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Opening Extract from...

Letters from Home

Written by Kristina McMorris

Published by Avon,
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Letters from Home

KRISTINA McMORRIS



KENSINGTON BOOKS
www.kensingtonbooks.com

KENSINGTON BOOKS are published by

Kensington Publishing Corp.
119 West 40th Street
New York, NY 10018

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7582-4684-4
ISBN-10: 0-7582-4684-6

First Kensington Trade Paperback Printing: March 2011
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED

to the veterans of World War II,
a generation of heroes who, like my grandfather,
fought valiantly and courageously
to secure freedom for us all.

And to the unsung heroes
with nary a medal nor ribbon to show for their sacrifices—
for 'twas the women who waited for their loved ones to return
who truly gave purpose to their soldiers' victory.

Acknowledgments

Some books sprout and flourish solely from the genius and fortitude of the author. In my case, it took an extremely large village to raise a novel. To these dedicated natives, I owe my immense gratitude:

First and foremost, to my beloved Grandma Jean and Merle "Papa" McPherren, without whom this story would not exist—nor this storyteller, for that matter. Your courtship letters are imprinted forever in my heart. I hope I did you proud.

To my mother, Linda Yoshida, for her faith and editorial input as I slaved over every syllable on these pages, but mostly for not calling me crazy the day I, the non-reader/non-writer, phoned to say, "Hey, I think I'll write a book." And to my father, Junki, for teaching me by example that with determination anything is possible in this great country.

For igniting the spark of my journey, I thank Scott Taylor, who once so aptly stated: "It all starts with Kinko's." Truer words were never spoken. I am especially grateful to those readers who survived my early drafts and still managed to keep a straight face while providing feedback and encouragement, among them: my sister Amanda Yoshida, Sue McMorris, Mike Pettinger, Bryan Mueller, my ever-loyal "divas"—Stephanie Stricklen, Sunny Klever, Michele Blaine, and Lynne House—as well as Tracy Callan, who never fails to make me feel "brilliant." Every person should have a Tracy.

I am indebted to Julia Whitby for her keen editing eyes, and to Delilah Marvelle and Elisabeth Naughton for believing wholly in my story even when I wavered. To Steve Powers for his Midwestern limericks (I'm still frightened by just how many are crammed in his brain), and to all the experts who kindly assisted me with foreign languages, 1940s speak, and accents reaching from South Carolina to Australia, thereby making me sound more worldly than I am.

My sincere appreciation goes to Michelle Guthrie, whose incomparable support carried me through, as did that of Jennifer Sidis, who knew when I should type *The End*. To those who inspired me with their contagious passion for learning while making me earn my "stripes": Joel Malone, Scott "Carp" Carpenter, Pat Crouser, and Joe Palese. Also, of course, to the supremely talented Mike Rich, the effervescent Pixie Chicks, and Lt. Lynn "Buck" Compton, whose humility and devotion to serving others exemplifies what it truly means to be a hero.

While I relied upon a myriad of wonderful readers and historical sources, any errors that slipped through are mine alone. For generously sharing their knowledge, I thank: Dr. Gordon Canzler for his medical savvy, history / military buffs LTC Robert A. Lynn and Alan Cagle, author-historian Mark Bando, research buddy Pete Blaine, Chicago transportation–whiz Henry Morris, archivist extraordinaire Robynne Dexter of the U.S. Army Women's Museum, the U.S. Army Military History Institute, Northwestern University Archives, and World War II veteran / historian Ken Brody, who assured me that I "got it right." There is no greater compliment.

Thank you to my insightful and trusting editor, John Scognamiglio, and the rest of the Kensington team for turning my dream into reality; to my film-rights agent, Jon Cassir, at CAA, for raising that dream to a galactic level; and to Jennifer Schober—my literary agent, dear friend, and partner in crime—for whom there are no words strong enough to express my gratitude. Up next: world domination.

And finally, a most heartfelt thanks to my three favorite boys—my husband, Danny, and sons Tristan and Kiernan—for your overflowing love and patience, and for not complaining about six consecutive months of mac-and-cheese dinners while Mommy typed. You, alone, make life worth living. I love you to Jupiter, over a million cars, around a zillion trees—and back.

Each separate page was like a fluttering flower-petal,
loosed from your own soul, and wafted thus to mine.

—Edmond Rostand, *Cyrano de Bergerac,* act iv, scene viii

1

July 4, 1944
Chicago, Illinois

Silence in the idling Cadillac grew as suffocating as the city's humidity. Hands clenched on her lap, Liz Stephens averted her narrowed eyes toward the open passenger window. Chattering ladies and servicemen flocked by in the shadows; up and down they traveled over the concrete accordion of entrance steps. The sting of laughter and music drifted through the swinging glass doors, bounced off the colorless sky. Another holiday without gunpowder for celebration. No boom of metallic streamers, no sunbursts awakening the night. Only the fading memory of a simpler time.

