

## CHAPTER V-DAY

### Celebrating in the Streets

"It's almost time for the hospital again," Rose murmured, a tinge of melancholy colouring her voice. "Why not take a couple of extra days?" Aunt Rosemary suggested with a hint of concern.

"They are understaffed and overloaded with patients," Rose explained, her tone resolute. She was deeply committed to her duties, with a sense of responsibility etched into every word.

"And what about you, Rory?" Aunt Rosemary's gaze shifted to the young man.

"My ship sails in ten days, so I have a brief reprieve." He paused, contemplating his following words. "The war is almost over."

Both women looked up at him with a mix of hope and disbelief.

"Are you sure?" Rose sought clarification, her mind racing. She tried to envision life after the war. Would she continue nursing? The answer came swiftly—yes, without a doubt. But what would London be like? The thought filled her with despair; so much needed to be rebuilt, and so many lives had been lost. Nearly every family had endured the pain of loss. The road to recovery was daunting. England was facing bleak and challenging times ahead.

"Yes, they are assembling troop carriers, a sign of a new offensive or the war's end. The Germans are retreating; soon, it will be Berlin."

"Life after the war will be hard," Rose voiced her concerns, her voice tinged with the weariness of countless restless nights.

"Yes," Rory agreed, his gaze distant. "England has taken a hammering. It's a wonder we're still standing."

"I am lucky," Aunt Rosemary mentions with a hint of pride in her voice. "I help the war effort, of course." She pauses, nostalgia softening her expression. We are the base for the Flying boats built on the Calgarth Estate."

"I do not know that," Rory says, genuinely impressed. "Those boats play a critical role in the North Atlantic Campaign. They protect convoys carrying vital supplies to Britain and hunt German U-boats." "Yes, the Calgarth Estate boasts one of the largest hangars,"

Aunt Rosemary continues, her voice is more animated. "It's not just an estate; it's a lively village with factory shops and bustling activity. The air is filled with the hum of industry and the chatter of busy workers. The scent of machine oil mixes with fresh timber. On match days, the local football team's cheers echo through the streets, mingling with the smell of fried snacks from stalls. At its peak, the factory buzzed with over 1,500 employees, many from nearby villages. Workers' laughter filled the air, creating a vibrant atmosphere. You can feel the energy, see their sweat, and hear the hum of work everywhere."

She brimmed with pride, knowing the profound impact their considerable contribution made. It was not merely the scale of their endeavours that was impressive; it was the profound transformation in the lives they impacted. Take, for instance, Anna, whose newfound access to education lifts her family out of poverty, or James, who finds a renewed sense of purpose and belonging through their community initiative. These stories, among many others, are lasting testaments to the indelible mark left on individuals."

She paused, taking a sip of her tea before continuing. "What will the people do once the war is over?"

They stood in heavy silence, letting the enormity of the war's impact seep into their very bones, contemplating the profound changes it had wreaked on their lives and the daunting uncertainty of its aftermath.

"London won't conjure many happy memories," Rose murmured, eyes glistening with the lingering pain of loss. "Only the oppressive shadow of death and the relentless scars of destruction haunt its streets." "But amidst the swirling heartache, there glimmers a faint beacon of achievement," Rose interjected softly, her voice echoing with sorrow and indomitable resolve. "They endured, pushing through the searing pain, and in the end, England emerges free, its spirit unbeaten, ready to rise and rebuild. That is our collective triumph."

"Not mine," Rory countered, his tone void of the joy that once coloured his words. "Australia has remained untouched by the ravages of invasion, though the looming threats were ever-present. When I return, I know we will have so much to catch up on, as the burden of work fell upon too few shoulders. Our task will be to catch up." He feared the fate of the farm left to his father. He was no farmer, something only confirmed by his visit to Windermere. What condition would the farm be now? He knew the house "Windamere" would be fine; his father would have ensured that.

Their reflections on the future echoed a more profound resonance—a yearning to restore the shattered buildings and mend their fractured lives.

Rory's prophecy, uttered with eerie clarity, blossomed into reality on May 8, 1945—a day that forever changed the fabric of time and is now inscribed in the collective memory of humankind. This moment marked the end of nearly six gruelling years of conflict, a period rife with anguish.

The war had devoured millions of lives, turned vibrant neighbourhoods into ghost towns, and shattered families, leaving behind a trail of heartache and desolation. Entire cities lay in ruins, their once-thriving streets now silent testimonies to the horrors witnessed.

As the world held its breath on that fateful day, each bore its emotional burden, a tapestry woven with threads of sorrow and hardship.

