



RADIO GIRLS

Sarah-Jane Stratford

Allison & Busby Limited
12 Fitzroy Mews
London W1T 6DW
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2016.
Published by arrangement with New American Library, an imprint of Penguin
Publishing, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.

Copyright © 2016 by SARAH-JANE STRATFORD

The moral right of the author is hereby asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

*All characters and events in this publication,
other than those clearly in the public domain,
are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by
any means without the prior written permission of the publisher,
nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover
other than that in which it is published and without a similar
condition being imposed on the subsequent buyer.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2068-2

Typeset in 10.5/15.5 pt Sabon by
Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication
has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced
from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

‘If we have the sense to give [broadcasting] freedom and intelligent direction, if we save it from exploitation by vested interests of money or power, its influence may even redress the balance in favour of the individual.’

– HILDA MATHESON, *Broadcasting* (1933)

LONDON 1930

She ran, weaving in and out of the startled pedestrians, but her pursuer was still close on her heels.

All their meticulous planning, all that work in spinning the web and catching all these flies, but they hadn't factored in this possibility: the chance that the papers in her bag were worth so much that someone would chase after her to get them back.

Chase after her with a gun.

She heard it, heard the click, even above the sounds of shoppers, of traffic, of her own pounding feet and pounding heart and the steady gallop of the man behind her.

He didn't know, though, that she wasn't alone. A small comfort, as she leapt over a pair of Yorkshire terriers and ducked around their sable-clad owner to sprint down the alley, but she would take what comforts she could.

And he had no idea what she was about to do. No idea of the power she really wielded. He was like all the bullies who had chased her as a child, hoping to frighten her. They had succeeded. He would not.

She ran harder, knees high, sure-footed as a gazelle, and gazelles didn't wear well-polished heels with fashionable double straps.

Thank goodness for short skirts. Ten years ago I'd have been dead by now.

She just needed to get to the car. He was getting closer, though. She put on a burst of speed.

Would it help to scream? No, it never helped to scream. Besides, she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing she was afraid, just as she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of getting the papers he wanted so badly.

She tightened her grip on her handbag, slick with sweat, and ran harder.

CHAPTER ONE

November 1926

Although everyone in the boarding house had seen the letter and assured Maisie that it was genuine, she couldn't help continually unfolding and rereading it, until the typed words along the creases were nearly illegible, only five days after she had received it.

'You ought to be careful,' advised Lola from her perch on the straight-backed bedroom chair, where she was buffing her nails. 'You'll soon have that in pieces, and aren't you meant to present it at your interview?'

The interview. After months of unemployment, with only the occasional two or three days of work that everyone was sure would turn into something more substantial and never did, Maisie was at last invited to interview for a full-time position. A junior secretary was needed at the BBC.

'I do hope it's for whoever it is who puts on the plays and things,' Lola said at least once a day, with some variation. Maisie promised faithfully that, if this was the job on offer and she secured it, she would make every effort to have Lola brought in to broadcast. Privately, however, she hoped the

job was as far away from the ‘plays and things’ as the BBC’s offices in Savoy Hill allowed.

She read the letter again. The letterhead was a plain, modern type, giving the address and exchanges for phoning (Temple Bar 8400) or sending telegrams (Ethanuze, London). The text was in the succinct, formal style she associated so fondly with Britain, directing her to arrive at the office at three o’clock Thursday, November twenty-fifth, and ask for Miss Shields. She was to bring ‘appropriate references’.

‘I wish I knew what they meant by “appropriate”,’ Maisie said, running her finger up and down her pointy chin. She had a note from Sister Bennister, head matron of the Brighton Soldiers’ Hospital, pronouncing Maisie an effective and considerate nurse – generous, considering Maisie had scarcely been more than a nurses’ aide. The certificate of completion from Miss Jenkins’s Secretarial College was more relevant but less impressive, as it was dated 1924, from New York, and there was no great way to explain her failure to provide anything else.

