

She passed dozens if not hundreds of men and woman in her travels, but something about the tall, lean man in the tan suit with the tilt-set hat standing in front of the Golconda’s marquee made Eve Sutton stop for a second look. Those raw-boned features, with the sharp, prominent nose and deep-set eyes with their compellingly black lashes pulled a name from her pre-war memory and she blurted:

“Iron?”

The man turned and – goodness! – it was indeed Iron Alan Pierce, the man who’d been her brother’s stalwart shield from all things troublesome or bad news during the days of sold-out shows at the theater. Ten years had hollowed his cheeks some, but the eyes were still intelligent and the mouth still prone to a smile, which it did as he recognized her, too.

“Eve? I’ll be damned!”

She rushed to him nearly on air, to spite the weight of her bags. Though when she got to within an arm’s length of him, she stopped. Tumbling into the arms of a man on the street, no matter their depth of history, was beyond the boundaries of propriety.

“It’s been an age,” she said, looking up at him with a smile she was certain was gushy and girlish, but she couldn’t help herself. “Iron Alan. How are you?”

He leant back from her a little, as though to keep his distance, and chuckled. “First, it’s just Alan, now. No one’s called me Iron since before the war.”

She noticed as he tipped his hat to her that his other hand gripped a cane; part of his stiffness was due to that. “The war,” she echoed, her gaze flashing up to his face again. It was still a very handsome face. “You fought?”

He nodded and tapped his right leg with the cane. “3<sup>rd</sup> Division.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, for lack of anything better.

He shrugged. “We got them in the end.” He changed the subject with a beaming grin that she remembered perfectly. “Look at you, though! All grown up and still as beautiful as a starry night over the Thames.”

She lowered her eyes. “You’ll make me blush.”

“Then I’ve done my job.”

She laughed and looked up at him again, because it had been so long and he was wonderful to look at. “Still quick with the flattery, I see.”

“It’s served me well in my profession.”

“Still publicizing?” She indicated the marquee with a tilt of her head.

He waved his free hand. “No, no. Haven’t been part of the theater since George left. This is just on my way to the office.” He puffed his chest to make himself taller, if that were possible. “I’m a *bona fide* press man, now, at the *Times*.”

“The *Times*!” she said with genuine surprise.

“Just copy work,” he amended. “We need to keep things punchy for the advertisers.”

She looked at him sidelong. “What do you think it would take to get something written about Bright Heath?”

He snickered. “You could always use your feminine wiles on me.” He narrowed those shrewd eyes. “What’s going on at Bright Heath?”

“We’re selling it.”

His face fell. “No!”

She lifted one shoulder. “We need the money, and it’s not doing anyone any good just sitting there empty.”

“George is still in America, I take it, but what about you?”

She shook her head. “Paris.”

He made one of those *ah* noises. “That’s a shame. I always liked that old place, despite the trouble.”

“Yes,” she said, glancing away. “Well, no one wants to be reminded of that, either.”

A little silence settled between them, one she regretted and immediately sought to counter.

“I’m staying there now, though, while we get ready to sell. You should come by.” She lifted one of the bags of groceries. “I can make lunch.”

He smiled with the same genuineness she remembered from her youth. “I’d like that.”

“Tomorrow?” she asked before she could temper herself.

“How about Sunday?” he suggested. “Saturdays are always a bit unpredictable in the copy office. Sunday editions and all that.”

“Of course,” she said with a sense of both disappointment and relief.

They parted ways with plans made. When Eve returned to Bright Heath, a new excitement put height in her step while she went about her necessary chores, so much that she easily exhausted herself... though not enough to stop her from thinking of Iron Alan in her bed that night, and how his smile and laugh and even just the shadow of him against the sun as he’d walked away down the street rekindled in her a physical longing she hadn’t allowed herself to feel in years.

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Saturday was full of obligations for the estate. Mrs. Goodrich, the kindly neighbor who offered to help prepare for the sale, busied herself with the more business-y details for which Eve admittedly had little mind or patience. Eve guessed the older woman was aiming to purchase Bright Heath herself, in which case Eve thought she should have just come out and made an offer straightaway. It certainly would have saved Eve the trouble of returning to England at all. Of course, if she hadn’t come, she’d

never have run into Alan and they'd never have made plans for Sunday lunch, which seemed to arrive after both too long a time and not enough. She wondered that morning if she shouldn't have reminded him of the way, but she had no way of contacting him now and it didn't matter in the end anyhow, as at a few minutes before twelve the bell rang through the house and when she answered it, Alan stood on the step, looking as tall and handsome as he'd ever done.

