

Fateful Decisions

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for their unstinting support.

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Chapter 1

January 3, 1946

Rachel Johnson jumped out of the car and ran towards the pier. The cold January wind from the sea cut through her coat and chilled her to the bone. Voices were calling for her to slow down, but she paid no attention to them. People were running past her in the same direction, and she tried to keep up with them. For them, it was a happy occasion. However, Rachel was not sure what lay in store for her. She had been dreading this moment ever since she received two telegrams the previous month. She had not revealed the contents of one of the telegrams to anyone. Was it a mean trick? She would soon find out.

Rachel saw her friend, Martha, and she ran to stand next to her. There were cheers from the crowd, as the shape of a ship became visible on the horizon. People around her had waited four years for their loved ones to come back from war torn Europe. The person she was waiting for was coming back after twenty-three years.

Rachel felt two hands on her shoulders. She did not flinch, as she knew they belonged to her son whom she loved very much. She had almost lost him three times. Rachel wondered what his reaction would be since he had never met this person.

It was on a ship like the one approaching that her story began. A shy girl from Hartford, Vermont, had met two men who would change her life forever. From a timid, naïve girl, she was now the owner of a hotel empire. Thirty years had passed since that fateful transatlantic journey which originated from the same harbor.

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Oblivious to the noise around her, her mind went back to the events that occurred thirty years ago.

New York, May 1, 1915

Lusitania blew her horn and began moving away from the pier. Two dark haired women, one nineteen and the other seventeen, ran out of their cabin onto the deck. They wanted to say goodbye to the crowd that had gathered on the pier to see the ship off. One of the women bumped into a man. She apologized and ran away to join her friend.

The man saw the bracelet dropped by the woman. He picked it up and tried to find her. When he could not, he put it into his pocket and together with his friend walked into the crowd gathered on the ship's deck.

Lusitania left New York Harbor and headed towards the Atlantic. The passengers dispersed leaving Fred and Rudy at the railing staring at the disappearing American coast. Fred at twenty-four, was dark haired and a year older than Rudy who was blond. Both were around six feet tall and had blue eyes.

"Well," said Rudy, "looking forward to England. A bit apprehensive though, as I have a German last name. Ever since I was fired from my last job, I have been conscious about it."

"You are an American citizen now. Do not express any sympathies for Germany on this ship or in England, and there will be no trouble. You know what the papers say about the atrocities committed by German soldiers in Europe," replied Fred, patting Rudy's back.

"The papers lie," shot back Rudy in anger. He then smiled and said, "I guess you are right. Let us go to the first class lounge and mingle."

"Great idea! However, remember our agreement not to mention our real reason for going to England."

Rudy smiled and replied, "Oh, your secret is safe with me. Your competitors and the newspapers will not get wind of it. If anyone asks, I will say that we are on a holiday."

“Now, that’s a good friend and employee.”

They both laughed as they walked towards the first class lounge.

May 4, 1915

Rachel Williams left her second class cabin, came onto the deck, and stood at the railing. She needed to clear her mind. She heard two men arguing behind her. She looked at them for a moment and then looked out to sea.

“Rudy, you cannot let what those men say about Germany upset you,” said Fred.

“You have no idea what it is like when people talk bad about your birth country...”

Rudy noticed Rachel looking at them. He realized that she was the woman who bumped into him on the deck. He pointed her out to Fred and told him that he would like to return the bracelet to her. They walked towards her and stood behind her. Rachel was unaware of the two men behind her.

Rudy took a deep breath as if to muster up some courage and said, “Miss.”

The woman did not turn back.

Again, he said, “Miss,” with his voice slightly raised. The woman seemed to break away from her reverie. She turned around in surprise and said, “Yes, what do you want?”

Rudy held up the bracelet and said, “Does this belong to you?”

Her eyes lit up and she said, “Yes, thank you so much. I thought I had lost it.”

“You dropped it when you bumped into Rudy,” replied Fred.

“I am so sorry about that. I didn’t want to miss the ship leaving the harbor.”

“It’s okay. I thought you had a traveling companion,” Rudy added.

“Yes, Martha, but she is seasick. She is resting, and I have just come out to take a stroll and get some fresh air.”

“I hope she feels better. By the way, my name is Rudolph

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Holzmann, and this is my friend, Fredrick Johnson. You can call me Rudy; that is what everyone calls me.”

“And you can call me, Fred. We are from Long Island.”

The woman smiled and said, “My name is Rachel Williams from Hartford, Vermont.”

She held out her hand and the men shook it.

The bell rang announcing that it was lunchtime. Rudy invited Rachel to have lunch with them, but she politely declined the invitation saying that she had to help Martha with her lunch, as she was weak and had to be spoon-fed. Fred then invited her for dinner; she smiled and readily agreed. They decided to meet at seven p.m. outside the first class dining hall. She thanked them, waved, and walked away happily.

“Well, that was someone interesting,” said Fred, as the two men watched her walk away.

“Yes, a lot different and charming from the women in first class. If not for her losing the bracelet, we would never have met her,” said Rudy, and they both entered the dining hall.

“Rachel,” said Martha, “you know that you should be careful about meeting and trusting total strangers, especially young, unmarried men. Please don’t go.”

Martha Manning was a plain, slightly hefty woman, with a tanned complexion inherited from her Italian mother. She looked older than her age of nineteen. She was wise beyond her years and always looked out for Rachel who, on the other hand, was pretty and naïve, but her charm won over many men.

“Oh, Martha, why do you always fuss? I am almost eighteen. I can take care of myself. Besides, those two men were very kind to invite me for dinner after returning my bracelet. It is my chance to eat in the first class dining hall,” said Rachel.

“I promised your guardian that I would look after you. You will be careful, won’t you?” said Martha.

“Don’t worry, I will.” Rachel left closing the door behind her.

* * * * *

"Where is she?" asked Rudy. "It is almost five minutes past seven."

"I hope we didn't scare her. Perhaps we were too hasty in inviting her," said Fred.

They heard a voice behind them. "Well gentlemen, I'm sorry for the delay. Not used to being in the first class area."