‘Ah, don’t fret so much,’ Lola advised. ‘They have to say that sort of thing, don’t they? But I don’t reckon those references matter so much. It’s really all about the impression you make when they meet you.’

The longer Maisie studied herself in the black-stained mirror at her dressing table, the less encouraging that prospect became.

Both Lola and their landlady, Mrs Crewe, had been nonstop fonts of advice since the ceremonial slitting of the envelope. Even the other boarders, women who rarely seemed cognisant of Maisie’s existence, shared the thrill. Listening to

the wireless was a sore subject in Mrs Crewe's house, as that intractable lady pronounced the whole concept a 'nonsensical passing fancy' and refused to spend her hard-earned money on such a thoroughly unnecessary and, she emphasised, *unnatural* contraption as a radio.

'Why on earth would anyone want to hear bodiless voices? Sounds irreligious to me, not to say dangerous. Who knows what they can do, if they can speak to you through some machine or other? First cinema, now this. It's not right.'

Not right it may be, but Mrs Crewe was a stout champion of 'her girls', as she described her boarders, and was willing to put aside some of her hard feeling in the cause of Maisie being properly employed.

'And once you're working there and not growing two heads or whatnot, she'll have to agree it's all right and buy us a wireless!' Lola crowed. 'Of course,' she went on more musingly, pencilled brows furrowing, 'like as not we'll have moved somewhere a bit more smart by then, I'd think. Don't you?'

Maisie did, though only because Mrs Crewe wasn't likely to buy a radio anytime before doomsday.

Lola and the other boarders all had friends willing to host 'listening in' parties, where everyone gathered to enjoy something or other from the BBC, usually the plays or music, but of late the Talks. Maisie was not so lucky, which was part of why she was so interested to know more. She secretly agreed with Mrs Crewe that there was something terrifying about a disembodied voice, and it was bizarre that it could originate from another part of London and yet sound as clear as someone sitting across the table. A lot of people were

afraid of the wireless, certain that all this new technology was a harbinger of evil spirits, or a means of bridging the gap to the spirit world. Maisie wasn't sure what she believed.

What she knew for an incontrovertible fact, however, was that her funds had dwindled to one pound, thirteen shillings, and ninepence. Despite her nonpareil expertise with frugality, this little pile of coins represented a week of food and shelter. Her family, such as it was, lived in New York and Toronto, and none of them would respond favourably – or politely – to a request for assistance. There was nothing else for it. She had to get this job.

'Let me put some make-up on you. All those BBC girls wear make-up, I'm sure,' Lola insisted. Maisie demurred. She couldn't risk the unknown Miss Shields thinking she was fast.

Or stupid enough to think make-up would improve me. Maisie sighed, focusing on the nose people called 'Roman' when they were being kind and wishing her gaunt face boasted at least one other notable feature. *I suppose I should be grateful I haven't got a boil.*

She saved her gratitude for the popularity of the bob. It was a great gift to women like herself, cursed with fine, lank hair, and she wholeheartedly embraced it. Her hair might be dull and dirty-dishwater brown, but was less offensive for being short and unmoving on her head, with a severe fringe labouring hard to give her face something approximating a shape. She wished she had a decent cloche, something with a rhinestone flourish near the ear, or perhaps a little feather. Her tired black wool hat was so plain and obviously cheap. But it was clean, and careful brushing masked the worst of the patchiness.

The forcibly English tones of her Toronto-born and -raised grandmother echoed as Maisie rolled her stockings up her thighs and clamped them in place: ‘Well? Aren’t you going to thank me?’ And Maisie *was* grateful that the woman’s passion for thrift and sharp things had given her the skill to mend her black wool stockings so well. Modern women wore beige or pastel stockings – some of them silk! – but black was still acceptable and these weren’t too awful, so long as no one looked closely.

Lots of luck there. She frowned at her skinny, shapeless legs, wishing she’d appreciated longer skirts more when they were still in style.

