

## Chapter 1

*Early July 1945*

Victor Travis left his little daughter at home in the maid's charge and enjoyed a brisk walk to the village school, a mile away from their home. Like many other ex-servicemen, he was eager to vote in the General Election being held just after the end of the war in Europe.

For the first time since his wife's death, a few days after he'd been demobbed, Victor felt a sense of peace. Poor Susan had been failing for months, had been a mere shadow of the woman he'd married. He hadn't realised she was so close to the end, because he'd been involved in some hush-hush work and hadn't been able to get leave.

His mother-in-law ought to have told him, though, and she hadn't. The Army would have allowed him compassionate leave in such circumstances. He was still upset about it all.

Tomorrow he'd start arranging his move to the north where he was going to be a partner in a new building company. He was looking forward to that, but most of all, to having his daughter to himself and getting to know her better. What a delightful child Betty was!

He was surprised at how few people were voting. He saw no one he knew from Helstead, but got talking to a couple of young soldiers from a nearby hamlet. They were still in uniform, so obviously not yet demobbed.

What they said confirmed his own feeling that Churchill and his party were due for a few surprises. However, the results wouldn't be announced for another three weeks, to allow the votes of service personnel overseas to be counted.

When he got home, he found his mother-in-law's car outside the house, which surprised him. Since her daughter's death, Mrs Galton hadn't visited them, but had expected him to take Betty to her.

Inside, he stopped in shock when he saw her at the turn in the stairs, her hat awry, trying to drag his seven-year-old daughter down. Betty was hanging back, holding on to the banisters with both hands, sobbing and protesting loudly.

When she caught sight of him, Mrs Galton looked flustered, but she didn't let go of his daughter.

'What on earth are you doing?' he demanded.

Betty tried in vain to tug her right hand from her grandmother's grasp. But Mrs Galton still kept tight hold.

That did it! He strode up the stairs. 'Let go of my child this minute!'

'Don't you dare touch me!' she shouted and to his astonishment, she tried to stand between him and his daughter. But Betty managed to jerk away suddenly and flung herself at him.

'Daddy! Daddy! Don't let her take me away from you.'

He held her close as he repeated his question, 'What are you doing here, Mrs Galton?'

His mother-in-law hesitated, looking as if she didn't know what to do or say next.

It was Betty who answered his question. 'She said you wanted me to go and live with her now Mother's dead. She told Jane to pack all my clothes. Don't let her take me away, Daddy! I want to live in Lancashire with you, not stay here with her.'

'Of course you're coming with me, darling.'

She clung to him even more tightly and a hot little tear fell on his hand.

He looked up to the top of the stairs, where Mrs Galton's personal maid was standing with a suitcase in her hand, looking nervous. 'If that suitcase contains my daughter's clothes, Jane, and you take them out of this house, I'll have you charged with theft, because that's what it'll be.'

The maid's mouth opened in shock and she dropped the suitcase as if it were red hot. Taking a quick step to one side, she looked to her mistress for guidance.

He turned back to the older woman and gestured towards the front door. 'Don't let me keep you, Mrs Galton. I'm sure you have a busy social schedule.'

His mother-in-law let out one of her angry huffs of sound. 'I tried to do this quietly, for the child's sake, Victor but, if I have to, I'll go to the court for custody of my granddaughter, make no mistake about it. And I shall win. I'm sure this is what my poor dear daughter would wish. She told me so.'

'Nonsense. I was with Susan at the end and she told me she trusted me to look after our child.'

'You're lying. But I'll make sure Betty comes to live with me, whatever it takes.'

'I think you'll find the law is on my side there, since I'm her father.'

People only had to look at the two of them to see that. Betty had his dark, straight hair and olive complexion, not her mother's fair hair and pale skin. But the child's features were shaped like her mother's and he thought she too would be a beauty one day.

Mrs Galton glared at him. 'You've been away from home for most of the last few years. You don't even know that child.'

'Like many other men, I've been fighting for my country. I think the courts will take that

into account.'

'They'll also take into account the fact that a seven-year-old girl needs a woman to raise her. You've let Betty run wild in the short time you've been back and see the result: she came down with a severe head cold when you and that silly young maid of yours started looking after her. A man simply can't fill a mother's role. He has a job to do, money to earn.'

'My job will never come before my daughter, and it won't have to, thank goodness, because I have a private income. I'll find a woman to help where necessary, but make no mistake about it, I'm bringing Betty up – and in the way I choose.'

In the few weeks he'd been back, they'd already had several serious disagreements about what that way should be.

