to which it joined. In her expensive outfit, she

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was as out-of-place among the grim smoke-blackened brick houses as a hothouse bloom in a northern rockery.

For a moment, she returned to the thoughts that had so distracted her when Marjorie had started speaking: Stephen's letter, which had arrived yesterday. It was two weeks old and talked about the rumors of a ceasefire. He hoped it was so, and if it were true, they'd be together again soon. She hoped so too. These past months had been painfully lonely without him. Once, she'd have discussed it with Marjorie, but Marjorie was now so full of her new love there was no chance of that. She imagined Stephen smiling, grinning at the prospect of home and all its delights, one of which, he promised, was her. She smiled and looked around to see if anyone was observing her. If they were, she was sure they'd guess her thoughts, which brought a flush to her cheeks. It was time to go. Pauline put on her own thin, nowhere near as expensive, summer coat and left the café.

Outside, she hesitated a moment to see if Marjorie was still in sight. She wasn't. Whatever it was Marjorie had tried to share and which was now causing Pauline such unease, may have been justified, though you could never tell with Marjorie. She was so volatile. Unfortunately, Pauline had agreed without listening to what had been said and now Marjorie had flounced off in real anger. Pauline suddenly felt afraid. What if Marjorie were planning to do something rash, like trying to force her new lover's hand by announcing their affair publicly in some way? From the little Marjorie had shared, and Pauline had listened to, her lover seemed to be a rich married man who said he was going to divorce his wife. Pauline thought this unlikely. Men with standing in the world had too much to lose to take such a step.

She set off down the street toward the bus stop. The factory was along the river on the western side of the city and her flat was nearer the center – too far to walk, even on a

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bright summer's day like this. To her left, the terraced houses that stretched from the factory, where most of the men from the houses worked, up to higher ground and the West Road, were almost gay in the sunshine. In winter, the area looked forlorn, abandoned even, as she knew from her three winters in the

city, but now with children playing in the streets and wives chatting in groups along the length of the terraces, it looked a happy place.

The bus wasn't long in coming after she arrived at the stop, for which she was thankful. Three young men in the growing fashion for greased back hair, long jackets, string ties, and trouser legs so tight they were nicknamed drain-pipes, were jostling each other in what seemed innocent horseplay but Pauline knew would soon 'accidentally' involve her. She jumped on the bus the moment it stopped and sat where the driver could see her. Throughout the journey, she tried to remember something of what Marjorie had been saying.

It was no use. Marjorie prattled, there was no other word for it, when she was in love. And she was often in love, either with real men or the imaginary ones she saw in the movies, which she went to every week, either with a man, or failing that, which didn't happen often, with girlfriends. All this would have driven Pauline to distance herself from another person, but Marjorie was also open, friendly, trusting, generous, and good-hearted. There wasn't a waif or stray, human or animal, that Marjorie wouldn't rush to help, and as Pauline loved animals too, that kept the two young women closer than would be expected by anyone who only knew Pauline. But how much of Marjorie's prattling was fact and how much wishful thinking? It hardly mattered as Pauline could remember practically nothing of it. What must be true, however, was that Eric existed because Marjorie couldn't afford the clothes she was wearing when she left the café.

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Her flat felt cool after the sunshine. She lived alone, though the building, an old stone home in what remained a grander part of the city, was now divided into 'maisonettes' – tiny two-room apartments. Her neighbors were, like herself, mainly better paid young women who held responsible positions in the factories and offices that were still the mainstay of the city. Not for the first time, she thought, as she looked around at her few possessions, she wished her life too was fuller, more exciting, more glamorous – more anything really. And not for the first time, she realized that deep down she envied Marjorie's easy way with people and her attractiveness. She looked forward to the day when her fiancé, Stephen, returned home. He was in the army, presently in Korea in a war that was thankfully winding down, but he assured her any fighting wasn't likely to involve him. He was a staff officer and well away from the frontline. She prayed it were so and he wasn't just saying that to make her happy.

As she prepared her evening meal, she considered what to say in her letter today. She wrote to Stephen every day: news from home, news of his parents, news about her work, anything really. What had started as a way to keep him in touch with her, and her with him, was now also a way of making sense of the times in which they lived.

Pauline examined her pantry for supper. There was one piece of Wensleydale cheese, brought back from her last visit home, lettuce, tomatoes and a rather dry half of a cottage loaf, which she would have to toast under the grill to freshen. The cheese and bread situations were a problem she hadn't found solutions to yet. Newcastle shops carried only Cheddar, the hard, orange kind whose only real virtue seemed to be its ability to keep for months. For bread the locals preferred their stotty cakes, a flat oven-bottom bread, to the hearty farmhouse bread she'd grown up with. Added to that the warm summer made the flat feel close and it had a musty smell.

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She'd eat, go out for a walk, as it was such a beautiful evening, and then reply to Stephen's most recent letter.

Her walk was refreshing after her evening meal, but she got home late which left her listless, unable to concentrate, and the letter was put off until tomorrow. The first time she'd failed to write every day as she'd promised to do. But her conscience gave her no rest, so in the early hours, she rose and wrote. It would go by the morning post.