A time when Liz knew whom she could trust.

"You know the Rotary doesn't invite just anyone to speak," Dalton Harris said finally. The same argument, same lack of apology in his voice. "What was I supposed to do? Tell my father I couldn't be there because of some *dance?*"

At his condescension, her gaze snapped to his slate gray eyes. "That," she said, "is exactly what you should've done."

"Honey. You're being unreasonable."

"So it's unreasonable, wanting us to spend time together?"

"That's not what I meant." A scratch to the back of his neck punctuated his frustration, a habit that had lost the amusing charm

it held when they were kids. Long before the expensive suits, the perfect ties, the Vitalis-slickening of his dark brown hair.

"Listen." His square jaw slackened as he angled toward her, a debater shifting his approach. "When I was asked to run my dad's campaign, we talked about this. I warned you my schedule would be crazy until the election. And you were the one who said I should do it, that between classes and work, you'd be—"

"As busy as ever," she finished sharply. "Yes. I know what I said." With Dalton in law school and her a sophomore at Northwestern, leading independent but complementary lives was nothing new; in fact, that had always been among the strengths of their relationship. Which was why he should know their separate activities weren't the issue tonight.

"Then what's the problem?"

"The problem is, anything else pops up, campaign or otherwise, and you don't think twice about canceling on me."

"I am *not* canceling. I'm asking you to come with me."

Liz had attended enough political fund-raisers with him to know that whispers behind plastered smiles and greedy glad-handing would be highlights of the night. A night she could do without, even if not for her prior commitment.

"I already told you," she said, "I promised the girls weeks ago I'd be here." The main reason she'd agreed, given her condensed workload from summer school, was to repay Betty for accompanying her to that droning version of *Henry V* last week—just so Dalton's ticket hadn't gone to waste. "Why can't you make an exception? Just this once?"

He dropped back in his seat, drew out a sigh. "Lizzy, it's just a dance."

No, it's not. It's more than that. I have to know I can depend on you! Her throat fastened around her retort. Explosions of words, she knew all too well, could bring irreversible consequences.

She grabbed the door handle. "I have to go." Before he could exit and circle around to open her side, she let herself out.

"Wait," he called as she shut the door. "Sweetheart, hold on."

The sudden plea in his voice tugged at her like strings, halting

her. Could it be that he had changed his mind? That he was still the same guy she could count on?

She slid her hand into the pocket of her ivory wraparound dress, a shred of hope cupped in her palm, before pivoting to face him.

Dalton leaned across the seat toward her. "We'll talk about this later, all right?"

Disappointment throbbed inside, a recurrent bruise. Bridling her reaction, she replied with a nod, fully aware her agreement would translate into a truce.

"Have a good time," he said, then gripped the steering wheel and drove away.

As she turned for the stairs, she pulled her hand from her pocket, and discovered she'd been holding but a stray thread. The first sign of a seam unraveling.

In the entry of the dance hall, Liz stretched up on the balls of her feet to see over hats and heads. Her gaze penetrated the light haze of smoke to reach the stage. There, uniformed musicians played from behind star-patterned barricades of red, white, and blue. Flags and an oversized USO banner created a vibrant backdrop, Americana at its finest. In front of the band, her roommate Betty Cordell and two other women shared a standing microphone, harmonizing the final notes of "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree."

The audience broke into applause.

"Swell." Liz groaned. She'd missed Betty's entire debut.

Correcting her presumption, the trio jumped into another jingle.

"Thank God." Though not a particularly religious person, Liz figured it never hurt to offer a small token of appreciation to the Almighty.

Now to find her other roommate, Julia Renard. Despite the teeming room, it took only a moment to spy the girl's fiery, collar-length curls, her ever-chic attire.

Liz wove through the sea of military uniforms and thick wafts of Aqua Velva. Ignoring a duet of catcalls, she slid into the empty chair next to her friend. "I'm so sorry I'm late."

"Let me guess," Julia ventured in her honey-sweet voice. "Mr. Donovan lost his dentures, or Thelma refused to take her pills, convinced you're trying to poison her."

Liz edged out a smile.

"You know, it wouldn't kill you to get off work at a decent hour. You're making the rest of us look bad." She used her thumb to wipe something off Liz's cheek. "So, is Dalton parking the car?"

Liz tried for a casual shrug. "A political thing came up at the last minute." *Again* trailed her statement as the unspoken word.

"Oh," Julia replied. Not even her glowing smile could hide the sympathy invading her copper eyes.

"It's fine," Liz insisted. "I can't stay long anyway. I've got an essay on Hawthorne due Friday."

Julia nodded, then detoured from the awkward pause. "Hey, I think I still have notes on Hawthorne from last semester. Want to borrow them?"

"Sure, thanks," Liz said, before considering the source. "Unless you've got doodle designs covering the actual notes."

