Bye Bye Love

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS going to be a very special day. Not that there were any clues to it when Scarlett Smith woke up. Everything seemed much the same. There was the sound of her mother's broom knocking against the skirting-boards as she swept the floors downstairs, there was the drone of a BBC accent coming from the wireless and there was the familiar smell, the one that Scarlett had grown up with, the smell of stale beer and cigarette ash. The morning smell of a pub.

But today was June the second. Coronation Day. The Queen was going to be crowned Elizabeth II of England and it was going to be extremely busy at the Red Lion. Scarlett slid out of bed, washed in cold water, pulled on an old cotton dress and a cardigan and ran down the creaking stairs to the lounge bar. Joan Smith, a floral overall wrapped round her cosy body, was mopping the floor. She looked up with a smile.

'How's my darling girl this fine morning? Not that it is fine. It's raining. Such a pity! And all those people sleeping out on the pavements in London to get a look at the Queen. It said on the news they was out in their

thousands. Old people. Little kiddies. But they're all in great spirits, they said. Ready to cheer and wave their Union Jacks.'

'Must be wonderful to be up in London,' Scarlett said.

'Yes—a once in a lifetime event. The fairy tale princess becomes queen.' Her mother sighed. She leaned on the handle of her mop, a faraway expression in her eyes. Joan Smith loved a good story. A real life one featuring a real live queen was even better. Then she snapped out of it. 'Still, we're going to have a right old knees-up here, aren't we? Morris dancers, tea on the village green—mind you, it might be in the village hall at this rate—and us open all day so as people can toast Her Majesty. No peace for the wicked! Come on, sweetheart, fetch a bucket and cloth and do the bars and tables for us. Sooner we finish, sooner we can have breakfast. I got fresh eggs. Old Harry brought us in a basin last night.'

Mother and daughter worked rapidly through the lounge and public bars, wiping, polishing, setting out clean ashtrays, fresh beer mats and bar towels, straightening the tables and stools. Nobody looking on would have guessed they were related. Joan was round and dumpy, her brown hair greying, her blue eyes fading, her hands cracked and swollen and knees stiff from a lifetime of hard work. Scarlett, at fourteen, was already taller than her mother, slim and strong with big brown eyes and long dark hair pulled back in a shiny ponytail, her coltish figure starting to develop into a woman's body.

'Don't it look lovely?' Joan said as they gave a last rub to the horse brasses on the beams.

'Very patriotic,' Scarlett agreed.

The Red Lion was all dressed up for the Coronation.

Outside there was red, white and blue bunting draped from the windows and over the sign, with a big Union Jack over the door, and inside more Union Jacks and flags from the countries of the great British Empire were hung around the bars. Pictures of the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh and the little prince and princess had been cut out of magazines, framed with red, white and blue ribbons and stuck up on any available wall space. A specially brewed Coronation Ale had been delivered from the brewery a few days ago and was nicely settled and ready to serve to any of Her Majesty's loyal subjects who cared to drink her health. Nobody could say the Smiths hadn't made an effort.

The two put away the cleaning things and Joan set about making breakfast in the kitchen-cum-living room behind the public area. It was rather a dark room, tacked onto the back of the main building and crowded with a table and chairs, sink and stove and dresser, and a sitting area of two Windsor chairs and a small fireside chair grouped round the fireplace. The big brown wireless set sat in pride of place on a small table next to the larger of the Windsor chairs. When Scarlett was little, the grouping reminded her of the Three Bears, and she would always be ready to guard her breakfast porridge against invasions of golden-haired thieves.

Joan poured tea into a large white cup, put in three sugars, stirred it and handed it to Scarlett.

'Go up and give your dad his cuppa, lovey.'

Scarlett walked carefully up the stairs. Her dad never made an appearance until half an hour or so before opening time, giving himself just enough time to check the beers, have a cigarette and look at the sports page

of the newspaper before the first customers of the day came in. Scarlett tapped on the door of her parents' bedroom, listened for the muffled reply from inside and went in. The curtains were still closed and the air smelt of beer fumes. Her father had had a hard night last night. The regulars had been getting in some practice at toasting the new queen and naturally the landlord had to keep them company.

Victor Smith raised his head from the pillow as his daughter came in.

'Ah—tea—what a lovely girl you are.'

He coughed, fumbled for his cigarettes and matches, lit up the first Player's Navy Cut of the day and took a deep drag.

'That's better. Tell your mum I'll be down soon.'

Scarlett raised her eyebrows at this.

'Pull the other one, Dad.'

They both knew that pigs would fly and the moon turn blue before Victor made it to breakfast.

Victor laughed, coughed and patted her arm.

'You're getting too knowing by half, you are. Sharp as a barrowload of monkeys. What's two pints of best, a rum and black and a half of mild and bitter?'

Scarlett added them up in her head in a trice, then made up a longer round for him to calculate. It was a game they had played practically since she could count. As a result she was top of her class at mental arithmetic.