They turned around and were stunned at her beauty. "You... You... look beautiful," was all Fred managed to say.

"Thank you," replied Rachel. "Aren't you two going to escort me in? Come on, don't be shy," she said, teasingly.

Fred pulled out a chair for Rachel, and she sat down. The two men sat on either side of her. Over dishes of filet mignon, salad, bread and wine, Rachel told them that her guardian was sending her to England to study art and literature. When she looked at them inquiringly, Fred glanced at Rudy and Rudy said, "We are going there on a holiday." Fred smiled at him approvingly.

The conversation between them went well, until Rachel mentioned an incident that happened at the beginning of the voyage. "I heard that three German stowaways were caught with a camera, and they are being detained below in the ship's cell. The camera was confiscated by Captain Turner," said Rachel.

"They should have been made to work for their passage. Treating them like criminals is awful just because they are Germans."

"Why, Rudy? There is a war going on with Germany and we need to be careful."

"Because I was fired from my job recently as I was German."

"Were you born in Germany, Rudy? I thought you were from Long Island," said Rachel, embarrassed.

"Yes, I was born in Berlin. Mother was from Hamburg, studying chemistry in Berlin, and she met my father who was a baker. I was nine when we immigrated in 1902. My father got a job working in a delicatessen. We stayed Holzmann because Father was always proud of his German heritage and did not want to Americanize his last name. He died two years ago of a stroke.

Fred could see that Rudy was a bit upset. The band began playing, and a few couples started dancing. Fred asked Rachel if she would like to dance and she accepted. They excused themselves and headed to the

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dance floor.

“He seemed upset with what I said,” said Rachel, as they danced.

“He gets upset when people mention the war because he lost his job being a German.”

“That is awful. How long have you two known each other?”

“We met in 1904 in Central Park when both of us were playing there. We stayed friends and went to Columbia University together. Our friendship has always been about competing. We competed in studies, sports, women...”

Suddenly, Rachel asked for the time. Fred put his hand into his breast pocket, looked at the watch, and said, “9:15.”

“I have to go, Fred. Martha will be worried about me. I promised her that I would be back at 9:00.”

“Can’t you stay a little longer? I’m sure she would want you to enjoy your evening.”

“No, I must go. She is very protective of me and has always been that way even when we were kids. I cannot let her be worried.”

“All right, let us go back to the table.” He sounded disappointed.

“What happened?” asked Rudy. “It seemed like you two were having a great time.”

“I must leave. Martha will be worried. Thank you both for a wonderful time. I hope to see you two, maybe tomorrow.”

Rachel took her bag and walked out. Fred looked disappointed as Rachel walked away.

“Maybe I should have had a go at her,” said Rudy and laughed at Fred.

“Shut up, Rudy!” said Fred, very annoyed.

Rachel ran along the deck and opened the door to the cabin. She found Martha reading a book.

“Good, you’re back. I was beginning to get worried about you. I thought they may have thrown you overboard.”

“Don’t be silly, Martha. You worry too much,” she said, now out of breath.

“How was your evening?”

“Oh, it was wonderful. Let me tell you all about it,” said Rachel and sat on the chair next to Martha’s bed.

Rachel told Martha about her evening. After she had finished, Martha said, “I hope you do not fall sick after eating that food. I am concerned, since their friendship is about competing, they may be vying for your affection. I have a feeling that your life will be in turmoil if you get involved with these men.”

“Martha, you’re always pessimistic. This trip has just begun to get interesting. It would be fascinating to be pursued by two men at the same time. After we dock in England, we will go our separate ways, and I will never see them again. Let me enjoy the attention until then.”

Martha sighed and continued reading her book.

May 7, 1915

At eleven a.m., the Lusitania came through the fog into the hazy sunshine. She was twenty-five miles off the coast of Ireland. Captain Turner was expecting to meet his naval escort, HMS Juno. When the escort did not arrive, a message arrived from the admiralty to alter the ship’s course and head towards Ireland.

Kapitan, Leutnant Walter Schweiger saw that the fog had cleared and gave the order to surface. The U-20 blew her tanks and surfaced. Schweiger went up on the conning tower to join the lookouts. All of a sudden, one of the lookouts drew their attention to smoke.

Schweiger looked through the binoculars and saw that the smoke came from a ship. He gave orders for the U-20 to submerge and simultaneously change course to intercept the ship.

At about this time, Fred and Rudy had finished their lunch and were walking on the deck when they spotted Rachel.

Rachel was standing with her hands on the railing staring at the sea. She heard footsteps behind her and turned.

“Oh!” she said, her face lighting up with joy, “it’s nice to see you two.”

“It’s nice to see you too,” said Fred. “Where have you been?”

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“I’ve been sick with fever and an upset stomach. Martha was right; all that food did make me sick. I can’t wait to be on land.”

Meanwhile, on the orders of Captain Turner, the ship turned to starboard side and headed towards Queenstown.

“Look, we seem to be heading towards land,” said Rudy, pointing his finger. Fred and Rachel looked in the direction Rudy pointed.

“I think that’s Ireland. Wonder why we’re heading there,” said Fred.

A few miles away, after Kapitan Schwieger got confirmation from his pilot that it was the Lusitania, the U-20 prepared for action. Schwieger looked into the attack periscope and saw the ship was heading toward land. Schwieger gave the order to fire. The G-type torpedo shot out of the forward tube and heading toward the ship.

Blissfully unaware of the approaching danger, the passengers were dining in their respective dining halls, and some were walking along the deck. Fred, Rudy, and Rachel were standing on the starboard side when they saw a woman point to an object approaching the ship. The other passengers on deck went to see this strange object coming towards them.

One of the men standing around yelled, “No, it can’t be. It’s a torpedo! Run to the other side.”

Panic stricken, the passengers ran to the other side just as the torpedo struck the ship. The impact made the ship shudder. Dread set in among the passengers as they started to grasp the severity of the situation.

Rachel cried, “I must get Martha out onto the deck,” and she ran towards the cabin.

Rudy and Fred ran after her, and Rudy managed to hold her hand, when the terrified passengers rushed out pushing Fred away from them. He shouted, “Go find Martha. I’ll meet you near the life boats.”