Years spent in the grips of wartime adversity had stolen their comforts—food and clothing confined to meagre rations, evenings suffocated by dreary blackouts, and the omnipresent dread of aerial assaults looming overhead.

Yet, amid this backdrop of despair, a glimmer of hope ignited in their hearts. The yearning to celebrate—the desire to erupt in joy without restraint—was palpable in the air, electrifying and deeply resonant. A shared longing surged through the masses as a testament to their indomitable spirit.

Rory stepped through the doorway, and without hesitation, Rose flung herself into his embrace. "It's finally over," she exclaimed, laughter bubbling up as she pressed her lips to his. "Yes," Rory replied, his voice tinted with a sad undertone. "But what an immense tragedy—so many lives lost."

"I know," Rose answered, her eyes shimmering with defiance against the weight of his words. "Yet, let's not allow that to shadow this moment. Today, we celebrate as though none of it ever happened."

"Yes, we will," Rory agreed, fully aware that such denial was fleeting. Yet, cradled in her warmth and radiant spirit casting away the darkness, he found solace in postponing those haunting memories.

Rose finally took a step back but paused. "First, I need to call Aunt Rosemary," Rory observed her, trailing her gaze as she made her way toward the public phone, a mix of joy and concern swirling within him.

As Rose dialled her Aunt, a thrill of anticipation danced within her.

Aunt Rosemary's laughter spilled joyously through the phone, wrapping around Rose like a warm blanket.

"It feels as if the entire nation is sharing in a magnificent celebration! Bonfires flicker against the night sky, strangers embrace in jubilant dances, and the pubs overflow with laughter and song." Her voice crackled with affection, bringing a smile to Rose's face. "Thank God it's finally over," she added, her glee unmistakable.

"I know! The scene in London is surreal. For the first time, we can sway through the streets without worry, unburdened by fear," Rose replied, the weight of the past lifting just slightly as she shared this moment.

"Go on then, enjoy every bit of it!" Aunt Rosemary's giggle harmonized with the vibrancy of the evening. "Is Rory still by your side?"

"Yes, we're off together! His return was delayed as everyone awaited the final news," Rose's heart skipped at the thought of Rory, a captivating mix of excitement and warmth flooding through her.

"Send him my love. Now go! Celebrate this newfound freedom—may it remind us

never to tread down that darkness again," Aunt Rosemary urged before the call ended. Rose hung up, her heart swirling with hope.

With Rory still beside her, perhaps this time, their story would carve a path towards a brighter future together.

"Come on." Rose seized Rory's hand, hauling him onto the bustling street. The air was thick with the cacophony of voices and the melody of exuberant celebrations. People were all around them, a whirlwind of vibrant chaos—singing, dancing, weeping, and embracing. The weight of the moment—the sheer relief of it all—unleashed a torrent of repressed emotions, bursting like fireworks into the night.

As he enveloped her in his arms, the vibrant world around them dulled into a soft blur, replaced by the delicate sigh of the wind and the gentle whispering of leaves swaying in harmony. His embrace enveloped her like a warm, protective cocoon, isolating them from the world's chaos and infusing her with a serene refuge. Their lips finally met in a kiss that transcended the ordinary—a profound, lingering connection filled with the weight of unspoken promises. The kiss ignited an intoxicating spark, sending electric tremors through their beings, awakening something raw and beautiful. She felt his heartbeat syncing with hers, an intimate melody that anchored them firmly in this fleeting moment, rich with the delicious thrill of untapped possibilities just waiting to unfold.

Reluctant to fully accept the turbulent emotions within her, Rose gripped his hand once more and gently pulled. "Let's go to the Jazz Club," she suggested, her voice mixing hopeful anticipation and underlying tension.

Rory responded with a firm shake of his head, his gaze steady and determined. "No, the hospital, I am sure they are celebrating," he countered. His arm, warm and reassuring on her back, guided her forward with a sense of purpose.

The city around them buzzed with life, yet it felt like a distant hum compared to their electric connection. Neon signs flickered in the dusky twilight, and the aroma of street food drifted through the air, mingling with distant laughter and clinking glasses.

"Perfect," Rose smiled as he pulled her back into his embrace for another kiss. The street lamp above cast a soft glow, wrapping them in a tender cocoon of light amidst the urban chaos.

"But first, there is something I want to ask you." His soft, embracing eyes met hers, filled with a sincerity that seemed to make the world around them fade away.

Rose's lips curled into a loving smile, her eyes soft and dewy, waiting. Behind her, a blaring car horn and the chatter of passersby seemed to lose all significance.

"Will you marry me, Rose Ashford?" It had been a long time coming, but now the time was right. The war was over, and a sense of peace settled in the air, even in the heart of the bustling city.

