BLOOMSBURY GIRLS

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For my daughter, the original Evie

&

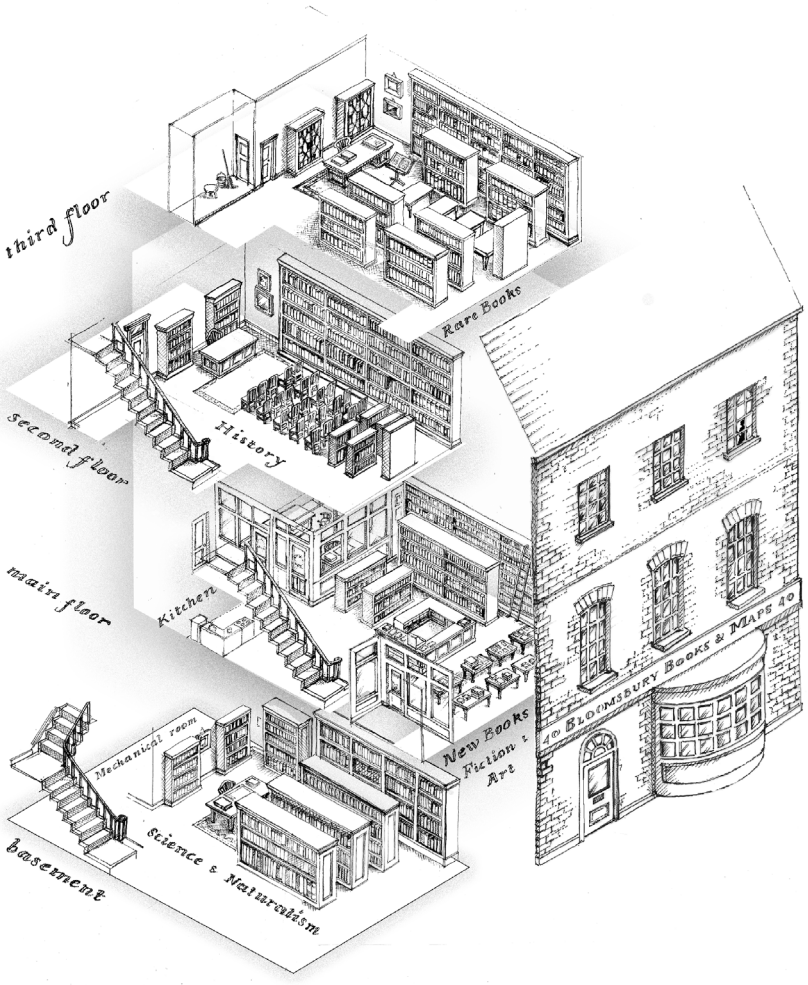
Malkit Leighl, the very best of men

INSIDE THE SHOP

Evelyn Stone . . . Former servant girl & Cambridge graduate
Grace Perkins . . . Secretary to the general manager
Herbert Dutton . . . General manager
Vivien Lowry . . . Disaffected staff member
Alec McDonough . . . Head of fiction
Ashwin Ramaswamy . . . Head of science & naturalism
Frank Allen . . . Head of rare books
Master Mariner Simon Scott . . . Head of history

OUTSIDE THE SHOP

Fredrik Christenson . . . Vice-master of Jesus College, Cambridge
Lord Baskin . . . Owner of Bloomsbury Books
Ellen Doubleday . . . Widow of American publisher Nelson Doubleday, Sr.
Lady Browning . . . English aristocrat & author
Sonia Brownell Blair . . . Widow of George Orwell
Mimi Harrison . . . Movie star
Samuel Beckett . . . Irish playwright
Peggy Guggenheim . . . American heiress & collector
Stuart Wesley . . . Research assistant to Vice-Master Christenson
Yardley Sinclair . . . Director of museum services at Sotheby's
Elsie Maud Wakefield . . . Deputy keeper of the Kew Herbarium
Dr Septimus Feasby . . . Principal keeper of printed books, British Museum
Robert Kinross . . . Junior fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge


third floor
Rare Books
second floor
History
main floor
Kitchen
New Books
Fiction
Art
40 BLOOMSBURY Books & Maps 40
Mechanical room
basement
Science & Naturalism
A Wain

PROLOGUE

19 December 1949, Cambridge

Evie Stone sat alone in her tiny bedsitter at the north end of Castle Street, as far from the colleges as a student could live and still be *keeping term* at Cambridge. But Evie was no longer a student – she remained at the university on borrowed time. The next forty minutes would decide how much she had left.