Rachel and Rudy ran along the deck towards Martha’s cabin when there was a second explosion, which rocked the ship, causing some passengers to fall into the sea.

Rudy and Rachel managed to steady themselves, went towards Martha’s cabin, and entered it. No one was there, and all their belongings were scattered on the floor. Rachel froze at the sight but

then composed herself. She opened her desk and found that her documents and money were missing. She hoped that Martha had taken them with her. The life preservers were also missing.

“Rachel, we must leave,” Rudy shouted.

Rudy grabbed her hand, and they ran out of the cabin together.

Captain Turner commanded the ship to go full speed towards the Irish coast, but the drop in pressure made the turbines unresponsive. The ship came to a sudden halt and began to list.

Fred felt the ship had come to a stop. He ran towards the portside to wait for Rudy and Rachel at the lifeboats. He saw that lifeboat No.2 was filled with passengers and was dangling precariously. A woman with a bag, holding the hand of a stewardess, stood in front of the lifeboat. Without any warning, the boat, filled with passengers, swung inboard towards the waiting passengers. The woman screamed as the lifeboat headed towards her. Fred caught her hand and pulled the woman and the stewardess aside. The boat missed them by a few inches but crushed the other passengers.

Fred saw a boat that was about to be lowered. He yelled at the crew lowering the boat to wait, and he told the two women to sit in the boat. The three of them got in. As the boat was being lowered, a woman came with her baby.

“Sorry, the boat is being lowered,” said the crewman lowering the boat.

“Give me the baby,” yelled Fred. The woman hesitated and shook her head.

“Give it to me. I will catch it, I swear.” The woman held out the baby, and Fred stretched out his arms and caught it. He gave the baby to the stewardess and said to the woman,

“Jump, I will catch you.”

The woman leaned forward and jumped. Fred caught her hand, but she slipped. The people in the boat watched with horror on their faces. Fred held onto her right hand with both his hands. One of the men next to him stretched forward and caught the woman's other hand. Together, they pulled her onto the boat. The boat now touched the water.

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The ship's lights went out; Rachel and Rudy were running in the dark towards the lifeboats. As they tried to get outside, they heard cries for help. They looked, and through the little daylight that was coming from outside, they could see passengers trapped in an elevator.

"We have to help them," Rachel said. They went towards the elevator and tried to pry the doors open. The doors would not open. The ship's list got worse.

"We have got to go," shouted Rudy.

"We cannot leave them," Rachel shouted back.

"We have to, or we will drown." Rudy grabbed her hand and dragged her. She tried not to look at the faces of the terrified passengers trapped in the elevator. They were now out in the open. Meanwhile, the stern began to settle back. A wave swept them off the ship. Rudy managed to hold onto the railing, but Rachel was thrown into the sea, screaming. She tried to stay afloat. The water was cold and she had no life preserver. Rudy realized that she could not swim. He jumped into the sea, swam up to her, and caught her just as she was about to go under water. She was exhausted and weak from the fever and running. Rachel settled onto Rudy's body while he caught hold of a deck chair that was floating next to them.

The Lusitania was sinking. Her stern stood out from the water, and the propellers were visible. Without warning, she lunged forward into the water and disappeared, taking people still trapped inside her.

Rachel opened her eyes and saw the ship disappear. She saw passengers drown and some trying to save others as well as themselves. She closed her eyes, unable to bear the horror unfolding before her.

The survivors on Fred's lifeboat witnessed the sinking of the ship, and were shocked into silence.

"She is gone forever. It took just 18 minutes to sink after the torpedo struck her," one of the men said calmly looking at his watch.

One of the women looked at the fishing boats coming from the coast and shouted, "Hurry; people are dying." She started crying and held her face in both her hands.

Rudy held onto Rachel with one hand and a chair with the other.

The water was cold, and she could feel her body beginning to numb. She kept holding onto Rudy, as she felt herself losing consciousness.

Rachel's mind went back to April 1912. She was at her convent school in Connecticut when she heard the terrible news as one of her classmates held the newspaper for all to see.

"Impossible, my parents are on board the Titanic. They are returning from Europe."

Two days later, the headmistress called Rachel aside. She had received a telegram from Rachel's great aunt confirming the death of her parents. She ran to her room crying, and she buried her head in the pillow. She began to feel a deep hatred for her parents. Could they not have tried to stay alive for her sake? There were many survivors, and why did they have to die and leave her all alone?

After what seemed like an eternity, Rachel felt herself being pulled from the cold ocean. She rested her head on Rudy's shoulder while they were sitting in the lifeboat, too exhausted and cold to say anything.

Rudy began arguing with the men on the lifeboat when one of them accused the Germans of attacking the ship. The argument got heated when another passenger insisted that the second explosion was due to a second torpedo. Rudy insisted that he saw only one torpedo.

"Don't argue with them, they might throw you overboard," Rachel whispered in Rudy's ear.

Rudy realized that it was pointless arguing and kept quiet. The lifeboat made its way towards the Irish coast.

The survivors were taken to Queenstown. There, Rachel and Rudy were reunited with Fred. Rachel searched for Martha and found her standing next to a stewardess. Rachel, with tears of joy, went and hugged Martha.

Martha told Rachel that, when the stewardess was feeding her, they felt the ship shudder. As a precautionary measure, the stewardess helped Martha with the life preserver, and the stewardess wore the other. Martha took the bag containing the documents and money before leaving the cabin.

"I know. I went with Rudy to get you and you were gone. Rudy

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saved my life. Let me take you to meet them.”

Martha thanked the stewardess and left with Rachel. “I did not get his name, but this wonderful man saved me and the stewardess. He also saved the life of a woman and her child,” said Martha.

“I hope I get to meet him and thank him for saving you.” They went towards Fred and Rudy who were talking.

“Oh, there he is. He’s the one who saved me,” said Martha, pointing at Fred.

“It’s nice to see you again. I did not get your name,” said Fred to Martha when he saw her approaching them.

“Fred, Rudy, this is Martha. Fred, thank you for saving Martha,” Rachel said in gratitude.