Julia scrunched her mouth, pondering. "Well, there might be a few. . . ."

Liz couldn't help but giggle. If past lives existed, Julia had to have been an elite fashion designer with a permanently attached sketchpad. A keen knack for sewing served as further proof, as showcased by their roommate's new dress.

"Speaking of which." Liz motioned toward Betty. "You've really outdone yourself, Jules." In the center of the crooning trio, the blonde sparkled in the form-fitted garment matching her ocean blue eyes. The fabric and buttons were so dazzling, Julia had obviously purchased the materials herself. No doubt the dress was already Betty's favorite. From the exquisite sweetheart neckline to the elegant flow around her hips, every stitch perfectly flattered her hourglass curves. "Rita Hayworth?" Liz guessed at the inspiration.

"Yep," Julia said proudly. "From the gown in *Blood and Sand*. Except I shortened it to the knee, and improved on the sleeves."

"You're amazing." *Too amazing to waste your talent solely as a homemaker,* she wanted to say. But there was no need traversing that well-covered territory.

"It was nothing." Julia blushed, waved her off. "You want something to drink?"

Liz only intended to stay for three songs, four tops. But some coffee to ripen her brain for a long night of reading wasn't a bad idea. "A cup of joe would be great."

"Coming right up."

As Julia headed toward the snack table by the stage, Liz settled in her seat. She massaged the tension out of her palms and returned her attention to Betty. In a seasoned motion, the girl tossed her finger-waved mane off her shoulders. The bounce of her hips succeeded as a diversion from her moderate singing ability, evidenced by the front line of awestruck troops, her ideal audience.

Leave it to Betty. Up there, living carefree, without regrets. No academic pressures, no parents' expectations looming overhead—

Jealous souls will not be answered. The passage interrupted Liz's thoughts, one of many Shakespearean quotes she had memorized from her father's personal tutorials.

"One quote for every sun kiss," he would say during the lessons that ended far too soon.

Now, glancing down at the constellation of freckles on her arms, Liz recalled those long-gone days. She considered the morals her father had passed along, and wondered how different their lives would be if only she'd abided by them.

"What the hell are you up to now?" Morgan McClain demanded as his brother ducked behind his back.

"Don't move. Need you to cover me." Charlie raised his shoulders to his sandy blond crew cut.

When Morgan glimpsed the silver flask in his brother's hand, he shook his head. Charlie wasn't the only enlisted man at the dance calling for "liquid reinforcement," just the only one daring enough to dip into his supply ten feet from the volunteers' snack station. Luckily, the herd of GIs standing around them at the foot of the stage offered plenty of khaki camouflage. Or at least Morgan clung to that hope as his brother choked on the drink. Whiskey, from the smell of it.

"Hurry up, will ya?" Morgan told him. Typically, he would have

voiced his disproval, but with Charlie's tension over tomorrow's departure vibrating the air, he decided to let it go. So long as the kid didn't get carried away.

"Ahh, much better," Charlie rasped, emerging from the protective shadow. He stepped up behind a couple of GIs from another outfit, both of them wolf whistling at the platinum blond singer on stage. "Sorry, fellas"—Charlie clapped them on the back—"but she's already agreed to mother my fourteen children."

"Don't fool yourself, shorty," the tall guy spat out. "You wouldn't know how to use it even if you could find it."

Charlie straightened, adding a few inches to his compact stature. "Hey, at least I *have* one, spaghetti bender."

"What'd you say?" The Italian GI angled his head over his wide shoulder.

"You heard me." Charlie took a step back. He rocked from side to side, dukes raised like Jack Dempsey.

As usual, Morgan would have to shut him up before a bigger guy's right hook beat him to it. "Zip it, Charlie," he ordered, then regarded the Italian. "Don't pay him any mind. It's his first day out of the loony bin." Not a stretch to believe, considering the mismatched challenge.

The GI's mouth twitched, from either amusement or agitation. To be safe, Morgan gestured to the stage and said, "Don't look now, but I think that red-hot tomato's got her eye on you, pal." The sentence launched the soldier's attention back to the bombshell, where it stuck like glue.

Problem handled.

Except for the instigator.

"So help me, Charlie," Morgan muttered, "if you weren't . . . my . . . if . . ." The lecture dissolved at a vision beyond his brother's shoulder. Across the room a petite beauty sat alone, swaying to the music. Strands of chestnut brown hair slipped from the knot at the nape of her neck, a frame for her heart-shaped face. Creamy skin, feminine curves, full, rounded lips. Each feature was no less than eye catching, but it was the way she moved—like wheat in a summer breeze—that mesmerized him.

"Hey, you okay?"

Morgan heard the question but didn't realize it was directed at him until a fluttering object broke the trance: a wave of Charlie's fingers.

"Huh? Uh, yeah. Yeah, I'm fine."

