FAR and AWAY

True Brit:

Beatrice, 1940

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True Brit:
Beatrice, 1940

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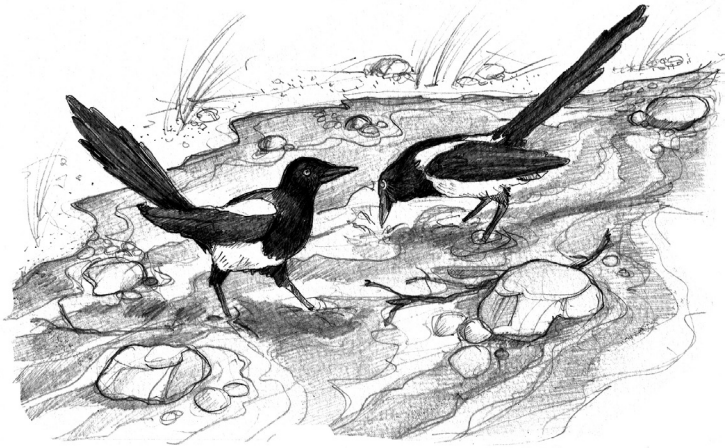
To Jake
who makes everything possible.

To Sergei and Brandon
who bring me such delight.

In memory of …

Tanya
who gave me a sense of the journey.

And Jaenet
whose enthusiasm for this story was key.



Chapter One

Only Great-Aunt Augusta spoke up against the plan. As usual, we had gathered for tea at her big elegant house in Mayfair on Wednesday at 4 p.m. sharp. White-haired and stout, Great-Aunt Augusta had made it quite clear she wouldn't allow the War to interfere with her teatime. Of course we each carried a gas mask to her home, just in case. The gas masks were made of smelly rubber and I dreaded using one but we feared a poison gas attack might come at any time.

Hearing the news of my trip, Great-Aunt Augusta looked appalled. "You don't mean to say you're going to send Beatrice to the United States!" she said. "The girl will surely lose all her manners. She'll return chewing gum and wearing lipstick."

"There are some things rather worse than chewing gum," Father replied, smiling at me kindly. "We want Beatrice to be absolutely safe."

I knew what Father was speaking about. Beginning on 7 September, we saw the air over London fill with Nazi planes. Horrid screaming bombs began falling from the sky, forcing thousands of us to crowd underneath the streets in the Underground. Since then, we huddled together every night in the dark listening to the explosions. Each morning we climbed out, fearful that a beloved house or church or shop had been demolished.

In some neighborhoods, block after block of buildings had been destroyed. Where there had once been a row of lovely homes, nothing remained but rubble, broken glass and dishes, smashed furniture, even soggy bed mattresses and torn clothes. People seldom bothered to go back to bombed houses for their belongings. It was too dangerous and too sad.

The vicious Nazis imagined they could destroy our wonderful little country of England, but they should have known better. Every Brit who was old enough was either bravely fighting or steadfastly protecting the country. Like my 17-year-old brother, Willy, who was in the Home Guard. Every night, he helped guide ambulance drivers through the wrecked city. Though only twelve, I wished I could go along and help also.

Yet now Mother was insisting I leave the city. The sooner, the better.

"I won't go. I won't go," I hissed through clenched teeth. "You can't make me."

But Mother was firm. "Darling, thousands of children have

left already for places in the country or abroad. You simply can't stay here another minute."

She rang up the Children's Overseas Reception Board, which was placing children in homes across the ocean. All the nice English homes in Canada, she learned, were already filled. But the Board lady said she'd received a letter from someone named Miss Clementine Pope. The woman was a public health nurse from a far-away part of the world called New Mexico. And she wished to take in a child. Were we interested?

"I'm not sure," said Mother. We were all seated around the table at breakfast. "I don't know any public health nurses."
"I've met dozens of nurses," said Willy. "And they're all splendid."

"A nurse should be able to care for a child," said Father.

"That's true," said Mother. "But she lives in such a faraway place."

"Santa Fe, New Mexico," said Father, who loved maps, globes, atlases and all that sort of thing. "I'm sure I've heard of it."

He jumped up, threw his napkin on the table and strode into the library. Our library was lined from floor to ceiling with books. Willy, Mother and I ran after him and watched as he spun around a large globe.