“Punctual as ever,” Eve said behind a smile.

“I know better than to keep a lady waiting,” he replied glibly before producing a small bouquet of mixed flowers from behind his back. “*Pour vous, mademoiselle.*” He broke into a brief chuckle. “All the other French I know shouldn't be repeated in polite company.”

She laughed, grateful for the levity; the flowers had taken her by surprise. “*Merci, m'sieur.* You shouldn't have done.”

“Yes, I should have,” he said with utmost seriousness, leaving her stupefied for another moment.

She dropped her gaze into the bouquet and stepped to the side. “Come in.”

He walked in somewhat unevenly and paused in the main foyer for a thorough once-over. “Feels different from what I remember.”

“It's empty,” Eve prompted.

Alan nodded. “That's it.” He turned back her way with a grin. “Quiet. Just you?”

“Today,” she told him. “Mrs. Goodrich spends Sundays with her daughter.”

He squinted. “Is she the one who used to come round at tea sniffing for gossip? Lives in that mid-Victorian monstrosity with the stained-glass windows in front?”

She giggled. “That's the one! You have a good memory.”

“Those years sit close to my heart.”

Such tender sentiment brought her to another pause. The misspent days and misplaced affections of her youth came back to her, and she had to avert her gaze.

The silence wasn't lost on him. "Have I said something wrong?"

"No!" She lifted her head to him again and smiled, to assure him all was well. "It's just a bit nostalgic: being here, with you, after so long."

He frowned. It didn't suit him, and she hurriedly changed the topic.

"I thought we could enjoy lunch in the garden?"

His smile returned, and he nodded. "That sounds lovely. I've always liked the garden."

She had a basket ready for carrying the food, drink, and blanket, and brought along a tankard to use as a vase for his flowers, an idea that made him chuckle for its cleverness as well as its incongruity. He insisted on carrying the filled basket despite his cane, leaving her to worry beside him the entire walk down the incline from the kitchen door to the great old wych elm where she used to sit in her tree swing. The swing was long gone – Mrs. Goodrich mentioned rotted rope had brought it down sometime after the start of the war – but the tree was as grand as ever and gave them plenty of comfortable shade from the late spring sun.

Alan set down the basket and tossed the blanket loose on the grass. Eve straightened its corners and claimed the basket, emptying it of its contents even while she kept her gaze surreptitiously trained on him.

He lowered himself to the blanket, clicking his tongue for her scrutiny. "I'm fine, you know."

She sat on her knees, still watching, and said, "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. We should have stayed in the house—"

"Don't be silly! I haven't enjoyed a sunny Sunday picnic with a beautiful girl in ages. I'm not about to retreat into any house now, no matter how grand it is."

She smiled but tightly, still focused on his leg. “Does it hurt?” she asked in a quiet voice.

“It did when it happened.” He lifted one lanky shoulder. “Now, it’s more inconvenience than anything.”

“What did happen?” she asked, shifting closer to him. “If I can ask.”

“Jerry engagement near Overloon,” he said without any cover of emotion. “I was lucky, though. I got out with just this.”

She touched his hand. “It must have been terrifying.”

“It was,” he answered with a loose laugh.

“How ever did you get through it?”

He looked from her fingers to her face. “I thought of you,” he said, then added quickly, “and George and Babs and little Lucy, and everyone else who’d ever meant anything to me.”

Her heart frayed a bit for his feeling, and she edged her fingers between his. “I’m glad you made it,” she said softly.

“Me, too.” He gave her fingers a tiny squeeze and held her gaze for a long moment. Then he blinked and declared, “No more war talk! It’s depressing. I want to hear about you,” he crooned. “Tell me about Paris, what wonderful adventures you’ve gotten yourself into.”

Under ordinary circumstances, with people like George or Barbara or even Mrs. Goodrich, Eve would put forth all manner of detail about her art and the café and the splendor of the City of Light at night. But with him, compared to the life he’d lived in the years between, she only shrugged and said, “It’s Paris. It’s beautiful and continental and perfect for painting.”

His eyes shone with undeterred interest. “Have you been? Painting.”

“I have a little loft where the light is good for it.” She blushed. “Most of the work I’ve gotten is rather lurid, I’m afraid.”

He grinned. “I think you protest too much.”

“No,” she said, blushing harder as she swung her face away. “It’s mostly buxom damsels in plunging necklines being tied up or thrown over the shoulders of rough-hewn villains, or whatever plot device the flimsy plot clings to.”