As for her shoes, she would just have to keep her feet flat on the floor to hide the holes. The cheap Oxfords had tarried valiantly for five years, but even if they could be repaired again, she couldn’t bear it. Every time she put them on, she wanted to cry.

As she tied the laces, she remembered one of the few pieces of advice her mother, Georgina, occasionally offered: ‘It is always best to have less if one must, so long as everything you wear is of good quality.’

Fine words from a woman who, as a struggling young actress, wore skirts to the ground and was now successful enough to always have what she called a ‘sponsor’ to keep her in all the silk stockings she wished.

Maisie stood and put on her coat.

‘Gosh, Maisie, I wish you’d borrow something of mine,’ was Lola’s response as Maisie presented herself for inspection.

‘Your clothes would never fit me,’ Maisie said, with perfect truth. Lola was shorter than Maisie, and though she

made assiduous use of straps to render her luscious figure more fashionably boyish, she wore her dresses as low-cut as daylight hours allowed. If Maisie tried to wear one, she would look like a chorus girl in a sideshow.

‘Well, I suppose no one cares what anyone looks like for radio anyhow,’ Lola said in her most comforting tone. ‘At least take a taxi there. No, you must. You’ll feel awfully grand. Here, I’ll lend you the fare.’

The coins glinted in Lola’s palm, shiny temptation. Maisie had never set foot in a cab and couldn’t imagine such extravagance, but the sudden vision of a cloth rose to pin to her hat arrested her. She might find a milliner on the Strand. Her hand hovered, but refused to land. She could not be pretty or smart, but as she was, she looked steady and practical. Someone must appreciate those qualities in a secretary. Besides, she hated being in debt if she didn’t have to be. She had no idea what next week was going to bring.

‘Thanks awfully, but that’s all right. It’s only two o’clock. The tram will get me there in plenty of time,’ Maisie assured Lola.

‘Well, good luck.’ Lola grinned. ‘They’ll want you. I’m sure of it.’

Parting with one of her precious pennies for the fare, Maisie hoped Lola was right. No one had wanted her in a very long time, and those that had taken her hadn’t kept her any longer than Richard the Third kept Anne Neville in Shakespeare’s invention.

Georgina always said Maisie didn’t belong in London.

I can’t have her be right.

* * *

Outside the handsome stone building with the brass sign reading: BRITISH BROADCASTING COMPANY beside the door, Maisie had a sinking feeling that Georgina knew whereof she spoke, though she had only ever visited a London suggested by stage sets. Maisie laid her fingers on the dark wooden door, feeling the pull of a place bursting with life. She forced her hand to stop shaking and to remember how to work a doorknob.

The door opened onto a vast reception room, vehemently modern, with a marble floor polished to the gleam and hazard of a skating rink and wallpaper featuring incongruous tropical trees. Two women in a corner, swathed in fox furs, twittered and chirped to each other, rhythmically tapping ash from their cigarettes into a burnished brass tray.

A clatter heralding imminent devastation – the earthquake of San Francisco, come to London – sent Maisie’s arms around herself in feeble protection as two men pelted down the stairs, cramming on hats and straightening ties, faces glowing with purpose. They zipped past on either side of Maisie, close enough to knock her both east and west, a billiard ball on a table, and sprang out the door, never seeing her.

Maisie straightened her coat, congratulating herself on staying upright. She sidled up to the cherrywood table, where the much-Marcelled receptionist turned away from the telephone to appraise her.

‘Have you an appointment?’ the receptionist asked in a deep voice, pleasant enough to be welcoming and authoritative enough to be respected.

‘Please, I’m . . . I’m to see Miss Shields at three o’clock,’ Maisie whispered, unfolding the precious letter to prove her credibility.

‘Hum,’ came the answer. A bell must have been rung, because a moment later a plump young boy with a shock of red hair appeared. He could not have been more than twelve, and bore himself with the imperiousness of a courtier.

‘Ah, Rusty,’ the receptionist greeted him. ‘This is’ – a glance at the letter again – ‘Miss Musgrave, for Miss Shields, right away, please.’