'Can't beat you these days,' Victor admitted.

Scarlett kissed the top of his head, left him to his tea and cigarette and went back to the kitchen.

'He all right?' her mother asked, whipping eggs out of the frying pan and slipping them onto a plate.

‘’Course,’ Scarlett said.

When she was younger, she had accepted the idea that fathers lay in bed while mothers worked. Even when she’d realised that other fathers got up and cycled to farms and factories to start work at eight, or down to the station to catch a train up to London and start work at nine, she’d still accepted it because, as her mother pointed out, other fathers didn’t have to stand behind a bar each evening. But as she’d grown older she’d realised that it was her mother who served the drinks, cleared the glasses, changed the optics, emptied the ashtrays and washed up. Her father supervised. That involved leaning on the bar, chatting to the customers and sampling the stock.

‘Oh, but he has all the cellar work to do,’ her mother said when Scarlett questioned this. ‘Everybody says he serves the best pint for miles around.’

Which was true. The Red Lion and Victor Smith were famous for their beers, and he was known as a good landlord who made everyone feel at home but dealt quickly with any potential trouble. And though other dads might work harder than hers, none of them were more fun, or quicker to back you up when you needed it. All the same, she couldn’t help thinking that it would have been nice to have a bit more help today.

‘Here you are, poppet.’

Joan placed a blue and white striped plate in front of her. On it were piled two chunky slices of fried bread, a rasher of bacon and two large fried eggs, the whites crispy around the edges, just the way she liked them.

Scarlett sat down at the rickety table with its checked yellow oilcloth cover.

'Two eggs?' she questioned.

'Well—we need to keep our strength up,' her mother said, but she only managed to work her way through one egg herself before she pushed her plate to one side and sat holding her teacup and staring at its contents.

Scarlett looked at her. Anxiety stirred within her.

'What's the matter, Mum? You all right?'

'Yes, yes, quite all right.'

'You ain't eaten your breakfast.'

Her mother never left food on her plate. It was a waste. After years of wartime rationing, nobody ever wasted a crumb.

'I will. In a minute.'

Joan's hands were shaking. She put the teacup down.

'Mum? You've gone all pale.'

'It's all right. I'm fine. Just a touch of heartburn, that's all. Go and fetch me the Milk of Magnesia, there's a good girl.'

Scarlett ran to the corner cupboard and got out the blue bottle. She gave it a good shake and poured the thick white liquid into a spoon. Her mother swallowed it down.

'That's it. That'll do the trick.'

But still she pushed her plate towards Scarlett.

'You finish it off for me, darling. Go on, before it gets cold.'

Scarlett did as she was told, though worry made it difficult to eat.

'P'raps you ought to go to the doctor, Mum.'

'Oh, doctors—I know what he'll say if I do. Take a tonic and get some rest. Rest! Who's going to do my work if I rest, that's what I'd like to know.'

'I could, if you'd let me.'

Joan patted her hand.

'That's very nice of you, dear, but you do quite enough to help round the place already. And you got your studies. You got to do well at school. That's the way to get on in life.'

Scarlett sighed. She knew there was no shifting her mother on that point.

'Well, get someone else in, then. Just someone to serve behind the bar on a couple of evenings, so you wouldn't have to work every day. Everyone else has a day off a week, Mum. Why shouldn't you?'

Unspoken between them was the fact that Victor went to football every Saturday afternoon and to the greyhound racing at Southend every Wednesday evening without fail.

'Get someone in? A barmaid? Oh, I don't know about that, lovey. We couldn't afford the wages. Things are tight enough as it is, without starting paying other people to do what I can perfectly well do myself.'

'But Mum—'

'Look, I'm all right, see? There's nothing wrong with me that another cup of tea won't cure.'

She certainly didn't look as white and clammy as she had done a few minutes ago. But Scarlett couldn't shake the persistent anxiety gnawing at her overfull stomach. This wasn't the first time her mother had had one of these turns.

'But Mum—'

'Enough said, pet, right? I don't want to hear no more about it. We didn't come into this world to have an easy ride. You got to keep at it, like Scarlett O'Hara. She never let anything stop her. Wars, famine, whatever,

she still kept right on. That's why I named you after her, Scarlett. I wanted you to be like her—fearless, not a little mouse like me.'

'You're not a little mouse, Mum.'

Scarlett had heard this story countless times before. It was one of her mother's favourites.

'Oh, but I was. Still am, really. Of course, I didn't have much of a choice. I had to look after my mum and dad, didn't I? First him and then her, both of them invalids. All those years.'

Joan sipped at a fresh cup of tea, looking inwards, back down the years. The commentator on the wireless was describing the crowds gathered for the coronation, but neither woman heard him.