“Finally, we get to meet you, Martha. Rachel has told us so much about you,” said Rudy.

“Likewise. Nice to meet you both. Rudy, thank you for saving Rachel.”

Martha turned to Rachel and said, “So, these are the men you were telling me about. I am glad that I was wrong. From now on, I will have more trust in your choice of men.”

Martha and Rachel left for England on the first ship they could get passage on. Fred and Rudy came to see them off. As the ship left the harbor, Martha said, “Rachel, I have a feeling that I have seen Fred before, and we will meet them again.”

Chapter 2

New York, July 1917

Two men got down from the car and stood in line with the other well-dressed people.

“I do not know, Fred, I am contributing money for America to go to war with my country of birth. I voted for President Wilson in 1916, because he promised that America wouldn’t be involved with the war in Europe,” Rudy whispered to Fred.

Fred patted him on the back and said, “America is now your country and your loyalty should lie here. Donating money to the American war effort will show that you are a patriotic American.”

When their turn came, they produced their invitations and were allowed to enter. As they entered, they saw people dancing and talking to each other. Harold Joseph Hardy walked towards them with a slight limp. He was a tall man in his forties with red hair that was beginning to gray at the temples. Harold and Fred, being part of New York’s elite society, would socialize in the same circles. They got along well, even though Harold was twenty years older. He shook Fred’s hand and welcomed him.

“Harry, meet my friend, Rudolph Holzmann. We grew up together, and he is now working for me as my accountant.”

Harold shook Rudy’s hand and said, “It’s nice of you two to come. The money collected today will support the American war effort in Europe and the war affected families.”

“You have our contribution to the war effort,” said Fred.

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“Thank you. You can go to the table and deposit your checks. Enjoy yourselves. I must see to the other guests arriving.”

Fred and Rudy deposited their checks and headed to the bar to get a glass of whiskey. As they were waiting, Fred drew Rudy’s attention to a woman in a blue dress. Rudy turned and looked in the direction Fred was pointing, and his eyes widened when he recognized the woman.

“It is Rachel. Wonder what she is doing here.”

“She looks beautiful; even better than the first time we saw her on the ship.”

“Well,” said Rudy, “the years have certainly made her more beautiful. Come, let us go talk to her.”

Rachel saw Fred and Rudy walking towards her. She excused herself from the group of women she was talking to and went towards them. “Fred, Rudy, it’s so nice to see you. When did you two come to Manhattan?”

Fred replied, “We arrived yesterday. When did you come back to America?”

“I finished my studies and came back in May,” Rachel answered.

“I see you are married with a child,” Fred continued.

Rachel chuckled and said, “Oh no, he’s Martha and Harry’s son. I came back for their wedding last summer. I was the maid of honor, and I’m now the godmother of their son, Sidney.”

Martha came up to them and said, “Rachel, there you are. I was looking for you.”

“Martha, remember Fred and Rudy? They saved us when the Lusitania sank.”

Martha’s face lit up when she recognized them. “Yes, I remember you both. You’re Fred Johnson, the heir to the Johnson Hotels. No wonder I found you very familiar.”

Fred laughed. “Guilty as charged. Rudy and I decided to keep our identities and our reason for our trip secret when we sailed because we were heading to London to buy a hotel. Due to the war, we decided not to. Martha, I received your wedding invite last year, but I was unable to attend the wedding because Father had just died. I never realized you were the Martha whom Harry was marrying.”

"I understand. I met Harry in England, and we were on the same ship coming back to America. Before I knew it, he proposed and I accepted, a few hours before the ship docked at New York Harbor. I am glad that you could come to this Charity Ball. Harry is very patriotic and fought in the Spanish American War. He would have enlisted, but he cannot. He suffers from asthma, and his old war wound makes him limp."

Martha turned to Rachel and said, "Rachel, let me take Sidney. It's time for his nap."

Rachel handed Sidney to Martha. After Martha left, Rachel led them to an older woman in her early seventies sitting in a chair. A woman in a red dress stood next to her. She introduced the older woman as her great aunt and guardian, Victoria Harlow, and the young woman was her granddaughter Lucy.

"Rachel told me about you two. Thank you for saving Rachel and Martha," said Aunt Victoria.

The music stopped. Harold Hardy came onto the platform where the musicians were seated and gave a short speech, thanking the people for their donations.

After the National Anthem, Fred asked Victoria Harlow if they would like to spend a few days at his home in Long Island. Aunt Victoria looked at Rachel, and Rachel said, "Oh Fred, I have never been to Long Island and would love to go there."

"Then it is settled," said Aunt Victoria.

Fred said, "We can all travel by train. The scenery is beautiful, and I will send the car ahead to pick us up in Long Island."

Two days later, the five of them were on the train. On the way, Aunt Victoria told Fred and Rudy the circumstances of how she got to raise Lucy and Rachel. Victoria Harlow was the sister of Rachel's paternal grandfather. Lucy, orphaned during the San Francisco earthquake, came to live with her grandmother in Vermont. Rachel joined them after her parents died in the Titanic tragedy. Although Lucy was a year older than Rachel, the tragedy of losing their parents so young made them close like sisters.

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The train reached the station and they alighted. Alfred, the chauffeur, escorted them to the car. The car navigated through the suburbs and reached two huge wrought iron gates. It then drove through the gates and stopped in front of a colonial style manor. The occupants got out.

Fred said, "Ladies, welcome to the Johnson Manor."

The butler, Robert, whose brown hair was graying, and the maids helped to unload the bags.

"You have a beautiful house and a lovely garden," said Rachel.

"Thank you. My grandfather built this place after buying this plot of land when he immigrated to America in the 1850s. He made his fortune in the Golconda Diamond Mines in India. He started a hotel in Manhattan and gradually built the rest of the Johnson Hotel Empire."

The women were amazed at the antiques in the house. Chinese vases and vases made from Benares brass, Persian carpets on the floor, and tapestries hung on the walls. There were fern plants and palm trees at certain corners, and glass chandeliers hanging from the ceiling.