‘Yes, miss! This way, please, miss.’ An exuberant wave of the arm, inviting Maisie into the bowels of the BBC.

‘Did you want to take the lift, miss, or the stairs? It’s up at the top, you see.’

She knew she should save her strength where she could, as it was hours before supper, but there was a buzz emanating from all those floors above and she wanted to walk through as much of it as she could.

‘I don’t mind the stairs,’ Maisie assured Rusty, and was rewarded by an approving grin.

The BBC had existed only four years, so Maisie didn’t expect the sort of ponderous grandeur that characterised a steady establishment, places that filled her with awe, wonder, and desire. The sort of places she dreamt of spending her days in, and her nights, too. Savoy Hill was a different narcotic. The bright, pulsing energy of the new, of a staff enveloped in a technological marvel, in a venture that might turn in upon itself and disappear tomorrow – though they would all battle like they were at the walls of Agincourt to prevent such defeat. Behind some of these doors, people were certainly shut in soundproof rooms, speaking out to the nation. But in the corridors, it was a rush of thundering feet and rustling paper and rapid conversation.

‘Did you hear? Old Matheson landed us Anthony Asquith.’
‘Pah. I’m holding out for Tallulah Bankhead coming to broadcast.’

‘You’d likely pass out stone cold!’

‘Worth it, depending where I land.’

The colloquy buzzed and whirled around Maisie’s head, cloudier than perfume, and just as dizzying.

‘I say, anyone fancy the American tonight?’

Maisie stumbled.

The bar, you idiot. He means the bar at the Savoy. Was that the sort of place these people went after work? Her presence on its pavement would provide the doorman with a good laugh before he directed her back to the main road.

The voice continued. ‘They’ve got a new bartender, straight from the 300 Club in New York!’

‘Any man can mix a drink, if he puts his mind to it. Tell me when they’ve got that Texas Guinan and her girls!’

He pronounced it ‘Gwynen.’

Quite unintentionally, Maisie stopped and spoke into the din.

‘Guy-nan. Her name, it’s pronounced Guy-nan. And she’s not one of the . . . er, dancers. She owns the club.’

And was, allegedly, a friend of Georgina, though a life’s experience had taught Maisie to query any information that sprang from the maternal font. Georgina described Texas Guinan as ‘no actress, nor beauty, but she has a force of personality, child (which Maisie still had to be, as Georgina never aged). Well worth cultivating’ (because what else were people but hothouse lettuces?).

Through the vapour of her rising mortification, Maisie felt several people staring at her in amused interest, spurring

a sudden fondness for her own well-cultivated disguise of Invisible Girl, the foe she had made friend, usually so useful in cloaking her. Even Rusty had abandoned his sacred duty to gaze upon his charge in wonder.

A young man loped up to her, all sunshine grin and summer freckles. His hair flopped over one side of his head in untidy brown curls, and he wore fashionable baggy trousers and what Maisie guessed was a school tie.

‘You’re American?’ he asked in a well-bred accent. ‘Are you from New York? You are, aren’t you?’

Maisie struggled to remember how to breathe. That grin. Those freckles.

‘Well, I . . . sort of . . . I mean, I lived . . . grew up . . . in New York, but . . .’

Rusty, remembering himself, intervened. ‘Ever so sorry, Mr Underwood, sir, but I must deliver the miss to Miss Shields for an interview.’

‘Oh!’ The young man looked stunned. ‘I rather thought you must be a Matheson acquisition.’

‘Not likely,’ someone said, and sniggered. A chorus of whispers ensued.

‘Well, enjoy Miss Shields, then,’ Mr Underwood encouraged. Sapphire eyes smiled, charmer to her snake, but his tone suggested enjoyment was futile.

Maisie wished the blush burning her face and neck was hot enough to turn the floor liquid and let her sink into nothingness. She trotted robotically behind Rusty, taking no notice of the number of stairs, only waking up when they reached a hushed corridor, more polished and solemn than the lower floors, with every door closed.

