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A Song at Twilight

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Chapter One

October 1943

'So this is Harrowbeer.'

Alison Knight stepped out of the Morris 8 and gazed at the hastily erected collection of sheds, huts and hangars. At the far side, she could see aircraft standing on the runways or parked in bays, protected by grass-covered ramparts. Airmen, mechanics and WAAFs were everywhere, driving trucks, walking or cycling briskly along the paths or lounging in the autumn sunshine outside their huts. Lifting her eyes, Alison could see planes tumbling in practice aerobatics over the rolling Devon moors. The air was filled with the roar of their engines.

She stared up at them, wondering if the man who had confessed to her that he was growing more terrified every day was in one of those planes. Throwing it around in the sky with such apparent nonchalance; hiding his fears from his fellow pilots; living a nightmare in his mind.

'Alison?' Andrew asked, concern in his voice. 'Are you all right?'

She shook herself out of her thoughts and smiled at her husband. 'Yes, I'm fine. Just taking it all in. What was here before?' She turned to help Hughie out of the back seat and he stood beside her, stocky and square, his thumb in his mouth and one hand clutching her skirt, gazing up at the aeroplanes. Alison brushed a fair curl back from his

forehead and he twitched away from her with exactly the same impatient gesture that Andrew sometimes used. Although as fair as his mother, all his actions and mannerisms came directly from his father.

Andrew came round the car and stood with his arm across her shoulders. 'Nothing much, as far as I can make out. It was just empty moorland. Nothing between Yelverton, over there –' he pointed at a stubby grey church tower rising from a huddle of buildings '– and a few small villages on this side. Buckland Monachorum, where there's a decent little inn, Buckstone, which is really just a hamlet near the perimeter, and Milton Combe down in the valley. Our cottage is just outside the village on top of the hill. The nearest town is Tavistock, about six miles away.'

'Plymouth's quite near too, isn't it?' she asked, and he nodded.

'About the same distance in the other direction, but it was more or less flattened during the Blitz. I hope you won't feel too isolated, darling.'

'Of course I shan't. Not with all this going on, and you coming home whenever you can.'

Andrew squeezed her shoulders. 'Even if I can't stay every night, we're close enough for me to be able to come home pretty often. You'll see plenty of me, don't worry.' He ruffled his son's fair curls. 'Have to keep an eye on this young man.'

Alison leaned her head against him. 'I could never see too much of you.' She looked out across the airfield again and watched the planes in the sky, repressing a shudder as she thought of the terrifying weeks of the Battle of Britain, with Andrew in the air almost all the time, fighting somewhere over the Channel or France. In the end, he had been shot down over Kent, so help had been swift in reaching him, but the broken leg and ribs and other injuries he had suffered had kept him in hospital for nearly three

months, throughout much of the Blitz of 1940 and 1941. Although he hadn't crashed in the three years since then, Alison could never quite forget that it might happen again.

Andrew, however, seemed to think that he was now invincible. 'I've had my crash,' he would say cheerfully. 'I won't have another one.' And he had been back in the air the moment the doctors had given him the all-clear.

As she stood beside him now, looking out past the huts and hangars at the Devon countryside, Alison could feel the vitality quivering through him. She twisted her neck to look up into his face and saw that abstracted expression that meant he was already, in his mind, somewhere in the sky.

'Are you going to show me where we're living, then?'

Andrew pulled himself back to earth again and grinned down at her. 'Of course, darling. I just hope you'll like it. It's not awfully big.'

'I don't mind that. It's not as if we've got masses of furniture, anyway. Just our crockery and cooking things, and bedding. They'll be arriving tomorrow, so I'll need somewhere to stay tonight. Oh, and my bike's coming as well, so I'll be able to get about.' She looked beyond the airfield towards the village of Yelverton with its square-towered church, and past that at the hills of Dartmoor, topped with their rocky outcrops. Nearer at hand was a sharp escarpment which seemed, like a brooding Sphinx, to be keeping a watchful eye on these noisy intruders. 'I shall be able to explore the moor and villages. It'll be fun.'

