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Following pages comprise 1-page synopsis; chapter 1

Synopsis

Nineteen-year-old Abby Stapleton, American expatriate, loves London. In summer 1939 war looms. Bomb shelters appear in parks and mothers evacuate children to the countryside. Despite her protests Abby's father demands she stay with her Uncle Will and Aunt Val at their Maryland estate. Bitter, Abby vows to become independent.

Abby adapts to life on the estate but is anxious for her family in England, who write of widespread destruction, causing her to doubt God's care. Lonely and isolated, she forms a bond with Jim Wright, the gardener. Aunt Val is suspicious, ordering Abby to break with Jim or she will fire him. Abby complies. She becomes more angry with God.

In 1941 Abby and Jim revive their affections and are secretly engaged. America joins the war, Jim is drafted into the army and shipped to England. Abby occupies herself with college and correcting her stammer. In summer months she schools the children of the workers at her uncle's defense plant.

Ailing, Uncle Will dictates to his lawyer nephew, Henri, his last testament, transferring the estate to Abby. Henri schemes to win Abby for himself and gain the inheritance, exploiting Abby's fondness for his eight-year-old daughter, Edythe. This fails. Spiteful, he attempts to discredit Jim and blackmail Abby. Uncle Will dies.

June 1944 Abby learns Jim is missing in battle. Blaming God for her misfortune, she enters a crisis of faith. Aunt Val proves to be a true friend. Abby discovers Henri is a spy and alerts the FBI. Henri is caught and Edythe is put into custodial care.

A cable informs Abby that Jim is in a hospital in England, seriously wounded. After a hazardous trip across England, Abby finds Jim, who recovers. They marry and sail for America to live at the estate. They agree to adopt Edythe. Abby thanks God for her new life and a rediscovered faith.

CHAPTER ONE

August 31, 1939

Southampton, England

On the RMS Queen Mary

Her parents were sending her away and she hated them for it.

Abby Stapleton leaned over the deck railing and stared at the three diminutive figures huddled on the crowded jetty far below. Her mother and father and sister waved.

With bangs and creaks a flotilla of tugboats nudged the huge liner from its moorings. A widening ribbon of dirty brown water opened up between vessel and dock. Abby riveted her gaze on the retreating scene, afraid she might never see her family again, her stomach cramped into an icy knot.

A sudden breeze snatched away the shouted farewells hurled at the passengers strung out along the deck. Abby clamped her hat to her head and clutched her skirt pocket and the Bible pressed on her by her father as a parting gift.

She shuddered as the engines thumped into life, pushing her out to the ocean beyond and America. Gulls called and wheeled overhead. She wondered if they, too, would be carried out to sea, reluctant exiles, unable to find the way back home.

Abby reached her cabin, puffy-eyed and in a new phase of her turmoil. Until the last moment she hoped her mother and father would call her down from the ship and say they'd changed their minds. That they could not bear to see her leave. That she must come home with them immediately. But here she was, turning the key in the door of the room where she must spend the next five days.

Imprisoned.

This would be her second voyage on the *Queen Mary*. On the first she was with

her parents sailing to England. Then she wanted to be alone. Now she was going back to America alone, wanting to be with them.

Abby surveyed the immaculate room, her father's hand in the arrangements evident. She conceded that some advantages accrue to the daughter of a diplomat.

Her sullen glance took in the honey-colored wainscoting, the plush sofa, a dining set with two straight-back chairs, a bar, and a newspaper rack stuffed with an assortment of American and British magazines. Rust-colored carpet stretched to the farther end where two pocket doors, half open, introduced a large bedroom. On the foot of the bed lay a neat pile of folded towels.

The portholes in this area overlooked the left side of the vessel. Abby watched the sunlight bouncing off the white breakers. The choppy water frightened her, as if it held some phantom menace. For reassurance she looked down at the floor. Rock solid. She wondered if this confusion of the senses was what made one seasick. It felt like being in a big house, insulated from the outside world.

"That's *my* life," she said aloud.

Exhaustion washed over her. She crossed to the bedroom, knocking off her high-heels as she went. She pushed the sliding doors shut behind her. Jerking the curtains across the porthole, Abby sprawled face down across the bed, shattered.

If mother and father could see me now they'd never have thrown me out.

She recalled that hideous evening in the parlor ten days earlier. She challenged them, pleading to stay in London.

Her mother, meekly compliant with her husband's wishes, proved a weak reed for Abby to lean on. She directed her last entreaty to her father.

"I'm nineteen. Why *can't* I decide for myself?"

"I'm still responsible for you, Abby. By God, there's war in the air. Hitler and

Stalin have signed a pact.”

