

Until June

Barbara M. Britton

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the men and women of the United States military, past, present, and future, who faithfully serve our country. Thank you for your sacrifice and service.

1

Juneau, Alaska, September 1918

Josephine Nimetz slipped into a perfect replica of a wool coat, one she had drawn, designed, and patterned on old newspaper. She tucked a rectangular box under her arm and tiptoed across the living room toward her mother who slept in an oversized chair. Laying a gentle hand on her mother's swollen knuckles, she whispered, "I'm off to the Chambers Estate."

Her mother's eyes fluttered open. "I thought you delivered Mrs. Chambers's gown yesterday?"

"Yes, but Ann forgot to put the gloves and embroidered handkerchief in the box. I don't want any complaints from our best customer."

"Your sister can't seem to think about anything these days. Anything, that is, except men."

Josephine stepped toward the door. At seventeen, the last thing she wanted to discuss was her sister's courtships. There had been too many stories of lonely miners with gold rush dreams.

Her mother coughed and leaned forward.

Josephine halted. "Do you need your medicine?"

"At night dear. Only at night." Her mom sat back

and closed her eyes.

Clenching her teeth, Josephine crossed over the woven rug and rested a hand on her mother's forehead. No one should suffer in order to save money. "I'll steep us some tea when I return." She stroked her mother's hand.

Using Mrs. Chambers's package to shield her cheeks from the salty sting of brisk Alaskan air, Josephine scuffed along the walkway bordering tiny, wooden row houses. The homes, nestled on the side of a mountain, were one earth-shattering jolt away from plunging into the Gastineau Channel.

She stopped briefly in town to inspect the fashion ensemble in the department store window. The same dusty, shipped-in gown from the previous month clung to the dressmaker's dummy. Good. No new arrivals to compete with this week.

Trudging past the stained glass Russian Orthodox Church and up the hill toward Juneau's elaborate homes, she spied the Chamberses' mansion with its gabled roof and large bay windows. One day, she hoped to own a big home with a formal dining room and a sizeable porch; a place where her mother could survey comings and goings from outside the front door—rain or drizzle. "Someday," she sighed. Definitely, not now.

As she neared the Chamberses' gardens, a man staggered in her direction. His limbs flailed like a drifter kicked out of the Red Dog Saloon at closing time. A cap shaded his face except for his days-old beard, but she knew that uneven gait. Ivan? Couldn't be? Her stepfather worked on Douglas Island—at the mine. Lately, on days off, he stayed on the island with his paycheck.

"It's about time."

Josephine's pulse quickened. She recognized her stepfather's sharp sarcasm.

Ivan's calloused hand engulfed her shoulder as the stench of Skagg whiskey accosted her nostrils.

"Where's the money?" His words slurred together.

"What money?" She cradled Mrs. Chambers's box against her chest, grateful for the distance it put between them.

Seizing her collar, Ivan curled the fabric into his fist. "Mrs. Chambers pays you fourteen dollars for those fancy dresses." His grip tightened. "You'll give me the money."

"It's gloves." She fumbled to open the top of the package. "I don't have any money."

Scarlet capillaries streaked her stepfather's bulging eyes. "I need it."

Words stuck like cotton in Josephine's throat. "But...but your pay from the mine? You got paid?"

He lifted her lapel closer to his face. His sour breath tainted the air. "Don't hold out on me, girl. That pay's gone."

What of mother's medicine? Heat flushed her cheeks. She dropped Mrs. Chambers's accessories and clawed at his forearm, easing the pressure on her neck.

"Look for yourself. There's no dress. That money paid off our credit at the store." She avoided Ivan's hazel-eyed glare.

"That's not your place, girl."

Sing-song laughter sliced through the pine trees.

Mrs. Chambers. Thank God. Josephine strained to see her customer.

Ivan cursed and released her collar. His ragged fingernails gouged her neck. A burn like booted-up

campfire embers sizzled along her throat. He bent to pick up the box. The crushed corner revealed embroidered cotton.

"These worth something?"

"No. Not to you." Her words came out in an almost-shout. She lunged to collect her work.

"Josephine?" Mrs. Chambers's inquiry held a hint of concern.