The room's solitary window was cracked open to the cool December air, which was about to vibrate with the sound of Great St Mary's striking two o'clock from precisely three miles away. The interview with Senior Fellow Christenson was for twenty minutes past that – exactly as long as it would take her to arrive at Jesus College. Evie always had her walks perfectly timed.

Christenson scheduled his appointments for twenty minutes past the hour, one of many famous eccentricities

for which he was known. The students jokingly referred to this arrangement as CMT or Christenson Mean Time. Resounding bells of St Mary's or not, Evie could have guessed the exact minute almost down to the second. She had honed this skill as a servant girl at the Chawton Great House, where for two years she had secretly catalogued the family library. Without the benefit of a clock, she had passed hours every night going through all 2,375 books, page by page. At a clear two-foot distance, Evie could now eyeball anything from a Gutenberg-era tome to a carbon-copy document and not only predict how long it would take her to summarise the contents but to quickly skim each page as well. These were skills that she kept to herself. She had long known the value in being underestimated.

The male faculty around her only knew Evelyn Stone as a quiet, unassuming, but startlingly forthright member of the first entry class of women to be permitted to earn a degree from Cambridge. After three years of punishing studies at the all-female Girton College, Evie had been awarded first-class honours for her efforts, which included a lengthy paper on the Austen contemporary Madame de Staël, and become one of the first female graduates in the eight-hundred-year history of the university.

Christenson was the next hurdle.

He needed a research assistant for the upcoming Lent term, and Evie had applied before anyone else. She also needed the job more than anyone else. Since graduating with a First in English, she had been assisting Junior Fellow Kinross with his years-long annotation of William Makepeace Thackeray's 1848 novel, *Vanity Fair.* With this project finally at an end, Evie's current stipend was

scheduled to dry up on the very last day of 1949. As Christenson's newest research assistant, Evie could continue to spend countless days on her own, without supervision, methodically working her way through the over one hundred libraries at the university – a prospect that remained more exciting to her than anything else at this stage of her academic career.

The minute the bells started to ring out, Evie – already clad in her thick woollen coat for winter – stood up, grabbed her leather bag, and headed for the door. Twenty quick steps down to the street, five and a half minutes until she passed the Castle Inn, and then a clear ten before she saw the bend of the River Cam. There the Bridge of Sighs loomed above the river, Gothic and imperious, the stonework tracery in its open windows designed to keep students from clambering in. This was the type of campus foolery that Evie would never seek to join – or be invited to.

Jesus College, Evie's immediate destination, was rich in history, having been founded in 1496 on the site of a former nunnery. The grass beneath Evie's feet had been kept long for centuries, reflecting its historical use as fodder. During the Second World War concrete shelters had been situated under the gardens to offer protection from German air raids. In this way, the medieval university had begun to bear the scars of modern existence, as well as its fruits: only a few years later, the women of Cambridge were finally permitted to graduate.

Evie didn't think about any of this as she crossed the grounds. Instead, her brain kept time to the rhythmic crunch of frost-covered lawn beneath her lightly booted feet.

With every crisp, measured step, her weathered leather bag swung steadily against her hip, weighed down by the writing sample inside: nearly one hundred pages dissecting individuality and resistance in the works of de Staël for which Evie could not have done better, having received the highest mark possible. The bag also contained a letter of reference from Junior Fellow Kinross. This time Evie could have done better, but didn't know she needed to.

Mimi Harrison had written to Evie earlier that fall in anticipation of her upcoming need for employment. Mimi had urged the young girl to accept a letter of referral from her husband, who had recently finished a three-year professorship at Jesus College and returned to Harvard along with his new wife.

'But I only ever met him once,' Evie had answered Mimi over the phone in the downstairs common room.

'Nonsense,' Mimi had replied with an indulgent lilt to her voice. 'When I arrived in Hollywood twenty years ago, it was with a letter from my father's former law partner, and I'd only met him one time more than that. Besides, Geoffrey desperately wants to help you.'

'But why? He don't – I mean, he does . . . not . . . know me.' Evie often slipped back into Chawton vernacular when conversing with Mimi, whose friendship remained so rooted in their time together in the small farming village.

Mimi had laughed, always trying to keep things light with the serious young woman. 'But he knows *me,* and he knows that I know a good egg when I see one.'