'It'll be hilly, too,' he warned her. 'The village itself is at the bottom of a really steep valley. And I'm not sure I like the idea of you cycling about all on your own, with Hughie on that little seat. Dartmoor Prison's not too far away, don't forget – and remember the Sherlock Holmes story. You don't know what might be lurking out there!'

'I don't imagine there are giant hounds, anyway,' she laughed. 'But I'm sure I'll find someone to go with.

There'll be other wives coming down too, won't there? And you might get a bike and come with me sometimes, when you're off-duty.'

Andrew went back to the other side of the car and slid into the driving seat. 'Not if I can help it! As long as I can scrounge some petrol, we'll use this little beauty. Anyway, a lot of the moor's out of bounds now. Get in, and we'll go down to the village pub for a drink before I show you your new home. And I've fixed for you to stay at a farmhouse until you've got the place sorted out.'

He started the engine and the car chugged off down a narrow lane between high, grassy banks with hedges growing from the tops. Behind the hedges, Alison could see tall trees, fields and the occasional cottage. They came to a sharp left-hand turn and shot down a steep road into the village, with rows of old stone cottages on either side and a narrow stream bubbling beside the road. An old inn stood at the bottom of the hill, with a low wall running along in front of it.

'What a lovely village,' Alison said as she stood in the narrow street. She could hear the sound of children's voices coming from nearby and the singing of birds from the trees that towered above the steep valley sides. An old man was sweeping up leaves along the edge of the road and the innkeeper was rolling a barrel along in front of the inn. 'You'd never think there was a war on, it's so peaceful.'

'Well, it was until they built the airfield,' he grinned. 'I think we must have made quite a difference to the rural atmosphere. Anyway, shall we have a snifter now that we're here? We can sit outside with Hughie – they've got a bit of a garden with a few seats. You're not in too much of a hurry to see the house, are you?'

'I have to admit I'm thirsty after that long train journey,' she said as Andrew carried out a pint of beer for himself and lemonade for herself and Hughie. There were a few

other customers already there, sprawled on benches in the sunshine – pilots in flying jackets and two or three WAAFs in their soft blue-grey uniform. Alison leaned back and let her eyes travel round the old stone walls of the inn and the nearby cottages, wondering what stories they could tell.

Andrew glanced up as one of the pilots approached them. 'Here comes Tubby Marsh to say hello. Come on, Tub, park your bottom here and try to behave yourself.'

Alison followed his glance and felt her heart move a little. The man coming towards them was about the same age as Andrew, in his late twenties, and Alison had known him ever since before the war had started. For a long time, he and Andrew had flown in the same squadron but now they were both Squadron Leaders, although still in the same Wing. He wasn't married but he'd had a string of girlfriends, and Alison could see the attraction. Chubby he might be, but his fair, boyish face had an engaging cheekiness that came as a relief from the serious business of fighting a war. Most of the pilots, especially when going through the major battles, treated life with a flippancy that masked their real fears, but with Tubby it had always seemed natural and unforced.

The rotund pilot beamed at Alison and sat down beside her. He took a sip from his tankard and said, 'I see you're still going in for self-denial and punishment. Why you ever married this buffoon, when you could have had me, I've never been able to understand.'

Alison smiled. 'I didn't know you then,' she pointed out, and he thought for a moment, then nodded.

'That must be it, then. Knew you must have some reason. Pity, though.' He drank again and winked at Hughie. 'And how's this young feller-me-lad, eh? Remember your Uncle Tubby, do you?'

'She married me because she knew a good bet when she saw one,' Andrew told him. 'And because I knew the

minute I set eyes on her that I wasn't going to let anyone else have her.'

Alison looked from one to the other, then turned away, afraid that her thoughts might show. She nodded towards the inn sign, painted along the front of the long, low building. 'That's an unusual name – the Who'd Have Thought It. D'you know why it's called that?'

'Probably because the whole village is the last thing you expect to see when you come down that fearsome hill!' Andrew said. 'It's pretty old. Francis Drake used to live nearby, at Buckland Abbey – remember we passed it just up the road? All the land hereabouts, and this village, would have been part of the estate. This old inn must have quite a history.'