When he finally put his finger down, I peered at the spot. It seemed nearly on the other side of the world from England! A disagreeable lump swelled in my throat. How could I possibly be forced to travel so far from everything dear to me?

Father, however, seemed pleased. "I daresay the War won't make it all the way over there."

"Why, Beatrice, that's the Wild West," declared Willy gleefully. "Perhaps you'll see cowboys and Indians."

"Oh dear," Mother gasped. "Not cowboys and Indians."

"Honestly, if I must leave home," I said, stamping my foot, "why can't I go somewhere in the countryside where you could visit me once in a while?"

My dear father was thin and tall with tortoise shell glasses always perched on his nose. Now he looked especially serious; his glasses slipped further down his nose. Coming close, he put his hand on my shoulder. "Nowhere in Great Britain is safe enough, darling," he said. "Bombs simply don't know the difference between city homes and country homes."

I looked up, tears in my eyes, knowing what he said was true.

All that had happened a week ago. Today was the first time that Great-Aunt Augusta had heard of my journey. Peering through her lorgnette at me, she commanded, "Come over here, Beatrice."

When I obeyed, she grabbed my shoulders and pushed them up straight. "Don't forget, Beatrice, you come from a very long line of Sims going back to the Earl of Duckchester," said Great-Aunt Augusta. "Remember you're made of strong stuff. Be proud of who you are."

I nodded glumly. Ever since I could remember, the Earl of Duckchester had glared down at me from his portrait hanging in the hall. Truly, I couldn't imagine doing anything good enough to please him, or Great-Aunt Augusta, either.

"Who is accompanying Beatrice on this perilous journey?" asked my great-aunt.

Mother looked uneasy. Father cleared his throat loudly. "Well, uh, we're not quite sure," he muttered.

I brightened momentarily. Mother and Father had wanted

Cook's sister, Miss Frimby, a thin, sour woman, to travel with me. But, at the last moment, Miss Frimby got herself engaged to a Navy sailor named Orlando Stiff. She packed up her cardboard suitcase and trotted out the door without even saying a proper "farewell" to anyone in the house. That's the sort of romance that happens during a war, said Father. I hoped the surprising event might delay or even cancel my trip. But that didn't happen.

"My goodness, you can't send her alone, can you?" Great-Aunt Augusta looked shocked.

"I'm afraid we may have to." Father frowned. "The chance of getting a ticket on another ship is too risky." He winked at me. "You can go it on your own, can't you, Toodles?"

I tried to smile. Toodles was a nickname he hadn't used since I was ten.

Mother, however, looked pale. "She is just a child."

"I am not a child," I protested.

"Of course you're not," said Father. "In any case, Beatrice will be traveling first-class. She'll be very comfortable." He turned away slightly and again cleared his throat. "I see no problem whatsoever."

Mother appeared somewhat relieved. "Thank heaven you're so tall for twelve years old, Beatrice. You appear much older."

I frowned. Indeed I was tall, but also gawky, pale and thin with straight-as-a-pin yellow hair. None of Mother's lovely looks – wavy brown hair and dark eyes like a Christmas card Madonna, as Father always said – had settled on me.

"On the bright side, Beatrice, just think – you won't need a smelly gas mask in the States," said Willy.

"But I don't want to go," I mumbled. "I want to stay here

and help like you and all the others." By then, however, everyone was busy talking about the new Prime Minister, Mr. Winston Churchill. Would he be able to keep our country strong and safe?

"He certainly has rallied the spirit of the British people," said Great-Aunt Augusta. "Don't you think?"

Later that evening, I made one last protest, cornering Father in the library where he sat reading the newspaper. "You are forcing me against my will," I said. "You are staying here and so are Mother and Willy. Only I have to leave. It's not fair."

"Yes, Beatrice, I know it's not fair." His face grew very sober. "But we have to think of the future, my dear. What if the Nazis succeed?"

"They c-can't possibly," I stammered. "Can they?"

"We certainly hope not. And we're working day and night at the War Office to prevent that from happening. But…" He pointed to the newspaper. "The news is not very good." Father shook his head. "If the worst should come to pass…I couldn't bear to have a child of mine or any English child brought up under the cruel form of government in Germany at present."

I fell silent, feeling the awful weight of his words.