The servants showed the guests their rooms, and they were told to be ready for dinner at eight p.m. Rudy wished them goodbye, and Alfred drove him home.

At quarter to eight, Fred was in the drawing room smoking his cigar. He got up and poured himself a glass of brandy. Rachel walked in wearing a green dress, and her brown hair was pinned on top of her head. She wore an emerald necklace to match her green dress. Fred could not take his eyes off her.

"Well, welcome," he managed to say.

"Thank you," she said.

She looked up at a painting of a very beautiful woman sitting in a chair over the fireplace. She looked at the next portrait and saw a debonair man with a moustach, dressed in a suit.

"Your parents, I presume," said Rachel.

"Yes, my mother died when I was five, and my father died last year of heart failure. My mother was a descendant of one of the Mayflower

passengers.”

“Aunt Victoria is the daughter of General Andrew Logan who fought for the Union Army in the Civil War. My mother was from Charleston, South Carolina and a supporter of the Confederacy. Aunt Victoria gives me grief all the time.”

Fred chuckled. He pointed to a painting of a man dressed in a suit, which was the style of the mid nineteenth century. She noticed that Fred and his father resembled the man in the portrait. “That’s my grandfather. He built this house in 1859.”

“It must have been an adventurous life in India with the elephants, wild animals, the Maharajas, and the exotic ambiance of the Orient.”

“Yes,” said Fred. “From what I have read from his diary, he had a lot of exciting exploits in that country.”

“Is Rudy coming for dinner?”

“Yes, he is. I told him to bring his mother along.”

Just then, Victoria Harlow and Lucy entered the room. Fred greeted them and they began talking. As the clock struck eight, Robert came in and said, “Mr. Holzmann and his mother are here.”

“Thank you, Robert. Show them in,” said Fred.

After a minute, Rudy and his mother entered. Rudy was dressed in a suit and bow tie and his mother in a simple yellow dress. Mary Holzmann looked frail and a lot older than her forty-six years.

Rudy introduced his mother to the Harlows and Rachel. Mary Holzmann greeted them with a recognizable German accent. Robert came in and announced that dinner was served. The six of them followed Robert, and they sat at the dining table. Robert poured the wine while the maids brought the soup. Before eating, Fred raised his glass and said, “A toast to our country! May she be victorious in this war, and may our boys come back home safely.”

The rest said, “Here, here,” and clinked their glasses together.

After dinner, all of them went to the study for coffee or brandy. Robert poured the coffee, and Marcy, the senior maid, with graying hair, served them. They sat talking until the clock struck ten p.m. Mary Holzmann declared that she was tired and would like to go home. After wishing them goodbye, the Harlows too said that they would like

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to retire. Rachel said that she would follow later.

After the Harlows left, Rachel asked Fred, "When did Rudy become your accountant?"

"Rudy was fired from his job and couldn't get another because of his German last name, though he was good at his work. I hired him before we set sail on the Lusitania. He saved my business. I avoided a lot of trouble with the Bureau of Internal Revenue and with my creditors."

"Why didn't you two enlist?"

"I, being the sole owner, have to remain here managing the hotels, but I do contribute to the war effort. Rudy does not want to fight Germany, and he cannot join because his eyes give him trouble."

Rachel yawned and said, "Well, it has been a long day, and I better retire. She stood up and Fred stood up too.

"Good night, and thank you for a wonderful dinner," said Rachel.

She smiled at Fred and went towards the stairs.

Fred watched her as she ascended the stairs, and he wondered if he should put forth the question he wanted to ask her. He put that thought aside and went to his bedroom.

At the same time, Rudy was lying on his bed thinking about the same question Fred wanted to ask Rachel. He turned off the light and went to sleep.

The next day, the three women spent the day at the beach and shopping. They had dinner with Fred that evening. After dinner, the Harlows retired and, once again, Rachel and Fred were alone. Rachel looked outside and said, "It looks like a beautiful night with a full moon. Can we go outside for a stroll?"

"Sure," said Fred. He opened the glass door and they went out.

"Lovely moonlit night, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," said Fred. "The moon looks beautiful; I have never seen so many stars in the sky."

"Yes, it is almost as if this night is made for lovers."

Fred grinned. "It may be so. You look beautiful in the moonlight."

Rachel looked at him, and Fred backed away with embarrassment.

"What did you say?"

Fred looked at her and said, "Rachel, will you marry me?"

She looked at him and was speechless.

"Rachel, will you marry me? I fell in love with you on the ship, and ever since I met you again, I realized that you are the one for me."

"But, we hardly know each other."

"That's not true. We know all there is to know about each other."

"Well, I am not ready to take that step..." and her voice trailed off.

Fred reached forward, held her, and kissed her on the lips. She broke away and sat down on the bench. "I am sorry if I was too hasty," he said, ashamed of himself.

"No, no, it's all right. Good night, Fred." Rachel got up and ran back into the house, leaving Fred staring at her. He stared until Rachel disappeared. He sat down with one hand on his head saying, 'stupid, stupid, stupid...' He then got up and went back into the house.

Rachel informed Lucy that she had a headache and would not come for breakfast. Fred had Marcy take Rachel a breakfast tray to her room. At nine a.m., the Harlows and Fred left the house for a tour of the vineyard and winery.

Rachel lay in bed replaying the events of the previous night in her mind repeatedly. The marriage proposal shocked her completely. She thought of Fred only as a good friend.

There was a knock on the door and Marcy stuck her head in. She said that Rudy was at the door, and he wanted to see her. Rachel told her to let him in, and she would be down in a few minutes.

She got up, washed her face, changed her clothes, and went downstairs. Rudy told her that he had come to talk to Fred and was surprised that he had left so early. Rachel told him that Fred was showing the Harlows the vineyard and the winery. She did not go due to the headache.

Rudy insisted that she come to his house and that the morning air would do her good. Rachel politely refused but relented as Rudy kept persisting.

She put on a hat and got into a horse drawn carriage, which Rudy

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had hired, and rode away.

The carriage went into a street with dilapidated houses. There were children running with filthy clothes on, and Rachel could see women washing clothes and hanging them on the clotheslines. She was shocked at the filth and squalor.