She recalled how he thrust the morning paper at her, slapping the back of his hand against the bold black headline, his voice rising. “You’ll be safe in the States.” And her mother staring at her, hands in her lap, ever on the verge of saying something, yet saying nothing. Abby knew her mother disapproved of her relationship with Simon. Abby took this as the real reason for her eviction. But she couldn’t bring herself to say so. To accuse your own mother of being anti-Semitic. How would Father have reacted to that?

Poor Simon. That morning in the park when he told her about his enlistment in the army she cried. *Such a waste.* A gifted musician, he was her favorite accompanist at the academy. He always brought out the best in her singing. She could talk with Simon. *Really* talk. He understood her even when she couldn’t find the proper words to explain herself.

Her mother repaid this friendship with chill civility.

Abby found it difficult to stay awake now. The droning of the engines and the darkness of the room urged her toward sleep but she fought it. She felt the need to unravel the skein of thoughts which had kept her in confusion since that showdown with her parents. If she could only express herself with competence, like a grown-up woman, self-possessed. But that wretched stammer always bungled the job. Even now, mouthing her own words of that night, she got stuck.

“I d-d-don’t want to leave, Father. I d-d-don’t know Uncle Will and Aunt Val that well. I haven’t s-s-seen them for years.”

At that point, she recalled, she jumped to her feet, knocked over the chair and dashed out of the room, slamming the door.

Now caricatures of her father and mother, dressed head-to-foot in black, and

images of her Kensington home, grotesque and distorted, piled up in a dark void above her and exploded, the fragments falling in a fiery cascade all around. Her sister and Simon appeared, hands clasped, scowling and pointing accusing fingers at her, then laughing and dancing together in a tight manic embrace, spinning faster and faster and faster until they vanished in a tiny puff of yellow light.

Abby screamed herself awake in a trembling sweat, blankets wrapped around her. She tottered to her feet. Engine vibrations welled up from deep below and shot needles of electricity into the balls of her stockinged feet. She peered at the luminous dial on her wristwatch but couldn't muster the numbers into focus.

Groping her way to the lavatory she vomited.

The three days which followed comprised a nightmare of sleeping, waking, nausea.

And a dread of what she knew awaited her.

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The fourth day out. Sunday. A cold rain fell in sheets.

Abby wobbled down to the Grand Salon, packed with early risers, and hovered at the reception desk for attention. Directed to a table against a pillar she didn't complain. The anonymity it afforded suited her sulky mood. Head down, she nursed a black coffee, looking up long enough to take in the massive painting of battling unicorns at the far end of the restaurant.

"I don't believe it!" A young woman eased herself into the seat opposite flashing a wide smile. "It's me, Kick."

Abby gave no hint of recognition.

"Keep working at it, kid. You'll get it."

“Y-y-you’re Kathleen Kennedy, the Ambassador’s daughter.”

“And you’re the Stapleton girl, Abigail. I met you at my coming-out party at Princes Gate last year. Your dad sending you away, too?”

“He says I’ll be better off away from the trouble.”

Kathleen whisked off her hat and tossed her head vigorously, freeing her long golden-brown hair, the curls dancing around her shoulders. “Sounds like you left in a huff. I don’t blame you. I’d got pretty settled myself and you’ve been there longer than I. But I intend to go back when everything’s settled down. I love the life.”

She summoned the waiter.

“Abby, dear, you’ll miss your grand entrance into London society. You’re quite lovely, you know, with all that red hair.”

Abby waved away the compliment. She felt that a preoccupation with dress, the parties and the attendant paraphernalia diminished women, at least those in the circles in which her mother obliged her to move. She tried not to resent them. Indeed, she admired the Kennedy girl, regarded in the gossip columns as the most interesting recent American addition to fashionable London. Abby had no desire to inhabit that world herself, but at this moment, sitting across from this exuberant beauty, she felt a rush of envy.

“Well, I turned nineteen in February,” Kathleen continued. “That makes me the oldest of the clan, so I’ll have to babysit my brother and sister on this trip. They’re asleep in the cabin.”

The waiter returned with a steaming pot of tea and crumpets. Kathleen slid the tray toward Abby. “I got this for you. You don’t look very well.” She glanced at her watch. “I must go. Mother was tickled pink when she learned Bob Hope would be on board. She insisted we find him and get introduced.”

Kathleen took Abby’s hands the way a mother might. “Chin up. God’s still in His

heaven. Don't be afraid. Let's get together when we reach New York."

Scooping up her hat and gloves, Kathleen blew a kiss, mouthed "ta-ta," and left.

Abby knew that they would not "get together" in New York.