'A maid is not the same as a grandmother. And your income is very small. My husband left me financially comfortable and I can give that child everything she needs. You still have your way to make in the world, unless you're intending to live like the hoi polloi.'

'I have my business life carefully planned, and it'll be a successful one, I'm sure.'

'My lawyer thinks you're about to make a highly risky investment – and using the proceeds from selling this house, too. How dare you sell it?'

'I believe I own it. It was your wedding present to us, after all.'

'We bought it so that Susan could continue to live near us in Helstead. Now my poor daughter is dead and you have no right to take my only grandchild away to the other end of the country, to a nasty industrial town.'

'Rivenshaw is a small town on the edge of the moors, with very little industry, actually. I'm told it's a pretty place.' He found it an effort to be polite to this arrogant woman. The more he'd got to know his in-laws, the more he'd disliked them. Cecil Galton was dead now, but Amelia was still running the village as though she were its queen. If the war hadn't taken him away from Susan, Victor would not have stayed in Hertfordshire this long.

He suspected her parents had threatened her when he was called up and made her afraid of moving away from them, but he couldn't prove that. And what did such details matter now that she was dead? He contented himself with repeating what he'd said several times already, 'You'll find that I'm perfectly capable of earning a living and looking after my child. Your lawyer knows nothing about the building industry.'

He kept his arm round Betty's shoulders and her whisper was all he needed to validate his choice.

'I want to be with you, Daddy.'

'And I want you with me, my little love.' He glared at the sour-faced woman still standing

nearby. Her views of the world were as old-fashioned as her clothes. The recent war hardly seemed to have dented the shield of arrogance she held between herself and those she deemed her inferiors.

He could understand her distress at the death of her only child, but he didn't think she or her late husband had loved their daughter for her own sake, any more than they'd loved their granddaughter. They'd simply considered the two of them possessions. No wonder Susan had insisted on running away to get married, her one major defiance of them. She knew they'd have stopped her.

That Betty was now seen as a replacement for the frail, compliant daughter they'd lost showed how little Amelia understood the child. His Betty would never be meek. She had a mind and opinions of her own already and he liked to see that. He wanted a freer and happy childhood for her, one not dominated by the great god Money.

The silence had gone on for too long, so he went past his unwelcome visitor to open the front door, with Betty still clinging to his hand. 'I think you should leave now, Mrs Galton, and please don't come back without an invitation.'

Her face turned a dull shade of red and she glared at him. For a moment he thought she was going to refuse, then she marched down the bottom few stairs and out of the house, her heels drumming their way across the tiled hall floor.

Since she hadn't given any instructions to her maid, he looked up and jerked his head to indicate that Jane should follow her mistress out.

She slowed down as she passed him and whispered, 'If you want to keep her, you should get Betty away today, Mr Travers. They knew you were away voting, so thought this would be the easiest way to do it. But Mrs Galton has her lawyer waiting to step in within the hour if this fails.'

She continued down to the hall and out of the front door without waiting for an answer, leaving him staring after her in shock, unable to believe his own ears.

He realised Betty was crying, so sat down on the bottom stair and pulled her into his arms, cuddling her close and pushing his handkerchief into her hand. 'Sorry, love. I won't leave you on your own again. What happened to Edna? She was supposed to be looking after you.'

'Grandmother sacked her. She told her to leave the house and never come back again.'

'How could she do that? She doesn't employ Edna.'

'When Edna said she wasn't leaving me, Grandmother said if she didn't, her family would be turned out of their house in the village.' Betty wrinkled her brow. 'I don't think that was fair, do you?'

‘No, darling, it wasn’t.’

‘I like Edna. She’s fun. But Grandmother tells her off for letting me play outside and shouts at her a lot.’

‘You can play outside all you want when we get to Rivenshaw, my darling.’

‘And you won’t get me a strict governess?’

‘Heavens, no. I’d be terrified of one myself.’

Betty giggled and cuddled even closer, still clutching the damp handkerchief. ‘Mother always said you weren’t frightened of anything. She said I was to stay with you. She said it lots of times.’

The child seemed to need cuddling, so Victor didn’t move, but he began thinking furiously. They’d meant to leave the village two weeks ago, but Betty had had a bad cold. Since his wife had been an invalid for years, he hadn’t wanted to take any risk with his daughter’s health, so hadn’t protested when Mrs Galton called in her own doctor, rather than the man in the village. Victor had followed the man’s instructions to the letter, of course he had.

‘How do you feel now, Betty? Is your cold completely better?’