The carriage stopped at house No. 27. They got out and Rudy paid the coachman. Rudy went to the front door and knocked. They heard footsteps, and Mary Holzmann opened the door.

Mrs. Holzmann greeted Rachel and was pleased to see her.

“Good morning, Frau Holzmann.”

“You speak German? I never thought any American girl would know to address me as Frau. We do not speak German anymore since we have to keep a low profile due to the war.”

“Sister Ingmar at my convent school was German, and I also had some German friends in London.”

They entered the house. It seemed a modest house, just enough for two people. Mrs. Holzmann asked Rachel to sit down and went into the kitchen to get refreshments. Rachel looked at the fireplace and saw three pictures on the mantelpiece. She went towards the pictures and looked at them. Rudy said, “Those are the pictures of my parents. My picture was taken when I was 8 years old.

Rachel said, “Your father was a very handsome man. You look just like him. You have his blond hair and square jaw.” She turned and smiled at Rudy. Rudy was better looking than Fred and had boyish good looks. She felt attracted to Rudy for the first time.

Mrs. Holzmann came out with a tray, and set it on a table. She poured three cups, added sugar, and handed them out. Rachel sipped the tea and felt her headache disappear. She felt much better and, for the first time that day, she was able to think clearly.

Mrs. Holzmann told Rachel about their life in Berlin and their decision to immigrate to America. She taught chemistry at the local high school. She was proud of Rudy for going to college and getting a good job. Mrs. Holzmann cut a cake and gave Rachel and Rudy a slice each. She got up and took the tray into the kitchen.

Rachel looked at Rudy and he smiled at her. She smiled back, and

Rudy took her hand into his and said,

“Rachel, I have something to ask you.”

“What is it?” she mumbled.

“I want...”

Rachel tried to pull her hand away.

“Rachel, will you marry me?”

Rachel could not believe it. In less than twenty-four hours, she had received two marriage proposals from two good friends. She felt her headache come back with a vengeance. She got up. “Rachel, I have wanted to ask...”

“Sorry, I really must be getting back.”

She started towards the door, when Mrs. Holzmann came out from the kitchen and asked her to stay for lunch. Rachel did not accept the invitation. She thanked Mrs. Holzmann for her hospitality and left the place.

Mrs. Holzmann turned to Rudy and said. “Strange girl! I wonder why she ran away.”

Rudy did not answer. He saw Rachel run and get into a carriage. ‘You blew it, you fool,’ he said softly to himself. Rachel ran down the street, hailed a passing carriage, and got into it. She told the coachman where she wanted to go; the coachman looked surprised. Without a word, he turned and yelled at the horse to go. She closed her eyes, and they remained closed until the carriage reached Johnson Manor.

When she opened her eyes, she saw the front door of the manor and the coachman opening the door of the carriage for her. She paid the coachman, ran towards the front door, opened it, and ran to her bedroom. She lay on the bed and began thinking. She was not yet twenty and she had received two marriage proposals. Marriage was far from her mind. She wanted to become a nurse and help the war effort. She was glad that she was going back to Hartford the next day. She got up from the bed and went into the washroom. After freshening up, she went downstairs for lunch. All through lunch, she did not speak much, except when it was necessary while Aunt Victoria and Lucy told her about their outing. She was thinking about how she would face Fred when he came back in the evening, until she left the next day.

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When Fred came home for dinner, she hardly looked at him, saying that her silence was due to her headache. After dinner, she went to her bedroom to pack and sleep. She felt better in the morning. She was relieved that she was leaving the events of the previous two days behind her for good.

After breakfast, Fred accompanied them to the station. Aunt Victoria and Lucy thanked Fred for his hospitality. Rachel remained silent. "Rachel," said Aunt Victoria, with a firm voice, "why haven't you thanked Fred? He has been very kind to us."

"Thank you," said Rachel, looking away with embarrassment.

Just then, the conductor blew the whistle, and the engine let out a gust of steam. Victoria Harlow thanked Fred again and they got in. The train let out one more gust of steam and pulled away from the station.

The next day, the three of them were back in Hartford. They collected their luggage, hired a horse drawn carriage, and were on their way home. As the carriage picked up speed, Rachel stuck her head out of the window and looked at the cornfields and meadows with the cattle grazing. It felt good to be home.

The carriage reached their residence and they got out. The house was not large but sufficient for a small family. There was a vegetable garden in front with a few rose and other flowering plants.

After settling down, they opened a tin of ham, made sandwiches, and had lunch. After lunch, Lucy declared that she would plant her rose cuttings, which Fred had given her, before they withered. Aunt Victoria took her feather duster and started dusting. Rachel said that she would work in the vegetable garden. She found her gardening gloves and began pulling out weeds. After half an hour, she entered the house tired and exhausted from working in the blazing sun. She washed her hands and sat on a chair.

Aunt Victoria came by her and said, "Rachel, what's the matter? I have noticed for the past two days that you have been very sad and acting strangely. You hardly smile and you look stressed."

"It's nothing, Aunt Victoria."

“Rachel, if something is bothering you, it is better you tell me. I, being older, can advise you what to do.”

Rachel sat up and asked Aunt Victoria to keep what she told her confidential. Aunt Victoria assured her that she would. Rachel began telling her what happened. At the end, Rachel was emotional and told Aunt Victoria that she did not know what to do.

Aunt Victoria sat next to Rachel and said, “My dear, do not grieve. You have to think carefully and see who would be able to support you and give you a good life.”

“Rudy saved my life and has always been kind to me and is good looking. On the other hand, Fred is financially stable, has been very kind to us and looked after us, but he is not as good looking as Rudy. I realized that I was attracted to Rudy’s good looks and charm when I went to his house. I was never attracted to Fred but thought of him only as a good friend.”

“My dear, just because a person has saved your life, does not mean that you are bound to him for life by marrying him. Don’t go for looks. Fred saved Martha’s life, but did she marry him? I am sure she is grateful, but neither she nor Fred thought about marrying each other. You must choose a man who can support you and the children and keep you secure for the rest of your life. From what you told me about Rudy’s place, it looks like he will not be able to provide for you. Many factors go into a marriage than looks and gratitude. Please think about it and tell me what you decide.”