Rusty strode up to one of the doors, gave it a respectful knock, then edged it open.

‘Miss Shields, Miss Musgrave for you, miss,’ Rusty announced in his best impression of refinement.

‘Thank you, Rusty,’ came a ringing voice. Maisie forced herself into the office, hoping her blush had dissipated. Miss Shields looked down her nose at Maisie, her handsome features unblemished by such frivolities as a smile. She wore a brown tweed suit whose simple lines spoke the epitome of quiet good taste. A gold watch was pinned to the lapel, reminding Maisie of the Sisters in the hospital, except their watches didn’t feature a spray of tiny rubies and a diamond.

‘Do sit down, Miss Musgrave,’ came the invitation, polite enough. ‘Would you care for a cup of tea?’

Maisie hesitated. She never turned down refreshment on principle, and all the chill November had to offer had seeped through her worn shoes. On the other hand, she was shaking enough to possibly upset that tea all over her thighs. But this was not the sort of woman who brooked refusals, so Maisie nodded and smiled.

‘Yes, please, thank you. Very much.’

Miss Shields gave Rusty the order. Maisie waited awkwardly, feeling rather than seeing the room, hot little pinpricks of excitement dancing up her limbs, forming pools of sweat under her arms. Quite a thing, sitting in an office all your own. Miss Shields’ chair had curved arms and swivelled. Maisie longed for every bit of it, and wondered how fast the chair spun around.

‘Would you like milk? Sugar?’ Miss Shields asked.

‘Yes, please, both, thank you,’ said Maisie, wishing the

bounty extended to a tea cake or even just a cookie (or ‘biscuit’, as she’d taught herself to say). She didn’t remember what it was like not to be hungry in the long hours before supper.

‘Yes, you Americans do like your tea sweet,’ Miss Shields observed, pleased with her knowledge as she handed Maisie a cup and saucer with bluebirds flying around the rim.

‘Oh, I’m Canadian,’ Maisie stammered, and went into her usual apologetic patter. ‘Half-British, as my father was British. My mother is Canadian and I was born there. Then my mother and I went to New York, where she was an ac—where she had work. I mostly lived there but spent summers in Toronto until I joined the VAD in 1916 and was assigned to the hospital in Brighton.’

She trailed off. Her biography was such a terribly unimpressive hodgepodge. She handed Miss Shields her two letters of reference and managed only one sip of tea before they were read through and set aside.

‘Where was your father born?’

‘Oh. I . . . I don’t . . .’ She couldn’t see how the question was relevant, but glanced down at her shoes and settled on ‘Oxford’, as that sounded gorgeously respectable. Very not Georgina.

‘I suppose his name was Musgrave.’

‘Edwin Musgrave,’ Maisie specified, which was true as far as she knew. The familiar pang tapped her behind the breastbone, and she suppressed a sigh. The father she apparently – and unluckily – resembled almost exactly. Whom she still hoped to find someday. Had he taken one look at his infant daughter and walked away, or did she have

memories of him locked away somewhere, if only she knew where to search?

‘And do you know where he was educated?’

‘Where he . . . ? No, I . . . I’m sorry . . . I – I don’t.’ She forced herself to keep looking into this woman’s cold eyes.

‘I see. Well, we’ve grown quite busy of late, and I need someone who will provide a bit of extra assistance when the typing pool is at full pressure. I am the personal secretary to Mr Reith.’

She pronounced his name with the sort of fervour Lola reserved for Rudolph Valentino.

‘The Director-General, yes,’ Maisie put in, attempting to demonstrate that she had made an attempt to learn something of this place.

‘Mr Reith expects everything done well and on time. He expects a serious and dedicated staff. We are growing, gaining in importance. Everything we do must reflect and enhance that. I require an assistant who can manage a number of tasks at once and yet be ready to add something more when called upon. You having been a nurse, that is—’

She narrowed her eyes at Maisie.