‘It’s been better for ages. I don’t know why the doctor said I had to stay in bed so long.’

He closed his eyes for a moment, angry with himself for being fooled like that. He’d not expected a doctor to lie to a father about his child’s health. That woman must have been making plans all the time, no doubt with her lawyer. Fitkin spent a lot of time with her since her husband’s death, handling all her business affairs.

Well, his mother-in-law was in for a few shocks when the young men and women who’d served in the forces or other service groups like the Land Army were demobbed. He didn’t think men who’d faced death would kow-tow to Amelia Galton, as their parents had. Nor would young women who’d lived and worked independently want to go into service at the Hall and bob curtsies to that old harridan. Those days were past.

In the end he decided to take the maid’s warning seriously. The situation might not be that desperate, but he’d seen Fitkin driving up to the Hall in his big black Wolseley as he was walking back. He wasn’t risking losing his daughter. ‘I’ll tell you what, my little love. We’ll leave for Rivenshaw earlier than planned.’

‘Why can’t we leave straight away? It won’t be dark for ages.’

‘Your grandmother’s lawyer might try to stop us if they see us leaving.’

‘She always knows what we do, anyway. Mr Fitkin’s been paying the Peeby brothers to keep watch on the house ever since you came home and brought me back here to live.’

‘What? How did you find that out?’

‘I heard Grandmother talking to him about it and every time I look out of my bedroom window, I see Brian or his brother in the street opposite. Brian’s there now. I can show him to you.’

‘Do that.’

She led the way up to the nursery and pointed out a shabby youth standing on the street corner opposite their gates. He didn’t seem to be doing anything except watching the house.

As they stood there, a man went up to Peeby and said something. The youth straightened up and nodded vigorously.

Victor spoke his thoughts aloud. ‘I wonder who that man is?’

‘His name’s Barham and he works for Mr Fitkin. He collects Grandma’s rents in the village and from her houses in Watford too. Everyone in the village is afraid of him.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’ Betty stared down at her shoes. ‘Is it wrong to eavesdrop, Daddy? Mother always said it was. Only I can’t help hearing things sometimes, and anyway I get bored just sitting still or reading the books Grandma chooses for me. They’re so silly and old-fashioned, all about children dying or going to church. So I listen to what she’s saying, even when she’s in the next room.’

‘You have excellent hearing.’

‘Grandma always speaks loudly. I heard one of the maids say she must be going deaf.’

He’d noticed that too. ‘I don’t think it’s wrong to eavesdrop when people are trying to trick you.’

How dare his in-laws treat him like this? During his years in the Army, Victor had had a lot of experience in keeping his feelings under control and he managed that now, because he didn’t want to alarm the child. But Mrs Galton had chosen the wrong man to tangle with, by hell she had.

‘How about you and I turn this into a little adventure, Betty? We’ll creep out of the house by the back way once it’s dark and catch the last train to London. No one will be able to see us go. What do you think of that?’

‘Grandmother will be very angry.’

‘Yes. But we won’t be here, so she won’t be able to shout at us.’

She shivered. ‘I think we should go right away, not wait. I heard her say to Jane that her lawyer will get people here to take me away by force if necessary.’

He was horrified. Was Mrs Galton really prepared to go to those lengths? Sadly, yes. She always had to have her own way, whatever it took. She had men like Barham and the young

fellow waiting outside already . He couldn't fight off the two of them .

'No one will see us leaving if we go through the back garden next door, Daddy. There's a gap in our hedge. I play with the boy who lives there sometimes, though I'm not supposed to. That's how we get through to each other.'

'Can you show me?'

She took him to one of the back bedrooms and pointed it out.

He glanced at his watch. If they got away quickly, they might take Mrs Galton's people by surprise, and be in time to catch the next local train into Watford Junction. From there they could go on to Lancashire, which was on the same line. He used to know all the train times, but things had changed during the war, so they'd just have to take their chance. 'You're a clever girl. That's exactly what we'll do.'

He'd been intending to use his own back gate, but who knew whether that too was being watched? He glanced out of the window again. The rear alley curved round, so they might be able to stay out of sight of a watcher if they left through the garden next door.

Was he being paranoid? He didn't think so. He'd seen Mrs Galton do a few unethical things in the past few years, and he hadn't even been in the village most of the time. And even her maid had warned him to leave.

He stood up. 'I'll pack my bag. Wasn't it kind of your grandmother to have your things packed for us? Come on, princess. We're going to have an adventure.' He held out his hand, and with another of her delicious little-girl giggles, she took it.