Ivan pushed off to flee. His stiff-armed thrust sent Josephine tumbling backward. Her head struck something hard. Searing pain sliced into her scalp while vibrant bursts of light blurred her vision. A glacier-ice chill crept over her flesh. *I need to get up and deliver the gloves. Mother needs her tea.*

When she opened her eyes, darkness greeted her. Instead of the hard ground, silk sheets caressed her skin and mounds of soft pillows buffered the pounding rhythm in her forehead. Moonlight peeked under tall curtains and revealed the outline of claw-footed furniture. The scent of Mrs. Chambers's rosebud and lily perfume hung in the air. How had she gotten inside the Chamberses' house?

A deep undulating moaning crept into the bedroom, followed by a panicked scream.

Josephine sprang upright. Her head spun, the room spun, everything spun. She massaged her throbbing temples. Did her mother know where she was and what Ivan had done?

A man's cries filled the hallway. The hair on her arms rose to attention like fur on a hissing cat.

She wrapped a pillow around her head to drown out the moaning. Linen grazed her neck. What happened to her long locks? Reaching back, her fingers discovered chopped-off hair and a stitched bump

covered with greasy ointment. The mat in her hair was round like a bird's nest. A cap would be in order to cover this mess.

Rolling to the side of the bed, she slowly stood. Pain ricocheted through her face. She braced herself with a hand on the nightstand and fumbled her way to the door, trying not to trip on the length of her borrowed night dress. Someone had changed her. She stiffened. She needed to find out whom. She needed to find out what had happened. She needed to find out if Ivan had bothered her mother.

As she opened the door, light from engraved sconces in the hallway illuminated her room. Crystal glasses glimmered on the nightstand. A small R, larger C, and a small J were embossed on the matching pitcher. She ran her fingertips over the grooved letters. Reynold James Chambers. He owned land, lumber mills, and gold mines, and his wife paid top dollar for one-of-a-kind gowns. Even the bows on Josephine's night dress were a special order.

"Water," a voice pleaded. "Some water."

She held her breath and listened.

The pitiful sobbing from down the hallway made her injury seem insignificant.

Was Mr. Chambers ill? His son had recently returned from the war. Perhaps he or a servant suffered. Certainly, someone would comfort the man.

The crying stopped. Raspy shouting for a drink took its place.

Curious about what was going on, Josephine peeked down the hallway. A woman paced, head down, hands folded, outside a door at the other end of the hall. Her measured steps were precise as a wind-up toy. It looked like Mrs. Prescott, the Chamberses'

housekeeper. After a couple of laps, Mrs. Prescott scurried off. The maid's footsteps clamored on the stairs.

Josephine turned and stared at the pitcher of water by her bed. The Chambers had taken care of her injury. Returning a favor was customary. After all, Father Demetriev had preached, 'do unto others' at mass.

She poured a glass of water and swerved down the hallway, steadying herself with a hand to the wall, and careful not to spill on the plush rug. She stood in front of the door. Muffled sobs came from inside. Her heart plummeted to her belly. Her mother cried like this when her joints flared with pain. Sucking in a deep breath, she knocked softly and ducked into the unknown.

An eerie lemon-yellow glow came from a lamp on a nightstand. A man, younger than Mr. Chambers, lay in bed with a blanket covering the bottom half of his body. His nightshirt clung to his chest, wet with perspiration. A faint odor of rubbing alcohol and urine filled her nostrils as she entered the bedroom. She breathed through her mouth to calm her stomach.

The man turned his head to gawk at her as if she had materialized from a puff of magician's smoke. He stared with sunken gray eyes, underscored by purple half-moons. Brown hair hung over his ears, sticking to the side of his face, framing the stubble of a beard. Josephine steadied the glass in her hand. The man looked her sister's age—not more than twenty—but frail for his youth. If this was Mr. Chambers's son, he didn't resemble the young man she had seen driving a Model-T around town. With all the deliveries she had made to the Chambers Estate, she had only glimpsed Geoff Chambers once. Even then, he was scurrying out

the door to some urgent event.

She held out the glass and moved closer to the bed, ready to run at the slightest hint of danger.