Still, Evie had refused. And still, Mimi had had the letter sent through, just as she often did with theatre tickets, and rail fare, and the many other things that she had tried to give

the girl over the years. The generosity of Mimi Harrison, a famous film and stage actress, knew no bounds.

But neither did Evie's pride. So today she carried the letter of referral from Professor Kinross instead. Kinross gave out many such letters each term, but poor Evie did not know that. She had been perfectly content when he had offered her one. She had done solid research work for him on his annotation of *Vanity Fair,* and he had called her capable and efficient. Surely that would be enough for Senior Fellow Christenson.

It was now 2.22 p.m. and Evie sat feeling smaller than ever in the large swivel chair that faced her entire future. Christenson put Kinross's letter down, tapped the top of the one hundred pages on de Staël, and sighed.

'The research here . . . all these obscure women authors. Even de Staël is no George Eliot.'

Evie found this comment interesting, given Christenson's noted expertise on the latter.

'After all, the cream always rises to the top, hmm?' He leaned back in his chair. 'And the joint paper . . . on Mr Thackeray . . .'

Evie sat up. She was particularly proud of the research work for Professor Kinross, which she had completed alongside Stuart Wesley, another recent graduate. Kinross had commended her on the note-taking and impressive indices she had assembled to support his annotation. He had encouraged her to spend as much time with the original sources as possible, often stressing how critical accurate research was to the entire project.

'Your colleague Mr Wesley contributed a large part, I understand.'

Evie sat up even straighter. 'We both did.'

Christenson paused, his eyes narrowing against both her lack of demurral and the all-too-familiar letter of reference before him. Kinross did none of his students any favours with these rote little missives.

'Yes, well, I understand that you carried out the research and such, but the writing . . .' Christenson smiled, so genially and unlike him, that Evie finally grew concerned. 'As you know, what I need is a certain facility with text, with, ah, *language*.' He gave the last word an extra syllable in the middle, and Evie became even more conscious of her rural accent, which was apt to shorten everything instead.

'What you may not know is that I am assuming Vice Master Bolt's role in the New Year. Less time for my own writing, more's the pity.' Christenson picked up the papers before him, tapped their bottom edges decisively against the blotter on his overflowing desk, then passed the entirety of a term's work back to her.

'Thank you, Miss Stone, for your time.' He gave a cursory nod at his closed office door, which everyone knew to be his cue for dismissal, and Evie gave a quick nod back before hastily leaving. On the walk home, it started to snow. The windows of the shops and pubs glowed from within, their golden electric lustre in soft contrast to the early-winter darkness making its descent. For Evie, however, the day was fully, and terrifyingly, at an end.

She did not feel the tiny flakes of snow falling about her hatless head and shoulders – did not notice the figures scurrying home, the baskets full of rationed goods, the brown-paper packages hinting at the Christmas week just ahead. Instead, she pulled her coat tighter about her,

wondering what had just happened, mulling it over again and again. She now knew she had missed something, not just in her time with Christenson, but with Wesley, and Kinross, all along. She felt a sense of distrust starting to form from her confusion, which bothered her by its sudden – and delayed – appearance.

Evie knew that she had worked harder than any other student these past three years. Her marks reflected that. Christenson would never find a better research assistant. And yet.

She stopped in front of the window of the Castle Inn. Inside she could see students laughing and drinking, piled about different tables, celebrating the last day of term and the Christmas festivities already in full swing. She stood there for a while and watched through the frosted glass, confident that no one would notice her small, indistinct form against the snow-speckled night. When Evie returned to her bedsitter at the very north end of Castle Street, her mother's weekly letter lay on the worn carpet a few feet from the threshold of the door. Evie put the leather satchel on its anointed hook on the coat stand, which contained nothing else but her sturdy black umbrella, then stood aimlessly in the middle of the sitting room, looking about. She would need to start packing up soon. She had no idea for where.

Her brothers were all scattered far from home except for the youngest, Jimmy, who was only ten. Their father was dead these past two years from an infection in his gimp right leg, which he had shown the local doctor one week too late. After that, the family farm had finally been sold, and her mother and Jimmy had moved to a small two-up,

two-down terrace house on the main village road. But Evie had not worked this hard to go backwards.

She walked over to the upright dresser, the top drawers of which she had fashioned into a makeshift filing cabinet, having few clothes to keep inside. She pulled open the first drawer and started at *A*. She proceeded apace, going through each carbon copy, each sheet of notepaper, each trade card and pamphlet that she had retained over the years. She never threw anything out.