Then Father's face brightened. "Now, Beatrice, you don't have to think of this trip as such a terrible thing. Look at it as an adventure."

"An adventure?" Being torn from my family and everything near and dear to me didn't seem like a very fine adventure.

"There have been loads of Englishwomen who have had adventures in the wildest, most remote places on earth." Father leapt to his feet and began searching among the books on the shelves. "Somewhere I have a book about Gertrude Bell. She

traveled across the Arabian desert on horseback." He pulled out a book. "And here's one on Mary Kingsley, another great explorer. She traipsed across Africa wearing a long dress. Once her many layers of petticoats saved her life when she fell into a lion's trap filled with spears."

A lion's trap? Now that did sound interesting, I thought, taking the book.

Father went to his desk. "Let's see, what do explorers need? If you're going to be an explorer, you must take careful notes of everything you see." He pulled open a drawer and shuffled around a bit. "How would you like this?" He held up a little red-leather bound book.

"Keep it with you at all times," he said, handing it to me. "I expect you to fill it with very interesting information."

I took the little red notebook and turned it over in my hand. The leather was smooth and soft. It looked lovely. I hugged Father around the neck. "You are so sweet to give this to me," I exclaimed, wiping away a tiny tear from the corner of my eye. "But I still don't understand how a very ordinary twelve-year-old girl like me can become a world explorer."

"Why not, Beatrice?" Father said.

"But I've rarely even been out of the city," I said. "And then only for outings in the countryside."

"Nevertheless," said Father, sitting down and picking up his newspaper, "I see many great adventures ahead of you."

Though still doubtful, I tucked the heavy book about Mary Kingsley under my arm. I would read a few chapters before leaving. And I would try my very best to make this awful trip into an adventure.

On the day of my departure, 14 September, the rain poured down in sheets, soaking the city. London seemed particularly grey and dismal, coated with wet soot and ashes.

Father said farewell in the morning before leaving for work. He looked sadder and more serious than I had ever seen him. His final words were, "Beatrice, you will undoubtedly encounter many things you have never encountered before." He paused thoughtfully. "But that's a very good thing, really." Then he gave me a long hug. "Be brave, my dearest girl." His voice was scratchy. "I must rush off now to the War Office." Just as he was climbing into a cab, however, he turned back for an instant. "Be sure and keep your notebook handy."

I didn't leave until that evening. Cook and a chambermaid stood in the foyer to say goodbye. Cook, who had known me since I was a tiny baby, hugged me. The new chambermaid, her blond braids tucked under a little white cap, curtsied. I gave a final desperate squeeze to Alfie, my dear little dog. He was a Yorkshire Terrier with long golden hair that fell in his eyes and a sweet little tail that stuck straight up.

"Be brave," I whispered in Alfie's furry ear and kissed his tiny cold nose. A tear dripped on his silky coat.

Henry, the chauffeur, loaded my trunk into the Bentley, our shiny black limousine. As Willy, Mother and I were driven to the train station, I pressed my forehead to the cool glass and stared out. It was a dark night. Due to the blackout, automobile headlights couldn't be turned on and there wasn't another trace of light. Every window had been covered with heavy black paper. No one could even smoke a cigarette outside because that tiny glim-

mer of light might aid a Nazi airman far above. They might see where to drop their accursed bombs.

Still, even in the dark, I knew these streets so well I could imagine the tall stone and brick buildings on either side, so solid and friendly. Would any of them still be standing when I returned? Or would they all have tumbled down in a pile of dust and rubble?

Suddenly, our automobile jolted, throwing us all forward in a heap. "Sorry, M'um," said Henry, "but the street's torn up bad with holes nearly as big as the kitchen stove."

"Don't worry, Henry, I know you're doing the best you can," Mother said. She sat on the edge of the green velveteen seat grasping my hand. Her pointy red nails dug into my palm but I didn't complain. I knew she was nervous and upset.

"I just hope the fighting lasts long enough for me to join up," said Willy. Unlike Father, Mother and me, he was big, strong and athletic, with a ruddy pink face and curly blond hair.

"Please, don't wish that," said Mother. "I couldn't bear it."

"I wish I could join up, too," I exclaimed.

"Oh, darling," Mother moaned.

"What could you possibly do?" asked Willy.