She reached up and kissed him on the lips. "Yes, Rory Anderson." Her voice was a whisper, yet it resonated louder than any of the city's myriad sounds.

He laughed, lifted her into the air, and smiled at her. The world spun around them, a blur of city lights and distant voices, but in that moment, all that mattered was each other.

After one last lingering kiss, he gently lowered her to the ground, an almost imperceptible sigh escaping his lips as their bodies parted. The moment's intensity still tingled on her skin, a soft blush warming her cheeks.

"Then let's go and celebrate," he said, his eyes sparkling with excitement and affection. Around them, the evening air was cool and fragrant, filled with the subtle scents of blooming flowers, while the sky above blushed with hues of pink and orange as if reflecting their own shared tenderness.

As they stepped into the hospital, an unexpected symphony of laughter and joy washed over them, breaking the cold sterility of the hallways with vibrant life. It was a sound that seemed almost out of place amidst the looming shadows of illness, yet it beckoned them forward, stirring within them a curiosity they couldn't ignore. They followed the jubilant sounds to a long dormitory, where the atmosphere had experienced a delightful upheaval. The usual arrangement of beds, symbols of vulnerability and rest, had been pushed aside, making way for an impromptu dance floor brimming with spirit and camaraderie. In the heart of this vibrant gathering, Nurse Fran and Noel became the focal point of an electric moment; Fran's movements were an enchanting blend of graceful twirls and vibrant energy, while Noel's awkward hopping and shuffling added a note of endearing lightness.

Fran, known to everyone as a beacon of unwavering hope, was a woman whose history was marked by the trials of her own family; she had once sat in a waiting room not so different from this one, hoping for miracles that came wrapped in silence. Her passion for life became her refuge, and today, it enveloped Noel, drawing him out of shadows that often clouded his spirit. Noel, a young man whose laughter had been drowned by the weight of illness and isolation, felt the buoyancy of Fran's joy lifting his heart. As he stood there, a wisp of a smile flickering at the corners of his lips, the warmth of the celebration seeped into his bones, reminding him of the vibrant life waiting just beyond the confines of his struggles.

"Hey, look who's joined us!" boomed one of the patients, his voice a mix of surprise and warmth, echoing off the walls as the camaraderie rippled through the room, a testament to the unbreakable bonds formed even in the most challenging of times.

Turning to look, Noel nearly stumbled, but Old Fran's sturdy frame kept him steady. "If it ain't the boy from the bush and his..." Noel trailed off as the ward fell silent.

"My fiancée," Rory supplied with a grin.

A cacophony broke out. Cheers, comments of "About time," "never thought he would," and "You owe me a quid, told you he would" filled the room.

Amongst it all, Noel and Fran made their way over. Noel shook Rory's hand and hugged Rose warmly.

"For a real slow county boy, you did it," he exclaimed, raising Rory's and Rose's hands like prizefighters, prompting more cheers from the ward.

Old Fran, eyes brimming with tears, enveloped them in a bear hug, from which they were lucky to survive.

Then Noel scuttled across the floor, "Where is my camera? This news calls a celebration, Fran, and I will record the memories."

John limped to the keys of the old piano and started to play 'Waltzing Matilda'.

Returning with his camera, Noel snapped a quick photo before gently guiding Rory and Rose onto the dance floor. "It's not a waltz, but you know this tune well," he whispered with a knowing smile.

They stepped onto the floor amidst the vibrant clamour of cheers that rose like a swelling tide. The exuberant noise nearly drowned out the music, but Rose's laughter rang clear. "Our first dance," she giggled, her voice filled with joy and excitement.

Rory glanced down, his cheeks flushed a rosy hue. His eyes shone with a luminous love, each second a tender eternity. He silently wished that Noel had captured that moment.

As the evening deepened, a palpable energy overtook the hospital floor. Partners, nurses, and patients mingled in a vigorous dance of camaraderie. Whether robust or frail and better suited to bedrest, no one could resist the allure of this extraordinary night. The air was thick with a sense of occasion, and for once, the hospital walls seemed to pulse with life rather than illness. Who could remain dormant with such a vibrant atmosphere swirling around them?

The war had finally concluded, a battle of unparalleled ferocity that exhausted both body and spirit. Once thick with the acrid scent of gunpowder and the cries of the fallen, the air now held a melancholy stillness, a prelude to the dawn of a new beginning. Soldiers who had once stood shoulder to shoulder, united by the promise of victory and the fear of oblivion, now felt the weight of their triumph and loss. Tomorrow would bring fresh challenges, but they would confront them with an unyielding resilience and a pride forged in the heat of combat, for they had emerged victorious from the abyss of conflict.