Rachel got up to leave and Aunt Victoria said, “My child, remember that the man you want to marry is your own decision, and that decision has consequences.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, about your life, the children you will have, and how everything will impact the world.”

Rachel smiled and went to her room. She knew that Aunt Victoria’s last piece of advice came from her wisdom, and she had to think carefully before making the right decision. She had no idea that many years later, she would think a lot about this piece of advice.

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In the morning, Rachel came down for breakfast and found Aunt Victoria alone. She went to her and said, "Good morning, Aunt Victoria. I have thought about what you said, and I have made up my mind."

"Well, what is it?"

"I can see that Fred, in addition to being a wonderful man, can support me and provide for a family. He is a gentleman and is always very cheerful. He does love me a lot and is a genuine person. I will accept Fred's proposal."

"You must telegraph Fred that you accept his marriage proposal. Do not delay because there will not be another opportunity like this. Before you do that, I must be sure that you know you have picked the right person. I have met both of them, and they both seem like very fine gentlemen."

"Yes, I am sure, Aunt Victoria. Fred even told me that he loved me ever since he saw me on the Lusitania."

"All right, Rachel, since you are sure, I will respect your decision. Off you go."

Rachel went to the telegraph office and telegraphed Fred and Rudy. Rachel returned in the afternoon slightly exhausted. She had not eaten anything since dinner, and she could hear her stomach growling. She went into the kitchen and saw Aunt Victoria preparing lunch.

"Aunt Victoria, it is done. I telegraphed both of them."

"I have confidence in your decision, my dear. You have always been good at knowing what you wanted in life, and I am sure Fred is the right man for you. I feel it in my bones; old as they may be, I can still feel."

Rachel laughed and hugged Aunt Victoria.

* * * * *

Back in Long Island, Fred returned home, and after pouring himself a glass of brandy, he sat down in the drawing room, and began to read the latest bestseller. Just as he began reading, Robert came in with a telegram, and handed it to Fred, whose face lit up with a smile as he

read it.

When Rudy arrived home that evening, Mary Holzmann pointed to the mantel, and told him of the telegram that had arrived earlier. Taking it to his room for privacy, Rudy began sobbing as he read the disappointing news from Rachel.

A few days later, Rachel looked out of the window and saw the postman coming. Rachel opened the door and the postman handed her the stack of envelopes. Rachel thanked him and went inside. She looked through the stack and found one from Fred, which she opened and read. Fred had written that he was delighted she accepted his marriage proposal, and he promised to be true to her and take care of her. He asked her to inform him when she could come to Long Island so that he could announce their engagement and plan for the wedding.

Rachel ran into the kitchen and showed the letter to Victoria Harlow. She hugged Rachel and said, "I am so happy for you. You are finally going to be married!"

Ten days later, the Harlows and Rachel were on their way to Long Island. Rachel felt sad because she knew that it would be a while before she would be back in Hartford.

At the station in Long Island, Fred and Alfred helped the women alight from the train, took their bags, and escorted them to the car.

Aunt Victoria whispered to Fred, "I'm glad that Rachel accepted your proposal. I'm sure that the two of you will be very happy together."

"Thank you, Mrs. Harlow. By the way, I have already arranged for the engagement party to be held four days from now, and the wedding will be two weeks after the engagement."

"That is too soon. I don't have my wedding dress yet," interjected Rachel.

"Don't worry, we can go to Macy's in Manhattan and get you a dress."

"I want to stitch my own dress."

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“Then, we will get the material, and you can stitch it.” Rachel smiled back at Fred and felt that she had made the right choice.

* * * * *

Rachel got down from the car, looked at the manor, and realized that in a few days she would be the mistress of this manor. The thought of her new life before her filled her with apprehension and at the same time excited her. After lunch, Fred called Rachel into the drawing room and closed the door. He asked her to sit down and close her eyes. He removed a box from his pocket, opened it, and asked Rachel to open her eyes. When she did, she saw the most magnificent diamond ring she had ever seen.

“It’s beautiful,” was all she could say.

Fred took her hand and placed the ring on her finger. “Now, I can show you off to the world.”

The engagement party was held four days later. The guests eagerly assembled around the staircase. Rachel walked down the stairs wearing a blue dress and a diamond necklace, which was given to Rachel by Aunt Victoria as a wedding gift. Fred took Rachel’s hand and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, this is Rachel Williams, my future wife.”

Everyone clapped and cheered. Rachel was glad that they approved of her. She was nervous about meeting Fred’s friends since they came from affluent families. As he took her around to meet their guests, people told her she was just as Fred had described her. Two men even told her that they were envious of Fred for marrying such a beautiful woman.

When the music began to play, Fred led her by the hand to the dance floor. As the first dance ended, she saw a familiar face standing next to a pillar.

“Rudy!” she exclaimed. She had forgotten all about him.

“What was that, dear?”

“I see Rudy standing at that pillar. Let me go speak to him.”

“He must have just arrived. Let’s meet him together.”

No, no, let me talk to him. In a few days, I will be the mistress of this house, and it will be my duty to welcome guests. I better get attuned to it now." She squeezed Fred's hand before letting him go and headed in Rudy's direction.

Fred stared at Rachel as she walked towards Rudy. He was confused, wondering why she insisted on meeting Rudy herself. He shrugged his shoulders and walked towards the bar to get a drink.

"Good evening, Rudy. I am glad you came."

Rudy turned around in surprise and said, "Good evening, Rachel." He then lowered his voice and mumbled, "Congratulations."

Rachel saw the sadness in his handsome face. She went closer and whispered to Rudy to meet her outside on the other side of the balcony near the rose bushes in five minutes.

She walked away before he could respond. Five minutes later, she saw him come into the garden. She motioned him to go towards a row of tall bushes where they could talk without being seen or heard.

"Rudy, please tell me what is wrong."

"It is nothing, Rachel."

"I can see you're upset with me marrying Fred, and not you, aren't you?"

