



Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

March 1944

“YOU HAVE ONE CHANCE to make this fly.” Bobby Hamilton leaned across his broad desk and stared her down. “I had to pull more strings than I knew I had to get the brass to bite on sending a woman to Italy. Who sends a woman to a war-torn country? Getting credentials? What a mess.” The man waved his beefy hands down in a dismissive gesture. “Then getting you on the *Queen Mary*?” He chomped hard on his cigar.

Rachel perched on the chair in his crowded office as the Andrews Sisters belted out “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy” on the small Kadette radio sitting atop a stack of papers on Bobby’s overloaded credenza. She kept her back so straight her men’s-style tailored blazer pulled her shoulders back.

She didn’t blink, couldn’t give a single sign of weakness. Her editor may have taken all those steps, but she’d had to convince him first, all while watching her mother waste away day by day.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Justice.”

“I *do*.” She put as much force behind the word as she could without shouting.

He leaned back in his chair, unlit cigar poised to punctuate a thought. "You've got talent. A way with that camera."

She stroked the case, feeling as if it naturally extended from her.

"Don't let me down. Send back photos that will wow readers." He didn't have to mention his bosses.

"Yes, sir." Rachel lurched to her feet and straightened her skirt's front pleat as she hurried from the room before he could call her back.

There was so much to do. Too much before she could join the mass of soldiers and handful of civilians who would cross the Atlantic aboard the HMS *Queen Mary*. If she hurried, she could finish cleaning the apartment and still make it to the hospital before visiting hours ended. It was a stop Rachel had to make, yet dreaded. How could she explain to her mother what she was doing while hiding her secondary purpose?

Rachel climbed the stairs to the small flat she'd shared with her mother for as many years as she could remember. With her coming absence and her mother's declining health, Rachel had let the lease lapse. A friend already had the few boxes filled with Rachel's lifetime of mementos and memories while another friend held her mother's things. The furniture never belonged to them, so it would stay. All that remained was to clean what she could, leaving it in reasonable condition for the landlord.

As she tackled the small bedroom with a bucket of water and a rag, Rachel reached as far as she could under the bed. Her cloth-covered fingers groped against a surface . . . a book? She dropped the rag, then stretched farther, inching her head partway under the bed to reach the item. She grasped an edge and pulled it free.

The volume had a spiral-wire binding with heavy cardboard covers. Between those were thick pages covered with charcoal drawings. As she flipped through it, some of the images looked like different sketches of the same scene. Over and over. From

different angles. Varying perspectives. Alternating attempts at techniques. Some were quite good, others pedestrian. All contained one woman, a large hat obscuring her features as she stared across a meadow at a field of some sort. Another hill appeared to be terraced, its steep edges softened by the drop-offs.

Rachel flipped through the book but did not see a name, a year, even a location. Nothing indicated who the artist was or when he worked. The book might contain preliminary sketches of a larger work. She'd often seen her mother use the same technique on the rare occasions they had enough extra money to allow her to create an oil painting. Because supplies were so precious, her mother labored over each painting, testing visions until she had one that pleased her.

It had grieved Rachel to sell her mother's paintings. But with their limited income, the paintings were what she could sell to keep her mother in the hospital. Now those were gone.

She scanned the pages one more time. One drawing held initials in the right-hand corner: RMA. Initials that weren't her mother's. Rachel slipped the book in her knapsack next to her mother's diary she'd found while cleaning out the closet, then returned to her work.

An hour later she closed the apartment door, leaving the key with the super on the first floor. As she walked the streets to the hospital, she slipped between those walking home from work or heading out for the evening. A GI wrapped his arm around a pretty girl bundled in a rich velvet turban and heavy coat. A mother guided an energetic son in his zigzagging pattern up the sidewalk.

Who would miss her if something happened? Her mother? A handful of others? But there was no one to wrap an arm around her and pull her close, whether to ward off the chill or because he couldn't get close enough. She'd poured her energy into proving she could handle a career as a journalist. The last year her

remaining time had been poured into nursing her mother, trying to coax life into her.

The brick hospital loomed in front of her. Rachel stepped inside, nodded to the volunteer at the desk, then wound her way through the too-bright halls to the back of the third floor where her mother waited in a ward. The faint scent of disinfectant almost covered the distinct hospital aroma that surrounded Rachel. She sipped the air through her mouth as her gaze bounced around the ward.

She crept toward her mother's narrow bed but couldn't force herself to look into her mother's eyes, not when the woman had read her every thought with a glance from the moment Rachel had first breathed.

"Tell me."