When she got to *AL,* she found the small trade card for a Mr Frank Allen, Rare Books Acquirer, Bloomsbury Books & Maps, 40 Lamb's Conduit, Bloomsbury, London. Mr Allen had been introduced to Evie by their mutual contact, Yardley Sinclair, during the landmark dispersal of the Chawton Great House library by Sotheby's in the autumn of 1946. Along with Mimi Harrison, Yardley Sinclair and Evie had been founding members of the Jane Austen Society, which had acquired the library as part of its efforts to save the Chawton cottage where Austen once lived. During the auction, Allen had bid on and acquired a handful of nineteenth-century books for the London store that employed him. As assistant director of estate sales at Sotheby's at the time, Yardley had proudly been showing Evie off to all the various dealers and agents in attendance at the sale. She recalled how Allen had briefly complimented her meticulously handwritten catalogue, which Yardley also often showed around.

Evie stared at the embossed silver lettering on the cool white card, running her stubby, ink-stained fingers over the raised name. She could hear the bells of Great St Mary's strike half past three. Standing there in her woollen coat,

she felt the cold draught entering the room from the window she had left open. The satchel dangled from its lonely perch; the letter from her mother remained unopened on the floor. She heard the word *lan-gu-age* still reverberating in her head, then took a deep breath with all the assurance and certainty she could muster.

She would not be going backwards; she would not be looking back.

CHAPTER ONE

Rule No. 17

Tea shall be served promptly four times a day

'The Tyrant beckons.'

Grace looked up from her small desk at the rear of the shop. Here she marshalled all manner of what the bookshop staff called *couches:* the piles of letters, requests, adverts, journals, newspapers, trade cards, catalogues, magazines, announcements, invitations, and all the rest of the paper ephemera that kept Bloomsbury Books in commerce with the outside world.

Her colleague Vivien stood in the doorway, swinging the kettle in her right hand. It was Monday morning, and Vivien was always on elevenses duty on the first day of the week.

'And now the fuse to the cooker's gone again.' She made a face. 'You know they can't function without their tea. The Tyrant's in a particular *mood* today.'

The Tyrant had a name, but Vivien refused to use it in private, and Grace often found herself failing to do so as well – just one example of how Vivien's attitude at work sometimes seeped into her own. Grace stood up and stacked a pile of papers neatly before her. 'If he were ever to catch you calling him that . . .'

'He can't. He can't hear anything but the sound of his own voice.'

Grace shook her head at the younger woman and stifled a grin. They had been working at the bookshop together since the end of the war, and Vivien's friendship was a big reason why Grace stayed. Well, that and the wages, of course. And the fact that her unemployed husband could not begrudge her the opportunity to earn those. And the time away from her demanding boys. And the fear of drastic change. In the end, Grace supposed there were quite a lot of reasons why she stayed. She wasn't quite sure why Vivien did.

'Is Dutton not in yet?' Vivien asked, glancing past Grace to the empty office behind her.

Herbert Dutton, the long-time general manager of the shop, had never been given a nickname by Vivien, let alone a term of endearment. He wasn't the kind of man one would ever bother to put in a box, being so fully contained on his own.

'He's at the GP.'

'Again?'

Vivien arched both eyebrows, but Grace only shrugged in response. As the two female employees of Bloomsbury Books, Grace and Vivien had mastered the art of silent expression, often communicating solely through a raised eyebrow, earlobe tug, or barely hidden hand gesture.

Vivien placed the kettle on top of a nearby filing cabinet, and the two women headed wordlessly for the basement. Whenever they strolled the shop corridors together, their matching height and tailored clothes gave them an indomitable appearance from which the male staff instinctively shrank. Both women were unusually tall, although very different in physique. Grace had broad shoulders which did not need the extra padding so fashionable at the time, an open, un-made-up face, and a peaches-and-cream complexion – her one inheritance from a family that had farmed the upland hills of Yorkshire for generations. She dressed in a simple manner that flattered her height: the strong lines of military-style jackets and pencil skirts, with low-heeled pumps for walking. Her most delicate features were her calm, grey eyes and fine brown hair with just the slightest hint of auburn, which she always kept neatly pinned back at the crown.