He bounced with barely-contained laughter. “How delightfully crass! But you’re painting,” he added, squeezing her fingers again. “I’m so glad to hear that. It would break my heart to learn you weren’t able to do your art. I know how important it is to you.”

Not even George, who understood the sacrifices to consumerism one made for sake of their passion, had ever said anything so unconditionally supportive to her before. She had no words to express that except a hushed and demure, “Thank you.”

“And what about romance?” he asked, the glint of his eyes turning mischievous. “I noticed you’re not wearing a ring, but that could mean lots of things.”

She pulled her mouth to one side. “Ever observant, aren’t you?”

“Always. And you’re dodging the question.”

“You *are* a newspaper man!”

He snickered but pressed, “Answer the question.”

“No men,” she confirmed. “Paris is overrun with artists, and I won’t go down that path again.”

Alan nodded soberly. “You are a temperamental lot,” he said then, and winked.

Eve smiled again. “What about you? I don’t see a wedding ring on your finger, either.”

“No,” he admitted, grave and self-deprecating in the same breath. “It’s a busy world. Not many women willing to wait for a man who takes twice as long just to climb a flight of stairs.” He spoke with a wry smile, but the words plucked a defensive nerve in her chest.

“They don’t know what they’re passing by,” she said, suddenly acutely desperate to unburden the desires pounding in her heart, no matter how indecorous.

She shifted closer to him on her knees and grasped his hand firmly. “I shouldn’t have put you off all those years ago. I was such a little fool.”

He stared into her eyes. “You were in love,” he allowed. “With Lerner.”

“I shouldn’t have been,” she said, saying aloud at last what they both surely thought. “I should have been in love with you: Iron Alan, who always looked after us, and who tried to save me from myself with Sean.” She pulled his hand to her chest, between her breasts, clutching it close to her heart. “If I could go back in time and change just one thing, it would be to throw him off. To never look at him at all and never cause anyone so much misery as I’d done by thinking he was any sort of good man. Like you.”

He smiled full of wistful feeling but said, “I’m glad you didn’t.”

“Why?”

“Because I’d have asked you to marry me,” he said with a short, sad little laugh. “Then shipped off to war a year later. What kind of life would that have been for you, leaving you alone for five years before coming home less a man than I was when I’d left?”

“You’re not less a man than anyone. Least of all the one you were before.” She put one hand to his hard-boned cheek. “In fact, I think you’re twice so.”

He stared at her in abrupt enlightenment. “Eve-!” he said, when she pulled his face to hers and swallowed any more words with a kiss so fierce and full of pent-up longing that for several moments she forgot even to breathe. By the time she remembered, he’d put his arms around her, one hand in her hair and the other circled around her waist. She climbed into his lap as one of his hands left her waist to clutch her thigh, then crept higher up her leg under the loose, lacy edge of her knickers.

She scrabbled at his trousers, yanking blindly at the button and zip until she got them open enough to struggle down the waist of his pants. He made a grunting noise against her mouth even as he snatched at the silk of her knickers to pull them off.

She did an odd little shimmy to keep their faces together while she clambered out of her underwear, kicking them to the side when she was finally free. Then she reached down and put her hand around his cock, which was pleasantly thick, firm, and nearly straight up from his lap. She guided herself to the right angle then didn't slide him in but plunged down upon him, making him break from their kiss to give a gasping noise of approval. But she latched their mouths together again, rocking with robust delight as the initial shock of his size became a more companionable sensation.

His fingers clenched the flesh of her hips. She started to feel the rising tide of pleasure that would turn her vision white when he suddenly pushed her off him to spurt unceremoniously onto her thigh and the blanket beneath them.

They panted in the quiet of the open afternoon for a full minute until he said:

“At least I missed the sandwiches.”

The absurdity of that statement was so unexpected, so blithe, so perfectly *him* that she laughed and fell to his chest to kiss him again.

He stayed sitting up and put his arm around her, the other wedged straight to keep them upright so they could nuzzle and bump foreheads.

“Why did that take us so long to do?” she asked.

“I don't know. But it was worth it.”

She half-stifled a snicker. “We should do it again, to make certain it wasn't a fluke.”

“I may need a bit. I'm not the young man I used to be.”

She drew herself up with a heavy-lidded look that she hoped would either entice or amuse him, preferably both. “I’d say you’re *every inch* that man.” She played her fingers over his lips. “If not more.”

Her touch strayed to his teeth as he smiled. “I think we should get inside for that. In case your nose neighbor decides to come round. And so I can attend to you properly,” he said, hooking his hand behind her neck, “in a bed.” He kissed her again then, tenderly but with meaning.