‘You must have been *quite* young when you joined.’

Maisie never knew how to respond to that observation. Surely someone must appreciate her patriotism and initiative – or at least her need to escape – in having procured a fake birth certificate so as to be eighteen when she first came to England, instead of several months shy of her fourteenth birthday. But she had never yet found anyone to whom she dared mention it.

‘Most of my nursing was after the war,’ Maisie explained,

truthfully enough. 'I left because we had discharged enough men that I wasn't needed any more.'

'And you didn't seek a job with another hospital?'

'I . . .' *Wanted to stop washing blood off my hands. Wanted to be part of the living world.* 'I wanted to do something a bit different.' And she hadn't been much of a nurse anyway.

'So you went to secretarial school.' Miss Shields nodded briefly at the certificate. 'And in New York, it seems.'

'Yes. I, er, I . . . returned there for a short while.'

I was penniless, my grandparents wanted nothing to do with me, and Georgina wanted to show off her generosity to her newest sponsor. She is always so happy when I fail. Though in fact Georgina had called Maisie her niece, not her daughter, and it was the sponsor's money that paid the way.

'I see,' said Miss Shields. 'And where did you work after completing your course?'

'A number of offices, but they were only short-term assignments, I'm afraid.'

Everyone wanted secretaries to be glamorous and bubbly and modern.

'I see. When did you return to Britain?'

'Last year. My mother, er, knew I was happier here.' And she and Georgina were both happier with an ocean between them. 'I am indeed very happy in London and hope to stay, provided I can secure a good job.' Maisie kept her tone prim.

'Mm,' was the sole reward. 'Now, aside from your nursing and secretarial training, where did you go to school?'

And we're at that question.

It was a question asked in American interviews, too, for formality's sake. Maisie's single criticism of the British was that

they were inordinately obsessed with education, even for girls. Or at least, girls who interviewed for the sort of jobs she wanted.

Oh, just lie! she scolded herself. *One more can't hurt. Make up a name. They're not going to write somewhere overseas just to confirm it. It's so easy. Miss Morland's Free School for Girls. St Agatha's Girls High. Gramercy Girls Academy. She won't know they're not real. Just say something!*

'Er, I . . .'

'Yes?' Miss Shields' eyebrows danced the dance Maisie knew too well.

'The fact is, we moved a great deal, so I couldn't go to the same school for very long.'

'But you did go to school?' Despite the inflection, it was much more of a statement than a question, one that expected nothing but affirmation.

The School for Scandal. The School for Wives. The School of Hard Knocks. Miss Witless's School for the Criminally Uneducatable.

'I was predominantly educated at home,' Maisie answered, hoping she sounded starchy and governess-trained.

'Was this a general all-round education, or did you have a specialty?'

Maisie wasn't sure what the woman meant. All she could think of was Georgina instructing her never to wear two shades of red together.

'Just general. I, er, I liked history. I've always liked reading. Reading everything, really.'

'Hmm. Well, I didn't exactly expect the equivalent of Cheltenham,' Miss Shields remarked, making a note.

Cheltenham! That was one of the poshest girls' schools

in Britain. Was Savoy Hill filled with women who had gone there? Had Miss Shields?

‘We need people who are sharp and well organised, Miss Musgrave. For this job, your educational background is less critical than your ability. Now, the post also demands some assistance given to the new Director of Talks’ – Maisie was quite sure Miss Shields swallowed a sneer – ‘but your main attention is to me, which is to say, Mr Reith. I expect that’s quite clear?’

‘Yes, Miss Shields.’ Maisie nodded.

‘Because we can’t have someone who’s got one eye somewhere else.’

‘No, Miss Shields.’

‘It is useful, of course, especially in Talks, if you know a great deal about the important people of the day and things taking place. Do you read the daily papers?’

Maisie used to, but the long period of irregular employment made it impossible to focus on anything other than the ‘Situations Available’ pages. She had, however, become adept at picking up abandoned papers from collection piles and cutting out shoe linings from them. They kept her feet warm. She wondered what stories she had walked on to get here.