The man studied her approach. He lifted his hand to take the water glass but never shifted his focus from her face. He drank the water in one gulp.

"What's the matter?" she whispered.

"Only that everyone seems to have gone deaf." He handed her the glass. "What's wrong with your hair?"

"I injured my head." She fingered her scalp. "I guess I'm lucky it didn't kill me."

"You're not dead," he said, straightening the bed sheet. "I should be."

Her mouth gaped as if she was eating a fork full of greens. Was he serious?

He sank back onto his pillow. "Refill that for me. I'm awfully dry."

Josephine nodded. Once.

Slipping back to her room, she filled the glass and glanced down the hall for Mrs. Prescott. Thankfully, the floor didn't buckle in her vision and cause her to swoon.

She headed toward the sick man's room and opened the door without a knock. Why wake her hosts? The man knew she was coming. Hurrying toward the bed, she reached out her hand.

He went to seize the glass. Stepping forward, her foot caught the edge of a throw rug. She catapulted forward. Before she could steady herself, water cascaded over the man's chest.

Gasping, he shot up into a sitting position. Liquid soaked into his shirt, dripping onto the sheet below.

He cursed.

Josephine blinked her eyes rapidly as if she was

watching a black and white Flicker Film. "I'm so sorry."

"It's all right." He held the shirt away from his skin. "I've had worse."

"Let me help." Grabbing a cloth from the table, she blotted his nightshirt. Her fingers slid down over his thigh and then bent sideways over a ledge of flesh. Her hand descended like an anchor toward the mattress. No muscle or bone buoyed her weight. In steadying herself, she pressed on his other thigh.

His chest heaved. Profanity spewed from his mouth.

She dropped the washcloth and sprang off the bed. Her heart fluttered as if she had run a race. "Forgive me. I'm so sorry."

Tremors wracked the man's body. "Get out."

"I didn't mean to hurt you." She backed toward the door. "What do you need?"

"Sleep. Now, leave."

When her fingers touched the doorframe, she turned and sprinted back down the hall, ignoring the painful boomerang in her head.

Jumping into bed, she pulled the sheet over her body and wrapped herself into a ball. The feeling of the man's thigh tingled on her hand. She opened and closed her fist, but the sensation would not disappear. It was etched into her nerves and etched into her memory.

Her hand had touched his thigh, and then, nothing.

The rest of his legs didn't exist. They were gone.

What had happened to cause such a deformity? Her arms closed in tight around her knees.

I want to go home.

2

Josephine bunched up her pillow and tried not to think of anything. Not swears from an injured man. Not the ache from her injury. Not the confrontation with her stepfather. Nothing. Going home and getting back to work on her patterns was her responsibility.

“Water girl?”

She bolted into a sitting position and immediately regretted the sudden movement. She knew that haggard voice. Had she misunderstood the summons? She listened intently as if for the squeak of a mouse.

The man called to her again.

Oh, why did she listen? She knew why. Few were the nights her mother didn’t call out from pain.

Her hand trembled slightly as she poured a glass of water. For a few minutes, she stared at the glass. The last time she played nurse the man had shouted at her. She didn’t even know what some of the names meant. Looking at the ceiling, she said, “Remember this, Lord.”

A quick peek into the hallway showed no sign of a wayward Mrs. Prescott. She shuffled carefully toward the stranger’s door and positioned herself near the entrance to his dimly lit room.

“You came,” he said, his voice strangled and

rough.

"I came to ease my conscience and to get some sleep." She offered him the water glass. He took it from her but didn't drink.

"I need two white pills." He pointed to a metal box on top of a tall armoire. "My caretaker's sick."

"I can't," she said. "I'll get in trouble."

"It's just an aspirin, Runt. Read the label."

How dare he insult her? Josephine crossed her arms, crushing all the mail-order bows on her gown, and drew to her full height—five feet nothing.

"I am not a runt."

"Short hair, short body, short legs, you're a runt. Now, get me that pill." He pushed his body higher against the headboard. "Do it," he demanded. "I hurt." His tone softened.