Charlie swept a glance over the room, tracing the distraction. Soon a gleam appeared in his hazel eyes. "Aha, I see . . ." He twisted around and declared, "Gentlemen, we've located our primary target. We're goin' in."

Before Morgan could object, his brother began pressing him through the crowd like a restive racehorse into the starting gate. GIs whooped, whistled, and hollered "attaboys" in his direction. If he retreated now, the razzing would only worsen.

He pulled a deep breath. Adjusting his tucked necktie, he imagined introducing himself; he got as far as his name when a redhaired woman joined the brunette's table. A growing audience. His shoes turned to cinder blocks. He raised an arm to stop his brother, who swooped under and pounced into place, blocking the women's view of the stage.

"Pardon me, ladies," Charlie said. "We're in dire need of your assistance."

"Why? You lost, soldier?" the redhead teased.

"Not anymore." He grinned, sporting his dimples. "Now that I've found my way to your heart."

When the gals exchanged incredulous looks, Morgan considered sneaking away, preserving his dignity while the possibility remained. But the mere sight of the brunette's profile locked his knees. Unbelievably, she was even prettier up close.

"Wait a minute," Charlie went on. "I think we've met you girls before. You're Gor and Geous, ain't ya?" Their lack of response didn't faze him. "All right, what are your lovely names, then?"

Nothing. Just blank stares.

"Afraid I'm not going anywhere till I know." Charlie crossed his arms and waited, a rare showing of following through.

The brunette released a sharp sigh. "Fine. I'm Liz, this is Julia, and *you're* leaving."

Morgan pressed down a grin.

"Leaving?" Charlie repeated. "How could I, after finding the two prettiest gals in the city?"

Julia shook her head. "Has any of this actually worked on a girl before?"

"She means a *human* girl," Liz added.

"Ouch!" Charlie stumbled backward as though her insult had struck more than his ego. "You sure know how to hurt a guy." For the pathetic come-on alone, Morgan could think of a worse punishment.

"Goodness me," Liz exclaimed, hand on her chest. "Where are my manners?"

"Not to worry, apology accepted." Charlie's assurance drove straight through her sarcasm, arching her brow. "Besides. I owe *you* an apology as well, for not introducing myself properly."

The situation was deteriorating. But it wasn't too late. If Morgan moved now, blended into the crowd, he just might escape the quicksand of humiliation. His brother could find his way back on his own.

"My name's Charlie," he said as Morgan edged away, "but good friends and peachy gals like you call me Chap. And this dashing gentleman over here is my brother, Staff Sergeant Morgan McClain."

Staff sergeant? Morgan bristled at the lie, and found himself trapped by their gazes. He held his breath, arms at his sides, as if preparing for Saturday inspection.

Liz stretched her neck over her shoulder, curiosity forcing a peek. With Morgan's charcoal black hair and olive complexion, she questioned if he and the fair-skinned knucklehead were actually brothers.

"Evening," Morgan said, the word barely audible. A fitted service shirt outlined his broad build. His facial features were of the average sort, but he had an allure about him, an unnamable quality Liz couldn't dismiss.

"Hi," she replied as Charlie continued.

"Honestly, ladies, here's our situation." His serious tone implied a change in strategy. "You see, me and Morgan, we're leaving for war soon. As two of the U.S. Army's finest, we'll be fighting on the front lines. So without much time left to live, I've got just one thing I'm wishin' for." He knelt, presenting Julia his palm. "To dance with this red-haired knockout before I go."

"Sorry, Casanova, but I'm already spoken for." She held up her left hand to display her engagement band. Daily polishing, since her fiancé's fleet shipped out a month ago, kept the gold shiny as new.

"Well, then . . ." The gears clearly cranked away in Charlie's mind. "How 'bout a dance to celebrate your engagement?"

Liz replied for her. "How 'bout we celebrate when your squad tosses you overboard?" She heard Morgan quietly laugh, a second before his brother directed his plea to Liz.

"C'mon," he said. "Is this how you thank a man who'll be risking his life for *your* freedom?"

She felt a smile threatening to surface. "If you got these lines out of a book from the drugstore, you should really get your nickel back."

"Hey, I'm just trying to save your friend Julie, here, from years of guilt. Imagine the headlines: 'Soldier denied a final dance . . . dies for his country . . .'"

Julia giggled, hand covering her mouth. "Okay, okay." She rolled her eyes. "One song." Together they headed toward the dance floor, where skirts flared and couples dipped to the band's emboldening tune.

After a moment, Morgan stepped closer and pointed to Julia's chair. "May I?"

"Why not," Liz said, a verbal shrug. Her night was tumbling downhill at avalanche speed. Rather than curling up at home, losing herself in classical literary works, she was stuck in a dance hall packed with slick soldiers on the prowl.

Morgan sat beside her, their shoulders only inches apart. If this guy was hunting for a khaki-whacky girl, he was barking up the wrong table. She leaned away, just as Charlie began spinning Julia

round and round like a top. Liz grew hopeful that her friend would rush back, ready to head out. But then both dancers broke into a fit of laughter, confirming Liz was on her own.