‘I certainly do look at them, Miss Shields.’

‘I see.’

Miss Shields didn’t seem likely to say more, and Maisie finished her tea, thinking *she* ought to ask a question.

‘Would I, that is, would the person you engage be working in this room with you?’ It seemed unlikely, given the room’s size, but she wanted to steel herself if she were

going to be subjected to that stern gaze half the day.

‘In my room? I should say not. We are pushing through a cupboard to create space.’

Maisie glanced at the door to her left.

‘No,’ Miss Shields corrected her. ‘That is Mr Reith’s room.’

Maisie’s heart jumped. Was he in there? Had he been listening? What if he opened the door?

‘This is the space we are designating,’ Miss Shields said, pointing to the door on the right. ‘There will be space enough for a typewriter, and it will do. Much time will be spent in managing files and papers. Energy, Miss Musgrave, I need someone with energy.’

‘I have energy,’ Maisie assured her, wishing there were some way to prove it. *Shame I can’t turn a cartwheel.*

Miss Shields set down her cup and saucer, then looked at Maisie’s references again.

‘What I cannot understand, Miss Musgrave, is why, if you’ve had such trouble securing regular employment, you haven’t returned once more to your people in Toronto or New York.’

Beneath the impertinence, Maisie sensed the woman was exhorting her to leave and save jobs for those who deserved them, especially as so many men were unemployed. It was a fair point, although no man would be hired as this sort of secretary. And in fact, despite the enticement of the office, Maisie planned to quit the moment she was sure her hoped-for husband was a certainty, bringing her closer to the loving family she had wanted since she knew such things existed.

She forced her shoulders back and her breath steady.

‘Miss Shields, I may have been born and raised in what’s sometimes still called the New World, but my heart lies in the Old World. There’s nothing that makes me happier than walking around London. History’s lived here. So much began here, so many stories. This is still the centre of the universe, and there are still . . . conventions here. I came here hoping to do my bit for Britain, and leaving was so stupid, so cowardly. I made it back and I’ve got to stay. I’ve just got to. This is home. I hope,’ she tapered off – her blush was making her face hurt.

But it was true. She needed this job, needed this room with the desk, the swivel chair, the bird-festooned teacup and saucer. She even needed the terrifying Miss Shields. And the hidden Mr Reith. If the BBC’s brazen raw newness chafed against her passion for the starch and certainty of tradition and opulence, it also enchanted her with its brightness and bustle. She couldn’t be turned away. She just couldn’t.

‘Very nice, I’m sure, Miss Musgrave,’ Miss Shields said dryly. ‘Thank you so much for coming in.’ Miss Shields pressed a button by the door and held out her hand. ‘You will receive a letter in due course telling you of our decision. Rusty shall show you out.’

Rusty popped up like a groundhog and hovered as Maisie shook Miss Shields’ hand and thanked her with what she hoped wasn’t an excess of sincerity. She tagged after Rusty, feeling her heart oozing through the holes in her shoes. The most important thing was to get outside before the tears came.

‘Hey, New York!’

Just as she reached reception, Maisie was stunned to be accosted by Mr Underwood of the school tie and baggy

trousers, pattering down the stairs after her. Still grinning. Still freckled. Eyes still blue – inviting enough that she wanted to learn to swim. Had she ever been smiled at by a man this handsome?

‘Have you been to a speakeasy, then? What’s it like? Is Broadway really so bright at night it’s like day? Gosh, I’d rather like to spend just a week there. Must be jolly great fun – not that our London isn’t the best place on earth, of course, and we can get drinks legally, but maybe it’s more fun when you can’t? I’d give a lot to see the Cotton Club. Or do they let white people in?’

It was like being blown through with machine-gun artillery. The fellow’s interview skills were more daunting than Miss Shields’, and the questions more impossible to answer. But he was looking at her with interest, which was more than Miss Shields had done and remarkable from a man. Grateful to him for distracting her from her misery, Maisie gave him the one answer she could manage.