Abby made her way up the broad stairway to her cabin. Halfway up she heard the shriek of the klaxon. She reached the top only to be swept back by a throng of people in a mad dash downward. In the crush she missed the bottom step and tumbled onto her side. Someone helped her up and propped her against a bulkhead. Her left arm was bloody and smarting. The nausea returned and she leaned back to steady herself.

Eyes shut, she half-attended to the babble streaming past and the endless din from the horn high above her head. The vibrations in the deck intensified and she sensed a subtle shift in direction. A few minutes later, the same thing. It was unmistakable.

The ship was zig-zagging.

Someone touched her shoulder. "Are you all right, Miss?" A man in uniform faced her, cap in hand, his head bent toward hers, hand cupped to his mouth. "May I be of assistance?"

Abby attempted a response. Then everything went blank.

She came to on a hospital bed, still in her clothes, a tight bandage on her arm. A white linen curtain hung across the opening at her feet. Yellow light from an outer area filtered through and she caught snatches of female conversation. She noted that the clock on the adjoining wall showed ship's time of 7:40.

A nurse appeared at the foot of the bed. "Good morning. I took care of your arm. You grazed it when you fell." The woman swept back the curtain along its rail, admitting the glare from a ceiling light in the small windowless infirmary. "You fainted. Do you

remember the purser talking to you?”

Abby nodded. “Why all that shoving and shouting?”

“A German submarine off to port. It fired across our bow. That’s when the horn went off and madness broke out. The folks who knocked you down must have been at the railing and watched it surface.” She shrugged. “You’re American?”

“Yes. Living in England.”

“I’m Canadian. From Vancouver. This is my fourth time out and back. Looks like trouble coming on. Now that the Germans have decided to take potshots at passenger ships I don’t see how you and I can stay out of it.” As she left she called over her shoulder, “And keep your cabin windows covered at night until we get to New York. Captain’s orders. We may be in for a bumpy ride.”

Fifteen minutes later Abby navigated her way along a crowded passageway to her cabin. The loudspeaker clicked into life and the captain came on. “Attention, ladies and gentlemen, and all members of the crew. This morning, September the third, the Prime Minister declared that Britain is at war with Germany. God save our King.”

Abby glanced at the other passengers, now standing silent. Tomorrow they were all supposed to be in New York. To the rear her family faced mortal threat. In front, under miles of deep ocean, the enemy hunted.

Squeezed in the vice of contrary emotions, Abby felt the life drain from her.

Dear God, if you do listen, please help me.

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Monday, September 4

New York Harbor

Abby emerged into the heat and hubbub on deck as the liner glided toward the looming towers of Manhattan. As a fourteen-year-old she observed this dramatic

panorama in reverse. Now, returning to it, she felt none of the welcome it seemed to offer to the others who jostled for a place at the railing.

The last stage of the voyage, for all its agonies, afforded her the luxury of time to brood on her grievances and refine them in her favor. No, she couldn't blame everything on her parents. Just enough to absolve her of responsibility for the mood she now found herself in. Anger at her parents distilled into a general feeling of alienation from them and the life they represented. Dismissive of her mother's ambitions for her and the expected "good" marriage, Abby determined to stand on her own merit. Whatever difficulties she faced from now on she would prove to herself that she had intrinsic worth.

The swirling mass on the dock resolved into distinct faces, each one searching for an answering look of recognition. Somewhere down there her uncle and aunt would be waiting. She dreaded the reunion.

As she stepped off the gangplank a portly, balding, late-middle-aged man approached her and planted a kiss on each cheek. "Abby! Grand to see you, my dear. Four years is a long time." He spoke in a light French accent. His thick dark eyebrows and friendly blue eyes coaxed a reluctant smile from her.

"It's good to see you again, Uncle Will."

He took her coat and draped it over his arm. "You won't need this today." He gestured toward a roped-off area. "Your aunt is standing just over there by the car." He plunged into the throng, Abby trailing.

"'Britain and France Declare War on Germany'." Read it in *The Times*," hawked the newsboy elbowing past. Will reached into his pocket and bought a copy. He glanced at the front page and shook his head. Taking Abby's arm he led her to a long jet-black Pontiac with big white tires. A chauffeur was in the act of dispersing Abby's suitcases in the huge trunk.

Valerie Blulette held out her hand. "Hello, Abby. Welcome back." She appeared to survey her niece from foot to head. "You've got my sister's features all right. But you're taller than she is."

"It's nice to see you, Aunt Val." Abby would not have recognized her aunt, now noticeably gray and slightly stooped.

"I trust your mother and father are well," Valerie said when the car was under way. "And Amelia, of course. Your uncle and I spent a few days in New York City. Our twentieth wedding anniversary."

"I hope you had a lovely t-t-time."