She offered him a napkin to clean up and collected their uneaten lunch back into the basket along with her knickers wrapped in another napkin. She held his hand for the walk back to the house, carrying the basket with the other. While they made their way, they talked of the past in the form of Lucy, her niece, who was now nearly fourteen.

“Fourteen?” Alan cried. “She was in nappies when I saw her last.”

Eve giggled and closed the kitchen door behind them. “Not anymore. She’s to come to Paris for the summer, to study the masters and see if she prefers life here to America.”

He grunted. “Two liberated young women wreaking havoc on the unsuspecting men of Paris. The mind reels.”

She plucked a slice of apple from the basket and lifted it to his mouth. “You could always come with us,” she teased.

“Yes.” He accepted her gift and chewed. Swallowing, he put his hands on her hips. “But who would be protecting whom from being wicked, in that case?”

“Who said anything about protection?” She wound her arms around his neck. “We could both teach her to be wicked.” She rose on her toes to peck his lips lightly and once, tasting the remnants of tart apple there, and stayed close to murmur, “I know you have it in you,” before kissing him again more deeply.

He hummed and slipped his arms around her waist. “But you want me to prove it,” he said. Before she could answer, he mumbled, “All right,” and shuffled a step that wedged her between him and the table.

He trailed his kisses from her lips to her neck, setting off a cascade of pleasurable feeling that electrified her nerves to his slightest touch. She laid her cheek on his head, the thick pillow of his hair soft and smelling of ginger root. There, she sighed, the breath becoming a moan as his hand moved over her breast. Even through the ruched fabric of her top she felt the course of each of his fingers, notably his thumb, which brushed her excited nipple.

He put his mouth to her ear, whispering in a hot blow of air, “Here? Or in the bed?”

She’d wanted him wicked. More pressingly, she wanted him now.

“Here,” she said, and with a single move he took her around her waist again and lifted her onto the table.

He undid his trousers before unfastening the buttons close to his collar. While he struggled his shirts over his head, Eve pulled her dress off over hers, tossing it to the table behind her so she was unashamedly naked when he looked at her again.

He swung his gaze once over her. She did the same with hers, drinking in the basics of his body but willing to savor discovering the details for later when they took each other in a warm, skin-to-skin embrace.

He bundled his shirts into a cushion for her head and kissed her lips as he laid her down to the table. Then he moved to her breasts, sucking at her sensitive flesh while she squirmed and raked her hands through his hair. Between her legs he tapped the head of his cock, testing or teasing or simply waiting for her to beg for him.

“Alan, *please*,” she wheezed, ready with more when he slid into her with one smooth but powerful stroke that seemed to stop the day around them, so it was only the two of them in that moment. Gradually, she became aware again of the smell of the kitchen and the creak of the table and the sounds of his voice and hers panting and squeaking in equal rhythm. She broke into uncontrollable giggling, which made him do, too, until they flowed together into a fit of joyful hilarity.

“Why are you laughing?” she puffed at him.

“Because you started!”

She held his head. “We sound ridiculous!”

“Ridiculously happy,” he said, lifting his chin to look her in the face. He rose up, the lines of his grin going smooth and his eyes going a bit glassy then, and he sighed.

“I was so in love with you back then. That’s probably a damn foolish thing for me to say,” he said with a forced chuckle before turning tenderly quiet once more. “But I’ve seen too much not to speak my heart in the moment.” He shook his head in reflective regret. “I never dreamed I’d ever see you again. When you called my name on the street, I thought Providence had given me a second chance.”

He hadn’t fully left her through this admission, through his ardor had softened with the baring of his heart. But when she cupped his face and pulled herself up to him, whispering, “I thought the same,” she felt the revival of his passion. This time when he reached his huffing climax, she wrapped herself around him to keep him with her. She pressed her chest to his and clutched his head to her neck so she could say without looking at him:

“Will you stay? I can care for you, like I should have done all those years ago.”

She felt the tump-tump-tump of his heart against her breast.

“I have to be at work tomorrow,” he said slowly. He drew back just far enough so that they could almost-see each other. At the edge of her vision she caught the curve of his smile. “But I can stay tonight.”

She smiled, too, and allowed herself to look into his deep and honest eyes. “I don’t know what happens next,” she said, thinking of the house, George, Lucy, Paris. And of him, and herself.

Alan stroked her cheek. “Nobody does. But I’d like to get to know you again.”

Eve framed his face with her fingers, caressing the fine, hard lines of his strong, handsome face, the one that had filled her dreams off and on for the last ten years, and pulled him close for a patient and gentle kiss, and told him, “You’ve always known me.”