"So—" Morgan cleared his throat. "You're Liz?"

"You're not going to use your brother's goofy lines, are you?"

"No, miss. I was—just asking about your name."

The sincerity in his voice underscored her own brusqueness. He hadn't done anything to deserve such treatment. At least not yet. "I'm sorry," she said, softening. "Yes, it's Liz." As she extended her hand, his mouth curved into a smile.

"It's real nice to meet you," he said.

Something about his touch caused her pulse to sprint. She released her grasp and sipped her coffee, despite it being a few degrees too hot. "So tell me, why do they call your brother Chap?"

"It's short for Charlie Chaplin. Got the name 'cause he loves making people laugh."

As if on cue, Charlie hopped around Julia like an island native performing a tribal mating ritual. His partner appeared as entertained as spectators on the sideline.

Liz tightened her lips, but a giggle snuck through. "And you really claim that guy as your brother?"

Morgan hesitated before nodding slowly. "Yep. But only by blood." A caring glimmer shone in his eyes, emerald gems speckled with gold. A miner's prized find.

Her leg started to quiver. Surely a side effect of the coffee and a tiring day of work. She tamed her knee. "I assume you've got a nickname too?"

"Just Mac, short for McClain. Nothing fancy."

"Well," she said, "at least it's nothing to blush over. My roommate's told me about plenty I wouldn't dare repeat."

"I can imagine." He grinned. "Suppose I should be grateful Farm Boy didn't stick."

The mention of a life so different from her own intrigued her. "Then you're a farmer?"

He half shrugged, a movement suggesting embarrassment. "My uncle owns a good chunk of land in southern Illinois. I've been managing it the past few years."

"What kind of farm is it?"

"You mean the crops?"

She nodded.

"Feed corn mostly. And we alternate with soybeans. Rotated the lower half last season and—" He bit off the ending, rubbed the faint cleft in his chin. "Probably more than you wanted to know."

"Not at all. Really. I'm interested." More than she should have been.

"Guess you can tell, us plow jockeys don't get out a whole lot."

"Except for USO dances and taking out your girlfriends, right?" It was a forward question, but if only he'd confess he had a sweetheart, Liz could stop her nerves from jittering.

"Charlie does do more wooing than working," he admitted. "But me, afraid I don't do much else but tend the fields."

She caught herself in a smile, a betrayal in its fervor.

"And what do *you* do," he asked, "when you're not at USO dances?"

Propriety prompted her to enlighten him about her courtship with Dalton and their path to matrimony, an eventual yet inevitable step in her practical plan—a checklist to a respectable future. Instead, she replied, "Guess I spend most of my time studying. That and taking care of elderly folks, a job I love for some reason." She wrinkled her nose. "Sounds odd, I know."

The polite, humoring head shake she expected didn't come. Rather, he seemed to examine the words, taking them in. "Not a thing wrong with helping out people who need it." He peered at her with those polished green gems, their deep shade nearly hypnotic. "So what are you studying, Liz?"

"Well—I'm . . ." She had to sift her mind for the answer. When had this become a hard question? "English," she remembered. "I want to be a literature professor."

"Wow, that's wonderful." He sounded genuinely impressed. A nice contrast to those who viewed her desire to work as an assault on the family structure. "What made you decide on that?"

"It's what my father does."

Morgan nodded, then asked, "But, what made *you* want to be a teacher?"

She stumbled over the inquiry—direct, thoughtful, unexpected. Her father's legacy had always sufficed as a natural explanation; no one had ever bothered to probe further.

"Sorry." He shifted in his chair. "Didn't mean to put you on the spot."

At a loss for a pat answer, she merely gave a nod, then opted for deflection. Or perhaps she yearned to know more about him. "And what about you? Any plans after the service?"

"Oh, we'll likely buy up some acreage. Charlie's pushing for cattle ranching, but we'll see."

"Ahh," she said, head tilted. "But what is it that *you* want?"

He grinned broadly, a nonverbal *touché,* and replied, "To put down roots, I suppose. Raise a family. Can't imagine anything more important."

The warmth in his words reached for her heart like invisible hands. Fortunately, she spied the single-striped chevron at the top of his sleeve—private first class—grounds for challenging his integrity. "By the way," she said, "when did you get promoted to staff sergeant?"

He half glanced at his shoulder and his expression dropped. "Um, well, you see. I'm not exactly . . . an NCO. Yet."

With Betty as a roommate, Liz had learned a great deal about military insignias. The fact that his rank was three grades lower than the one boasted by his brother didn't mean a thing to Liz. What did matter was his evident penchant for honesty. Which only made him more likable.

"My brother," he apologized, "he's a bit of an Irish storyteller."

"Mmm." She feigned contemplation. "You *are* in the service, though, right?"