In contrast, Vivien was as angular and slender as a gazelle, and just as quick to bolt when impatient or displeased. She preferred to dress in formfitting monochrome black – most often in tight wool skirts and sweaters embellished by a striking Victorian amethyst brooch, her one inheritance from a beloved grandmother. Vivien's face was always dramatically made-up, intimidatingly so, which was part of the point: by looking so in control of herself, she succeeded in keeping everyone else at bay.

On their way to the basement, the two women passed by the rear, glass-windowed office belonging to Mr Dutton, who was both the store's general manager and its longest-serving employee. To reach the back staircase, which Vivien had nicknamed Via Inferno, they had to brush

up against the towering boxes of books that were delivered daily from different publishers, auctions, bankrupt stocks, and estate sales across central England and beyond. The shop turned over five hundred books a week on average, so a healthy and frequent replenishing of stock was required from all these sources.

The misbehaving fuse box was in the mechanical room, which was adjacent to the infrequently visited Science & Naturalism Department. The entire basement floor was unseasonably warm and humid due to the inept workings of the pre-war boiler. Through the open doorway of the mechanical room, Grace and Vivien could spot the small wire-rimmed spectacles and placid brow of Mr Ashwin Ramaswamy, the head of the science department and its lone staff, peeking above the table where he always sat behind piles of books of his own.

'Has he said a peep yet today?' Vivien almost whispered, and Grace shook her head. Mr Ramaswamy was notorious for keeping to himself within the shop, which was easy enough to do given how rarely his department was visited. The basement collection of biology, chemistry, and other science books had been there since at least the time of Darwin, but remained the most forgotten and least profitable floor of the shop.

A trained naturalist and entomologist, Ash Ramaswamy did not seem to mind being left alone. Instead, he spent most of his day organising the books in a manner that put the other department heads to shame, and peering through a microscope at the slides of insects stored in a flat wooden box on his desk. These were the creatures of his homeland, the state of Madras in southeast India.

Ash's late father, a Tamil Brahmin, had been a highly placed civil servant in the British colonial government who had always encouraged his son to consider the opportunities offered by a life in Great Britain. Ash had emigrated after the war in the hopes of securing a post at the Natural History Museum in London. As a member of the most privileged caste in his home state, he had not been prepared for the overt prejudice of the British people towards him. Unable to obtain even an interview at any of the city's museums, he had ended up employed at the shop instead.

'You said a mood,' Grace started to say, as she fiddled around with her head inside the fuse box.

'Hmm?'

'A mood. The Tyrant. What is it now?'

'*It* is Margaret Runnymede.'

Grace poked her head out from the fuse box. 'The new book is out?'

'The way she bustles in here every release day, just so he can give her that ridiculous posy of purple violets to go with her latest purple prose and tell her everything she already thinks about herself. It's nauseating. He wants everything in the shop *just so* for her today.'

Grace raised an eyebrow at the younger woman. 'Is that all he wants?'

Vivien made a disgusted noise from the back of her throat. 'He's so full of himself. As if she'd ever.'

'Enough women do. Have an interest in him, I mean.' Grace shut the door to the fuse box and wiped her hands together. 'All done.'

'As he's plenty aware.'

'Well, one can't necessarily fault him for that.' As much as Grace herself did not care for the head of fiction, Vivien expressed a degree of dislike that Grace thought best to temper, for all their sakes.

They headed back up the stairs together, pausing in Grace's office for Vivien to retrieve the kettle before going her separate way. Through the glass divider to the farthest rear room, they could see the moonfaced Mr Dutton sitting idly behind his desk as if waiting for someone to tell him what to do. Above his head hung, slightly askew, the framed fifty-one rules for the shop that Mr Dutton had immediately devised upon his ascension to general manager nearly twenty years ago.

'One biscuit or two?' Vivien asked loudly and officiously, suddenly all work as Grace settled down into her chair, delicately pulling the folds of her A-line skirt out from under her.

Grace hesitated. She was nearly forty years old, and lately she had noticed just the slightest increased weight about her hips. Her husband, Gordon, had noticed it, too. He was never one to let something like that slip by.

She held up one finger with a sigh. Vivien scoffed as she ambled back to the kitchen, swinging the kettle widely to and fro by her side, as if hoping to hit something along the way.

Grace looked about her, at all the familiar papers, the boxes of books, and the bills of lading she had yet to type up. It would be pointless to start anything this close to the hour. So, she waited.

After a few minutes, she heard Mr Dutton call her from the back room at exactly 11.00 a.m. Right on schedule.