"Nurse the wounded," I quickly responded.

"Nurse the wounded? You're still bandaging your dollies, aren't you?" Willy always picked times like this to act beastly.

I tried to punch him but Mother pleaded, "Please, children, we have a very short time left to be together. Let's be nice to one another." Indeed, at that moment, we reached Victoria Station. The train station, always busy, was now in shambles. Thousands of people, old and young, were frantically trying to leave London.

After one look at the crowd, Mother sank back in the seat. "I can't go any farther. I'm simply too overcome with emotion." Kissing me on the cheek, she begged me, "Please, darling, let's not make a scene. Just pretend you're going away on holiday." For her sake, I held back my sniffles. Mother was a frail person with "weak nerves," as Father said.

"Really, darling," she went on, "this wretched business can't last very long. You'll probably be home for Christmas." She squeezed my hand as I climbed out of the limousine.

Thank goodness Willy finally stopped acting like a pig and started acting like my very dear big brother again. "Don't worry, Beatrice, I'll accompany you to the train with Henry." He helped Henry fetch my large red traveling trunk. Mother waved goodbye through the limousine window, but the glass fogged up so quickly her face was soon a blur.

"Come on, dearie," Henry gestured and hoisted my heavy trunk onto his wide shoulders. I reluctantly followed, staying close behind him and Willy as we burrowed our way through the crowd of desperate people.

On the train platform, I spied a mother giving last minute instructions to her four youngsters, two boys and two girls. "Now, Lucy, you are all heading for an old house in the country," she said, wiping a smudge from the face of the youngest, a small blond girl. "Be very patient with your great-uncle. He's not accustomed to children."

The girl named Lucy smiled brightly, "Of course we will, Mummy. We'll be very, very good." Her mother gave her a big hug.

"How fortunate those children are," I muttered to Willy.

"There are four of them, which is far more cheerful than just being one. And they're staying in England." He nodded but it was too hard to speak in the crowd with the noise of train whistles and people shouting all around.

By staying in England, those children would know all the customs and manners. What was the right thing to do and say and how to use a butter knife and a finger bowl. Where I was going, I knew none of the manners. Or even if the people who lived in that faraway land of New Mexico had any proper manners at all.

The three of us squeezed through the mass of people until we reached the platform for departing trains. We found the one I was supposed to ride on. Seeing the train made me realize that in a few minutes I would truly be on my own. Alone. My knees felt so weak I wasn't certain they'd keep holding me up.

I gasped, "Who will watch over Alfie? What if no one carries him to the air raid shelter at night? What if he escapes and goes looking for me in the fire and smoke?"

"Don't worry, Beatrice, I'll look after Alfie!" Willy exclaimed. "And I'll look after Father, Mother, our home and all of London. Everything will be fine when you return." He gave me a hard, quick squeeze. "I know this feels bloody awful, Beatrice, but you're a kicker, you'll survive."

I nodded and felt in the pocket of my wool jacket for the little red notebook Father had given me. Its soft smooth leather was comforting.

"And write, Beatrice, don't forget to write. Often as you like," Willy added.

"If you'll write back, I will." I said.

Henry helped me up the steep step onto the train. "You'll do fine, luv," he muttered. "I don't know much about New Mexico, but I've heard Mexico is a very jolly place. Very jolly!"

He loaded my trunk into a first-class compartment which, I noticed, was not filled with first-class people. Some were wearing dingy clothes. The air was thick and warm and smelled like stewed prunes. But I had no choice; this was my seat. Fitting myself between a large old lady clutching a brown paper bag and a thin ill-looking woman with a sharp pointed nose, I recalled Cook's remark, "The war is causing everyone hardships, even the better class of people."

At the last minute, a tall, grubby boy popped into the compartment and squeezed down opposite me, though it was easy to see there wasn't an inch of extra space. I looked at him indignantly, but he just glared back. Sneering at my fine clothes, shiny shoes and white gloves, he jabbered, "Whatcha' think this is, ducky, Buckingham Palace?"

The train jolted into motion. I caught one last glimpse of Willy and Henry, wildly waving. Then they were gone. The grubby boy was still staring. My lower lip began to quiver; I bit it hard, squeezing both hands into tight fists. That horrid boy will not see me cry, I thought. Not for all the tea in China.