A slight smile returned. "After all our training, I sure as heck hope so."

"It's a good thing you went Army, then. I hear basic's a lot harder in the Navy and Marines."

At that, his mouth retracted, leaving him speechless. Liz tried to keep a straight face but failed.

Tentative, he shook his head before easing out a laugh. "Are you always this nice to fellas you just met?"

"Just the special ones." The admission rolled out before she could stop it. Oddly, however, she felt no need to backpedal; they seemed anything but strangers.

"In that case," he said, "I'll take it as a compliment."

Behind Morgan, an attractive woman in a WAVES uniform rose at the neighboring table. She linked arms with an airman, who bid farewell to his buddies, and the couple set off through the crowd.

It suddenly occurred to Liz that she had landed herself in the worst kind of room, one full of impending good-byes. Distant memories seeped about her. As she refocused on Morgan, words never far from the clutches of her mind spilled out. "So when are you leaving?"

He paused. The question ironed the crinkles from the corners of his eyes. "We're heading for our post tomorrow."

It was a reply she should have anticipated. Still, her heart sank.

"Wanna know the truth?" He leaned toward her as if passing along a secret, his forearm on the table approaching hers. "I'm still hoping they'll have second thoughts about trusting my brother with a loaded weapon."

She nodded as he sat back, and found herself equally disappointed and grateful he'd increased the space between them. "Well, that may not be an issue. Rumor has it, the war could be over any day now."

"Yeah, well. Whatever you do, don't tell Charlie. If he doesn't see at least one battle, he'll never speak to me again."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"I made him wait till he turned eighteen." Morgan traced the edge of the table with his thumb. "Even took a deferment to give him time to grow up."

"And you think that worked?" she mused.

"Based on what we've seen tonight, I'd say definitely not." With a wink, he turned to watch the dancers. Aside from the premature gray sprinkled above his ears, he appeared just a few years older than Liz. Only from careful observation of his eyes did she sense a forced maturity, a cheated youth. An accumulation of endured hardships intended for a man far surpassing Morgan's age.

"I swear," he said, "that kid has added ten years to me." He gave the side of his head a gentle scratch as if he'd read her thoughts.

"Sounds like he's kept your life exciting, at least."

"That he has." When Morgan faced her, their gazes did more than meet; they locked in place, forming an open passageway. Her natural reflexes should have intervened, broken the connection, but those reflexes were no match for the invitation in his eyes. Without reason or reservation, she felt her soul accepting.

"I'm done," Julia said breathlessly, materializing out of nowhere. Her presence tugged Liz back to reality, reminded her of the performance that had brought her here. She glanced at the stage. A tuxedoed soloist had replaced the trio. Betty must have been primping for fans in her dressing room.

"What happened to your partner?" Liz asked, not seeing Charlie.

"Oh, don't worry about him." Julia flicked her hand behind her. "He's already found a new victim. Thank goodness."

Morgan stood and offered the chair to Julia.

"That's okay, I'm not staying," she said, grabbing her beaded purse.

Liz's shoulders tensed. "You're ready to leave?"

"Suzie and Dot are here. We're going to Tasty's to grab a bite. Want to come?"

Morgan retook his seat, appearing watchful of Liz's response.

"You go on ahead," she replied. "I'll be home after the show." Even in her own ears, the words seemed to have come from someone other than herself.

Julia rumpled her brow, then extended a curious smile. "You two have a good night." Once out of Morgan's eyeshot, she gave Liz a look that said she expected a full explanation in the morning.

Liz urged her legs to follow—after all, what was she doing?—but then a series of notes overpowered the thought. A slow version of "Stormy Weather." A melody of her past, towed through every dramatic measure.

"This tune"—Morgan gestured toward the band—"reminds me of my mom. Sang it around the house all the time."

"Really?" Liz remarked at the coincidence. She tried to think of

how many times she'd heard the original playing behind her mother's locked bedroom door. Must have been a thousand. Liz had every reason to hate the song, yet somehow it persisted as one of her favorites. "Mine liked it too," was all she added.

Eyes toward the singer, Morgan shook his head. A tender smile played on his lips. "Funny. She always made it sound so upbeat, I never noticed how sad the words are till now."

Liz listened to the lyrics, about gloom and misery, and realized she hadn't either. She verged on volunteering as much, but the glow in his expression stole her focus. Before she knew it, her gaze sloped down his arms, leaving her to imagine how they would feel wrapped around her.

When the tune ended, she jerked her eyes away, hoping he couldn't actually read her mind. Then another ballad began, "At Last," based on the opening bars. A horn sang soft and sultry and filled the silence between them. A silence that suddenly gaped for miles as he fidgeted in his chair. Staring in the other direction, he tapped his heel at quickstep tempo, as though antsy to reach the exit. She wanted to say something, yet nothing came to her. Their wordlessness dragged every second into a torturous crawl. Unsure of what to do, she peeked at her watch to verify time hadn't stopped.