'Miss Perkins,' he announced in his usual formal manner. He always combined the spinster prefix with her married name to reflect Grace's unusual status as a working mother. It would make Grace feel like a film star – *Miss Crawford, Miss Hepburn* – if she didn't know better.

Grabbing her notepad and pencil, she stood back up and walked into his office through the open doorway that connected with hers. 'Good morning, Mr Dutton. Everything went well, I hope.' She said it kindly but declaratively, knowing he would not directly answer her.

'Lovely morning,' he said with a smile so small that one could hardly detect it within the wide expanse of his face. 'I trust you had a pleasant New Year's.'

'And you?'

He nodded. 'Might I now have a second of your time?'

Grace nodded in return and held up the notepad and pencil in mid-air. They had done this routine a thousand times. He went through the schedule for the day – his schedule alone, as everyone else in the shop worked in service to the customers – and when they came to the 2.30 p.m. slot, he halted.

'A Miss Evelyn Stone?' he enquired.

'Yes, remember? That strange call right before the holiday. Mr Allen vouched for meeting her through Yardley Sinclair, and you agreed to interview.'

Mr Dutton just stared at Grace. She knew that his memory was lately not what it had been, and she prompted him again.

'A formality, you called it – out of respect for Mr Sinclair. As a most valued customer of the shop.'

Mr Dutton tapped the name in his appointment book,

then nodded. This was her cue to seat herself and take dictation while he drafted his correspondence.

They were on their seventh letter when he concluded with '*And while we appreciate the job the Broadstreet Signs Company has done in promoting this latest sales success, we are sorry to say we must decline your kind offer of competitively priced signage at this time. Most sincerely yours . . .*'

He paused and brushed his fingers over the right side of his balding head. Grace must have had one of her *looks* on her face, as Gordon liked to call them.

'Yes, Miss Perkins?'

'It's just that – well, I do think the front window has been looking somewhat shabby of late, and Viv and I strolled over to Foyles last week to check out theirs, and I must say, they have done rather a clever job.'

Mr Dutton sat there watching her with one of his own looks, a strange tightrope walk between terror and indulgence that ran across his round features whenever she proposed something new. Even more than losing out to Foyles, the shop's most envied competitor, Grace suspected that Mr Dutton's greatest fear was of any tumble being somehow cushioned by *her.* Grace's ideas for improving the shop seemed to do nothing so much as put him on edge.

'And . . . well . . . I thought, with some proper signage such as that provided by the Broadstreet Company, suspended from the ceiling so as not to block the view from the street, and with different shelving – more open-backed, to let in the light – we could promote the upcoming New Year sale quite effectively.'

Mr Dutton just stared. Grace had worked at Bloomsbury Books for nearly five years and, to her knowledge, a sales sign had never once been placed in the front window or, for that matter, anywhere else in the shop. Instead, the staff were trained to mention sales only most discreetly, in demure, elegant asides to the customers, as if even the mere idea of money had no place around books.

'There's also the matter of our upcoming centenary this summer,' continued Grace in the face of his silence. 'It's never too early to start celebrating. Vivien and I were thinking of another display: *One Hundred Years of Books*. A selection of top titles from every decade.'

Mr Dutton was a creature of habit and rules who, due to the daunting uncertainty of the future, resisted spending time or money too far in advance. This was one of many differences between him and his trusted secretary when it came to matters of business.

'Thank you, Miss Perkins,' he finally replied, looking almost pained by her suggestions. 'That will be all for now.'

It was indeed all for now. It would be all for tomorrow, too, and for the day after that. She would go back to typing up his unnecessarily long letters, organising his voluminous paperwork into alphabetical files, and fetching his tea. Then she would go home and do a version of the same for her family.

Grace looked down the corridor at Vivien, who was leaning on the edge of the front cash counter, her hips swaying as she alternated between jotting something down in a green coil-bound notebook and chewing on the end of her pencil. Vivien was essentially caged behind that counter, only occasionally allowed out front to assist with

the customers. She, like Grace, had joined the shop just as the world was emerging from the ashes of war. Life back then had seemed full of possibility and freedom, especially for the women who had taken charge while the men were off fighting.

This was the social contract that had been forged to sustain each of them during a time of great pain and sacrifice: of whom much had been asked, much would later be given.

But the past had a way of slipping back through even the thinnest of cracks in a fractured world. Women such as Vivien and Grace had hoped for a fresh beginning for everyone; but five years on, new opportunities for women were still being rationed along with the food. Those in power would always hold on to any excess supply, even to the bitter end.