"We hoped to take you to the World's Fair today and then go home tomorrow but this heat is oppressive. Besides, there are too many people there for my liking."

Uncle Will wound down his window. "On Labor Day weekend it's crowded everywhere so we decided to go home to Jolie Fontaine today."

"And this talk of war is horrible," Valerie continued. "To think that the King and Queen were here just a few weeks ago."

"'Wars and rumors of wars'," Uncle Will said. "Matthew, chapter twenty-four, verse 6." He slapped his knee. "Until yesterday Chamberlain showed no resistance to German advances in Europe." He jabbed at the headline of the newspaper spread out on his lap. "But he *had to* declare war once Poland was invaded. Now France has done the same. Canada will probably join in before long. Does Hitler think he'll get away with another invasion?"

Abby started to tell them about the incident at sea, but thought better of it. They'd find out soon enough.

"Do you think we're in for a long war, Uncle?"

“If other nations adopt the cause of freedom, it could be short. Then again, God forbid, this war could go on as long as the last one.”

The muted commentary from the radio was all about England and Germany and the onset of war in Europe. Abby felt ill and tipped her head back against the plush seat. She could almost taste the rich leather.

“It will take about three hours to get home,” Uncle Will whispered. “Try to sleep.”

Abby’s head bobbed as she alternately dozed and half-wakened to the murmur of hushed conversation between her aunt and uncle. Somewhere in the gaps her mind went on its tortured travels, dredging up unwelcome reviews. The more she fought to repress them, the stronger they asserted themselves. Yes, she thought, sister Amelia was the lucky one. She’d got out from under. Married and children, too. *Mother always preferred Amelia to me.* Even Aunt Val spoiled Amelia.

Through a haze Abby pictured the frequent visits to Jolie Fontaine when she was a little girl, her mother and aunt sitting together on the big settee in the living room, talking for hours, little Amelia between them. On those occasions Abby would be shunted off to play in another part of the house by herself. She often wondered what they talked about and why she was excluded. *What was the big secret?*

It hurt even now.

Well, she was not Amelia. From now on she would chart her own course. Her aunt and uncle would have to understand that early on. She wouldn’t be babied or bossed. Not this new Abby Stapleton.

Her mother and father would have to get used to it, too.

Dusk was well advanced when the car pulled onto the broad tree-lined avenue that was the majestic introduction to the estate. Wide awake now Abby recognized the

spacious three-story red-brick mansion, decorated with bright white shutters across its length, its many sharp-angled gables jutting up and out in testimony of numerous modifications. Fluted columns framed the wide porch on the side that looked out onto a vast grassy field.

She could just discern the flower-bordered path that led to the patio steps and the French doors opening onto the front room. At the farther end of the field a line of white birch pierced the twilight. Lamps encircled a large fountain and flickered through the branches.

While the chauffeur unloaded the luggage Aunt Val went into the house. Abby and her uncle walked over to the edge of the field.

“Where’s that music coming from?” Abby cocked her head in the direction of the sound. “I recognize that piece. It’s a S-S-Sousa march.”

“From the bandstand over there.” William pointed to a string of red, white and blue lamps. “We have a concert every Labor Day organized by the local church. That’s ‘Hands Across the Sea.’ Appropriate for these peculiar days, I think.”

They entered through a large reception hall and joined Valerie, who had assembled the household staff for introductions. William then led the way up the wide staircase to the landing, pausing at the balustrade that overlooked the great hall through which they had entered. Abby joined him.

Broad, ax-hewn beams of oak ran the width of the high ceiling. At each end a black wrought-iron chandelier, fashioned from a wagon-wheel, hung from a long chain. A fox hunt, colorfully and indifferently executed, progressed at a languid pace in the mural that covered one wall. The lacquered pine floorboards glistened in the lamplight.

Abby gave a low whistle.

William pushed open a heavy door onto a suite of rooms and ushered Abby inside.

“This is where you stay.”

Deep-pile white carpet covered the apartment. Lush maroon drapes that brushed the floor framed three tall sash windows, open to the evening air. A white plaster cornice ran around the high ceilings and an embossed floral-pattern paper lined the walls.

William parted the curtains. “You can see the driveway from here. . . this is the sitting room . . . fireplace there, just in case. And in here . . . this is your bedroom. Another fireplace. No extra charge.” He laughed.

Abby wriggled into an easy chair. “This is beautiful, Uncle. I don’t remember any of this.”

“We’ve made a lot of alterations since you were here. We’ll have a telephone put in for you. My office is next door if you need anything.”

They made their way downstairs to where Valerie stood, looking up at them. She flashed a tight-lipped smile, but not before Abby caught the look of reproof.

Abby retired early, her darkest fears confirmed.

[End of Chapter One]