"So, Liz," he said finally, "would you mind if I, um, asked you to dance?"

She was so relieved he had spoken it took her a moment to weigh his invitation.

It was a slow number.

She should decline.

Then again, he was leaving tomorrow.

"Sure—I mean, no, I wouldn't mind."

They rose and walked to the edge of the dance floor. As she slipped her hand into his, unfamiliar nerves rippled up her sides. His other hand cupped the small of her back and drew her close. She fought the trickle of a chill on her neck, willed moisture into her mouth gone dry.

This was a mistake, she warned herself. Still, she rested a palm on his broad shoulder, the starched fabric separating her from the skin beneath. At the shift of his muscles, the feel of his gaze, her

heart pounded twice as fast as the beat. She didn't take in a single lyric, yet everything about the song was perfect. It seemed the spiraling combination of notes was commanding her emotions to lead; her body to follow.

She turned her head and closed her eyes. Vanilla, lemon, and cedar—the scent of his talc or aftershave was soft but masculine. The slight rasp of his chin brushed against her temple; a rush of warm breath passed by her cheek. She tightened her grip on his shoulder as subtly as she could. Cracking her eyelids, she noted goose bumps prickling her arms. She desperately hoped he didn't notice the effect he had on her. Unless he felt the same.

What was she thinking? They'd only just met. Sensible. She needed to be sensible.

Then his hand adjusted on her back. His fingers moved up slightly, pulling her closer. Never before had she been so aware of being touched. The air enveloping them thickened, a dense cloud, smothering sensibility.

She relaxed her neck, her shoulders, her rules. Unable, unwilling to stop herself, she angled toward his gaze. Her mind reached for his lips, and—

"Watch it!" a stranger's voice shrilled.

Liz startled back to the room, and to the sailor falling straight into them. Morgan tried to slant her out of the way, but wasn't fast enough to dodge the man's red drink. It splattered an S down the side of her dress.

"Hey, I'm soor-ry," the stocky guy slurred. He floundered off, rubbing his hairless head.

"You okay?" Morgan touched her bare arm.

Chills again. She pulled the damp portion of her dress from her legs. "I just need to clean up in the powder room."

"Take your time," he told her, and smiled.

She turned to hurry away, not from anxiousness to leave, but rather to return.

With the fog Morgan found himself in, he almost wondered if fumes from his brother's whiskey were to blame. Liz had disappeared into the crowd, yet here he was, grinning like a possum. He

couldn't stop. He'd never met anyone so captivating. From her amber eyes that glowed and dimmed with her mood to the fragrance of a lavender field on her soft skin. More attractive still was the blend of her gentleness and outward strength.

But there was something else. A feeling of understanding, a comfort that defied reason. It was as though kissing her, a near stranger, would have made all the sense in the world.

He'd certainly had the impulse. Maybe he should have acted on it. Most guys at the dance would have done so without a second thought. At this very moment, his brother was likely coercing a smooch out of some girl in the room, a last favor before heading off to war.

The war.

How could he have forgotten?

Tomorrow they'd be at Union Station, one step closer to deploying to some country thousands of miles from home—and a world away from Liz.

Would a girl like that be willing to wait for a soldier she'd only known a single night? Or was he screwy to even consider the idea?

He drained a sigh heavy with doubt.

"Don't tell me you lost that dame already." Charlie's voice turned Morgan around.

"She's in the ladies' room." Promptly diverting, he said, "So what happened with the redhead? Not as irresistible as you thought you were, huh?"

"She was engaged. Doesn't count. Besides, Jack says there's a juice joint nearby, lots of gals there dying to show their patriotism."

"Hope they don't charge much."

"Hey, I didn't crack open my piggy bank for nothin'." Charlie beamed. "I'm guessing you're not going anywhere?"

"Think I'll stick around awhile." The answer formed so effortlessly Morgan almost missed the pricking of his conscience. When the town sheriff caught little Charlie drilling peepholes at Mrs. Herman's Lingerie Boutique, their father had made it abundantly clear Morgan was responsible for keeping tabs on his brother. A passage of years hadn't relinquished the duty; if anything, need for the role had risen.

But tonight, with the promise of Liz's return, how could Morgan leave?

"Now, if the skirt comes to her senses," Charlie said, "and decides to hide in the john all night, be sure to come looking for us."

"Yeah, all right. Stay out of trouble, though, you hear?"

"Absolutely." Charlie grinned and snaked off toward his buddies by the door.

"I mean it, Charlie!"

The kid raised his hand as if to affirm he was going to heed the order. Morgan knew better, of course. And he certainly knew better than to turn his brother loose with a flask of booze and their buddy Jack Callan on their last night in the city.

The thought ignited a flicker of regret, doused the instant Morgan's nose caught a residual whiff of Liz's perfume. Proof of her existence on his shirt. A reminder that he really had no choice.