'It'll get a bit more, now that the RAF's moved in,' Tubby observed with a grin. 'Especially the Poles! I gather half of them are counts or princes or something, and they're *all* a hit with the ladies. You'll have to watch this pretty wife of yours, Andy.' He looked at her with frank admiration. 'That lovely frock is exactly the same shade as your eyes, and exactly the same as the sky when we're flying above the clouds. How do you always manage to dress like a princess, when other women are cutting up old clothes?'

'I'm cutting up old clothes too,' she told him. 'This was one of my deb dresses. In a year or two it will be a blouse and it'll probably finish up as a scarf. Or even a handkerchief,' she added ruefully, 'if this war goes on for as long as Mr Churchill seems to think it will.' She changed the subject. 'Are there many wives here?'

Tubby set down his tankard. 'Well, not many of the blokes are married. Didn't have the sense that old Andy here had when he snapped you up. Anyway, ninety per cent of them are only about nineteen or twenty – haven't had time to get caught yet. There are the WAAFs, though.

They're having a camp built just up the road from Buckland Monachorum – the next village. There's a handy little footpath from there down through the fields to the Drake Manor Inn.' He winked. 'I dare say a few will be using that – quite a lovers' lane, it'll be. Probably give it a try myself, one fine evening.'

'Tubby!' she remonstrated. 'Don't you ever think of anything but girls?'

'Not when I'm down here with my feet on the ground,' he said. 'Don't give 'em a thought when I'm in the air, though.'

Alison bit her lip. She had begun to relax in the banter but Tubby's words were a sharp reminder that the war was still being fought and that he and Andrew would be fighting it. She still had nightmares about the day Andrew had crashed – the realisation that he hadn't returned from the sortie, the anxious wait for a phone call telling her that he had landed safely somewhere else, and then the news that he was injured. Guiltily, she had hoped that he would be kept out of the air completely, but she'd known as soon as she saw him in his hospital bed that he would be flying again at the first possible moment.

'Look at Douglas Bader,' he'd said. 'If he can fly with tin legs, I'm darned sure I can with real ones. A few broken bones aren't going to beat me. Anyway, the docs say they're stronger after a break.'

She caught Andrew's eyes on her now and knew that he understood what she was thinking. He gave her a little nod and said, 'Come on, darling, you must be dying to see our new home. And Hughie's getting tired. You've had a long train journey. Let's be on our way, shall we?'

'You mean you don't want to sit here making conversation with me,' Tubby said mournfully. 'Well, I don't blame you. I know I wouldn't want to hang about with my pals if I were old Andy here, with a lovely wife to take home.' He

picked up his tankard again. 'Run along, children. Enjoy yourselves. Don't worry about poor old Tubby, left here all alone to cry into his ale.'

'If you're here all alone it'll be for the first time,' Andrew told him heartlessly, tossing back the last of his own beer. 'We'll not be halfway up the street before you're flirting with the barmaid. Come on, Alison, let's leave the old phoney to drown his sorrows. You'll be seeing plenty of him, more's the pity.'

'You certainly will,' Tubby said, winking at Alison. 'I'm expecting a permanent invitation to *chez* Knight once you're settled in. Parties every night, that's what Andy's promised us.'

'You'll be welcome any time,' Alison said sincerely, getting up to follow Andrew to the door. She looked down at him and their eyes met for a moment. 'You know that.'

The village street was quiet. A couple of women stood outside the little shop across the road, holding baskets over their arms as they chatted. The sides of the valley rose towards the blue sky, the trees tinged with auburn and gold. It seemed impossible to believe that there was a war on; that not far away, in another country, people were killing and being killed; that her own husband, whose arm she was holding now, would soon be back in the thick of it, risking both his life and their happiness; and that without those risks, taken by so many young men, all such happiness and freedom, and the very peace of this tiny village, might be lost for ever.

She glanced again at Tubby, remembering the last time they had met, only a week or two ago, before he and Andrew had been moved from Manston in Kent to this newer airfield in Devonshire. Then she turned back to her husband.

'Let's go and look at the house,' she said. 'Let's go and see where we shall be living.'