‘Well, “Broadway” itself is a street, but you mean the theatre district. It’s . . . rather . . . well, glorious, really. All those theatres, one after the other, marquees all lit up. I daresay you could read there, though I suppose you wouldn’t want to.’

To her dismay, he looked disappointed.

‘You don’t talk like an American, not like some of the others who’ve been here, or in the stories.’

‘Oh. Well, I . . .’ She was eager to explain herself using as many choice bits of American slang as she could muster, but those eyes and freckles made syllables hard to come by.

‘Oi, Underwood!’ someone shouted from the top of the

steps. 'What the devil are you doing, having another tea break? Get yourself back here before the man takes your head off and uses it for a football.'

'Suppose I ought to dash, then,' her interrogator remarked, unruffled. 'You'll be back, will you? I do want to hear more!'

'Er . . . I – I don't think so,' she mumbled, but he was scaling the stairs two at a time. 'Thanks anyway,' she said to his back as it disappeared.

She glanced at the receptionist, wondering if she should be marked as leaving. The receptionist was simultaneously directing a man with a parcel, asking someone on the phone to please hold the line, and scribbling at a pad with a pencil.

Maisie closed the door on the painted trees and the gleam and the polish. She swiped impatiently at her eyes, rounded her shoulders against the chill, and trudged up the appropriately dark street.

'Miss! Miss!'

Rusty was sprinting towards her, a fiery little Olympic torch.

'Lucky you're here, miss. Didn't think I'd find you, but I took the chance. Miss Shields, miss, she asked if I did find you, would you return a moment, please?'

He ran back to the BBC, gone so fast Maisie was sure she was hallucinating.

But Rusty was decidedly solid, standing in the light spilling from the open door, beckoning to her with the impatient exasperation of boys universal, and was only mollified when Maisie finally walked back towards him. Her heart was behaving in a most peculiar fashion, as though it were holding its breath, wondering if it should crumple completely or take a leap of hope.

Miss Shields was descending the steps into reception. Her expression was resigned, with a soupcon of fury, and her words sounded rehearsed.

‘Ah, Miss Musgrave, that is convenient. It has been decided to offer you the position. You may begin on Monday. Be here promptly at nine.’

Maisie knew she should close her mouth or say something, but she was thoroughly incapable of doing either.

‘Are you interested in the position?’ Miss Shields snapped.

‘I . . . yes, that is, yes, abso . . . Thank you!’

‘I will allow for your surprised enthusiasm, but do know that Mr Reith expects clear-spoken decorum in his presence at all times. As to—’ She pursed her lips and appeared to change her mind. ‘The position pays three pounds, five shillings a week, and we are not accustomed to negotiating. Is that understood?’

It would never have occurred to Maisie to negotiate. This woman had just offered her life. She only hoped she wasn’t hallucinating after all.

‘Thank you. Thank you so much. I can start tomorrow, if you like?’

‘Monday, Miss Musgrave. You’ll report directly to me and we can begin. I expect you to be fully prepared.’

‘Yes, Miss Shields.’ Maisie nodded fervently. She had a bad feeling ‘fully prepared’ meant better clothes. It was tempting to hop a tram to Oxford Street right that minute. But she wasn’t the sort of person to whom the shops gave credit. Shoes and clothes would have to wait. She would just be prepared to do a good job.

A squeal escaped her as she bounced back to the street,

which seemed much brighter. What had turned the cards in her favour? Miss Shields hadn't seemed to like her much. Maybe she was one of those people who were hard to read. Lots of people were like that. Maisie hoped to be one of them someday.

Her Charleston-dancing heart reminded her that she would get to see Mr Underwood again, too. Those eyes, that smile . . . *I'll go to the library first thing tomorrow and catch up on all the papers. New York ones, too, if they have any. I most definitely want to have something new to say about New York.*