An upholstered chair sat next to the armoire. Couldn't he—? Her hand tingled with memory. *I didn't touch a long leg.* She hesitated as her pulse hammered against her veins.

Do it. Don't. Do it. Don't. Do it. Don't.

She met his gaunt-eyed gaze and carefully climbed onto the chair. The last thing she needed was to fall and hit her head again. She reached for the metal box and opened it. Rows of bottles and a stack of syringes filled the little chest. She picked up a copper tinted bottle from the left-hand side.

"It's on the right," he coached. "Don't mess with that bottle. The doctor counts those narcotics. If you give me any more of that tonight, you may not get out of here alive."

She ignored his threat. "I may be unsteady, but I do believe I could make it out the door before you could make it out of bed."

“Don’t worry. I’m cranky when I don’t get much sleep.”

When wasn’t he cranky? She picked up the bottle he indicated and recognized the brand. Her mother used these for pain. She shook out two white pills and placed the bottle back in the box before tidying up the row and closing the metal latch.

She handed him the pills. He drained the water glass. When he had finished drinking, she reached out to take the glass from him.

“What do you want?”

“The glass.”

He did not move. His hand clutched the glass, resting it on top of the blanket near his thigh.

“I need the glass.” Heat, blood, and embarrassment rushed to her cheeks. She braced for a struggle to get the crystal back. “I don’t want it missing from my room. The other one either. I don’t want Mrs. Chambers to think I’m a thief.” Her bottom lip quivered.

“Stop that. He moved the glass away from his thigh. “Take it. I don’t know where the other one went. Search if you like.”

She inched her hand closer toward the glass. “You won’t curse again?”

He shook his head.

Her gaze never wavered from his unshaven face until her fingers were wrapped around the prize. She grabbed the glass and wedged it under her armpit for safety. She skimmed the room for the other cup, but she didn’t see it.

The man flinched as though he had taken another drink bath.

She glanced to where his legs should have formed

two long lines underneath the sheets. The covers lay flat against the bed.

"It's not polite to stare." His lifeless eyes were as empty as the crystal glass.

"I didn't mean to. I've just never seen such an injury." Or felt it.

His brow furrowed. "Are you ignorant of the war? Those are my legs after the Germans tried to blow up my trench."

And like the night before, he bent forward, swearing, and curling his hands into fists. He beat the bed as tears trickled down the sides of his face.

"Where does it hurt? I'll get someone." She didn't know what she was saying. She would say anything because tomorrow she knew she would be home, sleeping with her sister, and this man would be a mile away.

"No," he called out, "don't get anyone. It's my feet."

She had to have misunderstood. He had no feet.

Chanting breaths filled the room. "They hurt even though they aren't there. Funny isn't it?"

"Not really." She didn't like to see people suffer.

Slowly, he unfurled his body.

"I should go," she said. "My forehead aches. Not as bad as your feet though. I think." She stepped backward.

"Belleau Wood."

The words sounded foreign to her. "Is that your name?"

"No." He laughed and shook his head. "It's a battle. I'm Geoff Chambers."

She kept her jaw from hitting the rug. From what her sister had said, Geoff Chambers was broad,

handsome, and charming. Her cheeks grew warm. "I'm—"

"Josephine Nimetz. Town seamstress. I know because the maid complained about making up the guest room."

"Oh, well, I won't be here long." She'd leave first thing in the morning and not be any more of an imposition to the Chambers.

Geoff leaned forward, holding himself upright with his arms. "At Belleau, the Germans tried to pick us off as we took back the forest. A shell detonated near my position. Mangled my limbs. That's why I couldn't get those pills."

Josephine's mouth gaped. "You were at the front? And survived an explosion?"

"Yeah, if you can call it that. At first, the medics left me for dead. Blood covered my body. Wasn't all my own, either. They didn't know I was alive until they heard me moan." A lopsided smirk puffed out his cheek. "I guess I'm good at that, except on a battlefield the dead can't complain about the noise."

"My mother said we're winning the Great War."

"People still die, lose their lives." He looked down at the foot of the bed. "If your mother's right, who knows, maybe we'll pop a cork before the end of December. That would make 1918 a heck of a year."