Rudy nodded his head. "I think, telling you face to face, would have been the right thing to do instead of sending a telegram. Both of you were in love with me, and both of you proposed to me within twenty-four hours of each other. I could choose only one of you. I chose Fred because he is a good man besides other reasons. Please be happy for us. I am sure you will find someone else in the future."

She held Rudy's hand in both hers. He looked into her blue eyes and saw the pain in them. He smiled and said, "I am sorry that I did not ask you sooner, but I am sure I will find someone at some point. Since you two are my friends, it would be very selfish of me not to be happy for both of you."

"Thank you, thank you," said Rachel and squeezed his hand in gratitude. A cool wind blew and the tall bushes began to sway. Rudy suggested that they go in.

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“Let me go in first and then you follow later. People may think it odd if we walk in together,” Rachel suggested. Rachel went in and tried to find Fred. A few seconds later, she saw Rudy entering.

“Ah, there you are! I have been looking for you.” Fred took her by the hand and led her to the dance floor, and they began dancing. She looked around and saw Rudy talking to people. She was relieved.

That night, when Rachel went to bed, she had a good feeling about her decision. Her happiness was complete except that Martha and Harry would not be able to attend the wedding as they were in Florida. Rachel wanted Harry to give her away.

* * * * *

The big day arrived! Rachel could not believe that she was going to be married. She looked out of the window and saw the decorations and tents set up for the wedding. In a few hours, she would be a married woman.

Aunt Victoria and Lucy came in to help Rachel get ready. After she was fully attired, Rachel looked in the mirror. She was pleased with what she saw. She thanked Aunt Victoria and Lucy for helping her stitch her wedding dress.

Aunt Victoria looked at the clock and reminded them that it was time to go. Rachel took one final look in the mirror and adjusted the pearl necklace, which her mother had given her before she departed for Europe, never to return. She turned away from the mirror, and the three women walked out together.

They arrived at St. Mark’s Church that was the local house of worship. “Thank you, Alfred. You did bring us to the church on time after getting Mr. Johnson here earlier.”

Alfred smiled as he opened the door for her. “The next time I drive you home, you will be Mrs. Johnson.” The three women went into the Brides Room. It was almost eleven a.m., and in a few minutes, she would enter the church as a bride. She looked at herself in the mirror and adjusted the flowers in her hair.

“I feel nervous, Aunt Victoria.”

"Then you feel like a bride," came the terse reply.

Lucy came in and said, "I took a peek. Fred looks handsome, and Rudy is beside him as his best man."

She then smiled and said, "Rachel, you have a surprise guest."

"Who is it?"

The door opened and Rachel heard a familiar voice. "Hello, Rachel. You don't plan on getting married without me, do you?"

Rachel could not believe it. It was Martha. She went and hugged her.

"I thought you couldn't make it."

"I thought so too, but then I realized that you came for my wedding and it meant so much to me. I decided to do the same, and Harry agreed. Harry is waiting outside to walk you down the aisle."

They heard the organist begin to play.

"Time for us to go in," said Lucy.

Rachel smiled. She pulled the veil over her face and walked behind Lucy.

* * * * *

Harry Hardy took Rachel's arm, and they walked down the aisle together. The first people she saw were the staff from Johnson Manor and Alfred, sitting at the back of the church. She did not know the rest of the people, as they were all Fred's friends, though she had met some of them at her engagement party. She then saw a few relatives and friends from Hartford and finally, she saw Martha and Aunt Victoria sitting together. Both of them were wiping their eyes and smiling at her.

She saw Fred standing next to Rudy. Fred smiled at her, but Rudy was forcing himself to be cheerful. She understood his plight. Both the men were in love with her, and she had to disappoint one of them with her decision.

She stood next to Fred and handed her bouquet to Lucy. The priest began the nuptial ceremony with the sign of the cross. When it was time for the exchange of vows, Rachel felt her heart beating faster. This was it; no turning back. She saw Fred smiling as he repeated his

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vows after the priest, and she did the same. They were pronounced man and wife. Fred lifted her veil, and she saw the happiness on his face. He kissed her on the lips. This time, she responded, unlike the last time he kissed her in the garden when he proposed.

She got a glimpse of Rudy. He smiled, but his eyes betrayed his bravado. The rest of the ceremony continued, and Rachel tried to think of her life ahead.

After the ceremony, Fred and Rachel walked out of the church. Lucy came to her and said, "Congratulations, Mrs. Johnson. I wanted to be the first to call you that." Rachel laughed and hugged her.

Fred and Rachel went back to the manor as man and wife. She could not believe that she was now Mrs. Frederick Johnson. She was glad that Fred had asked Rudy to be his best man, and he agreed. She knew she had unnecessarily worried that she would break up their friendship. She was hopeful that Rudy would get over his disappointment, and she looked forward to the wedding reception and her new life.

The guests cheered as the bridal couple entered the garden for their reception. Rachel was amazed at how beautiful the garden and hall looked. Fresh flowers were brought in for the reception and placed everywhere. People complimented on how beautiful she looked and how her mother's pearl necklace looked elegant on her.

Rudy got up to toast the newly married couple. He made a few jokes and spoke about how important Fred's friendship was to him. He said that they made a very handsome couple and wished them a long and prosperous life together.

Rachel was pleased with the toast. Rudy seemed to be getting over his disappointment.

Fred got up to respond to the toast. He thanked the guests for coming, and the last part of his speech made everyone gasp. "Ladies and gentlemen, Rachel has made me very happy. She has filled the void that was in me ever since my parents died. As my wedding gift to her, I am making her the co-owner of my properties, which means, that she will own half of what I have: the hotels in New York, and also this manor."

They could hear the gasps from everyone in the audience. Fred smiled and sat down. It was a gift that was unheard of. Rachel tried to

recover from the news of her newly found wealth. She could imagine the comments from the guests, accusing her of being a gold digger or saying that Fred was drunk.

After the reception, they headed to the Catskill Mountains for their honeymoon. Fred owned a farm that bred horses. Rachel loved horses and, therefore, Fred decided that they would spend their honeymoon there.