'Thirty-seven, I was, when poor Mum died. Never had a job, never went out dancing with young men, never done nothing except go to the library and borrow lots of books. Didn't know how to do anything but run a house and look after invalids. And there I was, alone in the world with the rent to pay and no pension nor nothing coming in now they'd passed on, God bless them. So I thought I'd better get something doing the same thing. I couldn't be a proper nurse—I didn't have the training—but I thought maybe I could get something live-in with another invalid. And I guess I would have done just that, and been a poor old maid with no life of my own, if I hadn't—'

'—met my dad,' Scarlett said for her.

Joan smiled. Her voice was soft with love. 'Yes. Your dad. Oh, he was so handsome! Like a film star. Tall, dark, lovely black hair he had, just like yours, and those flashing dark eyes, and that lovely smile. Just waiting

there at the bus stop he was. My fate. Just think, if I'd got there five minutes later, I'd of missed him, and then I wouldn't be Mrs Smith now, and you would never of been born. Just think of that! No Scarlett in this world. No wonderful daughter to love and watch over. Best thing that ever happened to me, you are.'

'Oh, Mum—' Scarlett leaned over and gave her mother a hug. 'You soppy old thing.'

'I mean it,' Joan insisted, hugging her back, stroking her hair. 'I couldn't ask for a better daughter than you. My Scarlett. *Gone with the Wind.* Oh, how I loved that book. Scarlett O'Hara was everything I wasn't—she was rich and beautiful and brave and she didn't care what she said or who she took on. And just look at you! You're beautiful and brave, and maybe one day you'll be rich.'

'Oh, yes, and then I'll have a big house with a swimming pool, like a film star,' Scarlett said.

It was a game they often played, the When I Am Rich game. Sometimes it was Scarlett who was going to become rich, by marrying a millionaire or being a beauty queen, sometimes it was Joan, who was going to win the football pools.

'Wasn't so long since you wanted a pony and a pink taffeta dress.' Joan sighed. 'Now it's a big house with a swimming pool.'

'Yes, well, I'm fourteen now,' Scarlett reminded her.

'Fourteen. Quite the young lady.'

Joan held her daughter's face between her hands and looked at her long and hard. Then she gave a nod and stood up.

'Yes, quite grown up. Grown up enough to read *Gone with the Wind.* I'll fetch it for you.'

She bustled out of the door. Scarlett started to clear the table and pile the plates up by the sink. At last she was going to be allowed to read the story that had figured in her mother's tales ever since she could remember. Since she had joined the adult section of the public library, her hand had often hovered over a copy of the novel. She had even picked it up, opened it, read the first page. There was nothing to stop her from borrowing and reading it, nothing except the amazing grip it held on her mother's imagination. It had been held out to her as a huge treat, something to look forward to, something almost as good as marrying a film star or winning the football pools, except that the sensible part of her knew that she would probably never do either of those things, whereas one day she surely would get to read all about her namesake.

'Here we are.'

Her mother came back into the kitchen and sat down at the table, breathless, holding her side.

'Oh, dear me. Those stairs. I swear they get steeper every day. There—here it is. I've read it so many times it's a wonder the pages haven't worn out.'

Scarlett took the book and ran her hands reverentially over the cover. She looked at the spine. *Gone with the Wind by Margaret Mitchell.* She opened it up and read the first line, the first paragraph, the first page. She was transported back ninety years or more to the front porch of a plantation house in Georgia. Such a strange world, so very different from her own.

Her mother touched her shoulder.

'Things to be done, pet.'

'Mu-um—' Scarlett protested. 'You can't give it to me, then tell me I can't read it!'

'Well, maybe I shouldn't of, but we got to get going, love.'

Joan had her hands in the sink. The first of many lots of washing up she would be doing today, what with all the glasses people would be using. Scarlett read one more paragraph, sighed dramatically and walked over to pick up the tea towel.

By the time Victor sauntered down the stairs the morning's chores were all done and Joan and Scarlett were glued to the wireless.

'What's all this, then?' he asked, squeezing Joan's shoulder, kissing Scarlett's cheek. 'Slacking on the job?'

'Oh, it's so wonderful,' Joan breathed. 'All the singing and that. He describes it so well. The people and the robes, all the colours. I just wish we had one of those televisions. It must be wonderful to watch it all going on.'

'It's what we do best, ain't it?' Victor said. 'Us British. We do pomp and ceremony best in the world.'

He pulled up a chair and lit a cigarette. Scarlett made her parents another cup of tea each and left them sitting contentedly, one either side of the big brown wireless, while she picked up the precious copy of *Gone with the Wind* and went to her room to change. Like everyone in the country who could possibly afford it, she had a new dress to wear for Coronation Day. It was blue cotton with white polka dots, with a tight bodice and a fashionably full skirt. She tied a long red, white and blue striped ribbon round her ponytail and then turned this way and that in front of the small mirror over the chest of drawers, trying to get a full length view of herself. What she could see pleased her. She put her hands to her slim waist and pushed it in still further, smiling at

her reflection. She might not be a southern belle like Scarlett O'Hara, but today was a special day and she was going to enjoy it.

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