"What?" Her gaze strayed, anywhere but Momma's knowing eyes.

"You have news. Something big. Earth changing."

"All of that happens across an ocean." One of which she would cross. Soon. A chill skittered down her spine. She wanted this, didn't she? In fact, she'd pushed so hard for it, her editor couldn't ignore her a moment longer. She'd won. But when she looked at her mother, lying there pale and emaciated, Rachel feared she'd lost.

A harsh cough rattled from her mother. She tensed as if a vise squeezed the very air from her lungs. When Rachel knew her mother couldn't sustain another breath, she relaxed.

Rachel laced and unlaced her fingers. "You okay, Momma?"

"As okay as I can be." A wan smile tipped her mouth as her mother dabbed a handkerchief against her lips. Rachel exhaled when no blood dotted it. "So . . ."

"I've been assigned to Europe. I leave on the next boat."

Her mother frowned, the edges of youthful grace slipping

from her in the motion. “You got your way. Proved you were ready?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I see.” The words sounded harsh like leaves crunching against an autumn sidewalk.

“I want to do something that matters. Bring the war home to people who can’t imagine it. To those who are weary of the news we aren’t winning. Somewhere there are stories that show the progress we’re making. I want to share those.”

“I suppose you talked your way to Italy in the bargain.”

“Yes.” There was no way Rachel would stop before she reached her goal. It didn’t matter what she had to prove to whom—she’d do it. All to find the man who’d abandoned her before her birth . . . but the man who might have the money to get Momma the treatment she so desperately needed.

“I don’t want you looking for him.” Steel undergirded the words, the kind that if Momma had her strength, Rachel wouldn’t dare to cross. Instead, this time she’d be half a world away.

Half a world.

The prospect could scare the spit right out of her or force Rachel to find the courage the war required.

Another cough called Rachel back to her purpose. Without a miracle the tuberculosis would call Momma home soon. Her mother reached across the blanket for a handkerchief, her fingers knocking it to the floor. Rachel rummaged through her purse for a handkerchief, anything that would ease Momma’s suffering. Her hands brushed the book, then a handkerchief. She handed the soft cloth to Momma, then retrieved the book.

“What do you have?” Momma’s voice was a weak whisper.

“I found this under the bed.”

“You should have left it there.”

“What is it?”

“A trinket from the past.” A cough shook Momma’s frame, daring to pull her under and never let go.

“Momma?” Rachel tucked the book in her bag and scrambled to ease her mother. She had to stop it before the cough robbed Momma of her life.

The doctors said there was nothing more they could do, but Rachel knew it was a lie. They needed money before they’d try another treatment. Now she had the vehicle to make more money—she had to board the boat in New York City. Then Momma wouldn’t rely on the kindness of old family friends. Not when the hospital couldn’t keep her much longer without writing *paid in full* across the bill.

“Maybe I should stay, . . .” Rachel’s words trailed off.

Momma shook her head. “Why stay here and watch me waste away? Get out there. Take that camera and shoot the best pictures. You’ve got more talent than anyone over there.”

“You need me here.”

“Not as much as I want to know you’re making something of yourself.” Her momma squeezed out another smile. “Give me a hug and drop me a line every now and again. Ruth will make sure I get them.”

Rachel nodded, fighting the tears that crowded her vision. “Yes, ma’am.” She had to do this. For Momma. And for herself. She needed to prove to the rest of the world she could create art with her camera that mattered. That she could make a difference in the war effort. That her past did not control her future.

But if Momma died while she was gone . . .

Her mother struggled to rise off the hospital cot. She fumbled with the silver necklace she’d worn every day Rachel could remember. “Here, take this. I want you to have it.”

“Momma . . .” Rachel’s fear escalated. “You shouldn’t give that to me.”

“I received it in Italy. You should take it back.” Momma shoved it at her, then started coughing.

Rachel took it and slipped it into her pocket. “Here, take a sip of water.”

“Good afternoon, Miss Justice.” The nurse handed Momma a small cup filled with water. “Ready for your afternoon nap?”

Momma fought to catch her breath. “If you stop this coughing.”

“You been at it?”

Momma frowned. “You couldn’t hear me at your station?”

“No, ma’am.”

“I guess it’s not as bad as I thought.” Momma closed her eyes, fatigue that never used to plague her pulling down the muscles in her face.

“I’ll send postcards, Momma.” Rachel leaned down and kissed her cheek.

“See that you do. You know I’ve always loved getting mail.” She opened her eyes, the icy blueness standing in stark contrast to her pale skin. “And Rachel?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“You leave your father alone.”