Preparing for her reappearance, he spiffed up his necktie, then swiped his hands over his hair, due for another buzz cut. In the midst of sliding his watch down over his wrist bone, he halted at the color of red: a cluster of punch spots, spiked punch at that, tainting the cuff of his sleeve. "Ah, damn."

Liz had only been gone a minute or two. He still had time before she finished cleaning up. Although finding a miraculous stain remover was a long shot, he had to try. The last thing he needed was an NCO's reprimand, followed by hours of scrubbing latrines. And more important, looking like a slob wasn't how he hoped to come across to the woman he wanted to impress.

At the snack table, a matronly volunteer extended her sympathy and set off to retrieve a bottle of seltzer. While he waited, a couple nearby Lindy Hopping caught his eye. The Marine tossed the girl around his back, then flipped her like a hotcake. His feet swiveled and scooted and shuffled. He may not have been the smoothest swinger in the room, but the fellow could pass as Gene Kelly next to Morgan's own less-than-snappy footwork.

Inwardly, Morgan kicked himself. He should have taken notes instead of heckling his brother when their mother used to lead Charlie in the box step around the kitchen. Then he wouldn't have

wasted two songs mustering the courage to ask Liz to dance. Too bad he wasn't as skilled with a dance partner as he was with a plow.

"Hey, toots! How about a twirl?" The husky voice boomed from a few yards behind. No surprise, it was the same chief petty officer who had separated him from Liz, only now he was falling all over someone deliberately: the curvy blond singer appearing from a door by the stage. She swatted at the guy's hands, but his groping continued until she gave him a shove. Turning to break away, she lost her footing and stumbled forward. Morgan's arms swung outward, barely catching her.

"Gimme a chance, doll face!" The Navy man staggered closer.

She gazed at Morgan with big blue eyes. "Save me," she pleaded in a whisper.

His first instinct called for a harsh warning toward her inebriated fan, and, if that didn't work, an invitation to step outside. However, based on stories he'd heard while at basic, Morgan knew better than to tangle with a superior of any branch. He'd have to get creative.

"Excuse me, Chief." He positioned his body to guard the singer. "But I promised my fiancée, here, a dance."

The man pulled his chin back over his neck. He scrunched his face like a bulldog being challenged. "Fiancée, huh?"

Morgan straightened, inched a step forward. "Yes, sir. High school sweethearts."

The Navy man scrutinized the couple with his bloodshot eyes. His pulse visibly throbbed on the side of his head, bald as a billiard ball. Suddenly, he flared a grin and stuck out a swaying hand. "Well, congrad-julations!"

Relieved, Morgan accepted the guy's ironclad grip while leaning away from the smell of sweat and bourbon seeping from his pores.

"Let's go, honey bear." The blonde latched onto Morgan's arm. "They're playing our song." She pulled him free and towed him to the dance floor. The horn section, rocking in unison, blasted lively notes toward the high ceiling.

With no sight of Liz yet, he took the singer's hands. He did his best to spare her toes through the basic steps of a jitterbug. Thank-

fully, the tune ended within a few bars and the petty officer, though still in view, had about-faced. Seizing the opportunity to exit, Morgan released the woman's hands.

"Can't leave me yet, Private." She drew him back for the crooner's ballad. "We didn't finish our wedding dance." Her arms wrapped around his neck, guiding him into a close sway.

He swallowed a gulp of air. Obviously, city girls were bolder than the small-town gals he'd grown up with.

"Miss, I'd love to keep dancin', but—"

She peered at him with a seductive glint. "Oh, come now. I have to thank you for your help somehow. And you did promise me a dance." A smile slid across her lips before she rested her chin on his shoulder. Just then, the petty officer shifted his stance to face them. Upon catching Morgan's eye, the guy tapped an arm of the sailor standing beside him. "Hey!" they yelled raggedly, and raised their cups in a distant toast.

Morgan lifted his chin in acknowledgment. For the singer's sake, he'd wait for the song to end before leaving the floor discreetly—unless, that is, he glimpsed Liz's chestnut hair, her heavenly face.

"I'm Betty, by the way," the blonde said.

"I'm Morgan . . . McClain," he said in pieces. His gaze hopped back and forth between the drunken bookends and the far corner of the dance floor, the exact spot where Liz had woven into the crowd and would presumably emerge.

"Well, thank you for rescuing me, Morgan." Betty's fingertips grazed the small scar on the side of his neck, a permanent reminder of the day he'd saved Charlie from a fatal dive down a grain chute. Man, he wished his brother were here to repay the favor by cutting in.

Charlie would think he was nuts, of course. Betty had to be the most sought-after girl in the place. Regardless, there was only one woman Morgan wanted to be with.

Alone in the ladies' room, Liz felt a new chapter in her life unfolding. She was a six-year-old waking to her first snowfall, a kid in a general store given free rein over the candy barrels.