He leaned his head against his wooden head rest. "I'm tired. The aspirin must be working." His eyes closed. "Good night, Runt."

"It's..."

A snore reverberated from the pillow. Fake or real she did not know.

She backed out of the room, still holding the crystal glass. Her soul grew heavy thinking about

Geoff Chambers and all the men the war had hurt or killed or maimed. Geoff didn't lose his life on the battlefield, but he would never be the same again. His painful disfigurement made her heart ache like a real live pin cushion.

Josephine climbed into her big, fluffy bed and tried to put the tormented man in the other room out of her mind. She glanced around the bedroom at the opulent decorations. Her damp row house couldn't compare to this luxury. If only she could afford a respectable home with nice furnishings for her mother. She didn't want to worry if the department store received a new shipment of dresses. She didn't want to worry if her fingers seized up. She didn't want to worry.

She shut her eyes. Someday a mansion would be waiting for her. Someday. Somewhere.

3

Morning finally came, bringing with it the sunlight Josephine so desperately desired. She was in the Chamberses' glorious mansion, and her throbbing head and stiff neck reminded her how she got there. *Ivan*. She would check on her mother first chance she got.

Someone tapped at her door.

Josephine sat and straightened the sheets.

"Good morning, Josephine. How are you feeling?" Mrs. Chambers's voice was like a heralding angel. "You gave us quite a scare yesterday."

Smiling a finally someone-I-know smile, she said, "I'm fine, ma'am." She admired Mrs. Chambers's crepe de chine dress, the gold buckles on her heeled pumps, and her silky tan stockings. "Are you well?" *Or did Geoff's wailing keep you awake?*

"You don't have to be so formal with me. I'll have Mrs. Prescott bring you something to eat."

"Thank you. Now that I'm up, I am hungry and ready to get back to work." Josephine sprang forward in the bed. "Your box!" Her head throbbed a warning. "The gloves. They fell."

Mrs. Chambers sat down next to Josephine and took her hand. "I have the gloves and handkerchief."

Her voice cracked. "Terrible things have happened. I can scarcely speak of them. When my husband and I came across you lying there in our yard." She paused and blew out a breath. "Marshal Dorsey will be coming in a little while to talk with you. You must speak freely."

The marshal? Did Ivan try to get money from her mother? "Is my mother all right?"

"She's at home. Not ill. You'll understand after you speak to Mr. Dorsey."

Mrs. Chambers patted Josephine hand. "Enjoy your breakfast. We have one of the best cooks in all of Alaska."

"I will. Thank you." She kept her answer calm even though a knot cinched her stomach. Was she in trouble with the law? Was Ivan?

When Mrs. Prescott came to pick up the tray, male voices could be heard in the hallway. Mr. Chambers and Marshal Dorsey entered her room. Josephine tugged her covers up around her chest.

"Josephine Nimetz." The marshal walked toward the bed. "You're a sight for these eyes. Mind if I sit right here?" He indicated a spot near the edge of the bed.

She nodded and glanced at Mr. Chambers. He looked stately, dressed in a well-tailored, vested suit, but what he held in his hand caught her attention most of all. He clutched a crystal glass. A glass from the set by her bed.

Her heartbeat rallied. She had brought two glasses into Geoff's room. But she had only retrieved one.

"I'm not going to mince words," the marshal began, rubbing the stubble of a beard. "I need to have some answers about what happened yesterday. Did

someone give you those bruises on your neck? That bump?"

She smoothed the sheets on the bed and said nothing, contemplating what would happen if she told the marshal that her stepfather had caused her fall. She didn't want to think of what Ivan might do to her if she told. He had a quick temper and a quicker hand. Her mother needed his salary from the mine, even if there wasn't much left after he bought his drink and placed his bets. If her stepfather was put in jail, the money would stop for good, not to mention her family would be shamed with the scandal.

"Josephine, I need the truth," the marshal coaxed. "How did this injury happen? Did you stop to talk to anyone?"

She inspected the double-stitched hem of the bed sheet with her thumbnail. "I don't talk to strangers."

"Then you knew this person?"

Should she confess? Or say she slipped? She didn't want Ivan to miss anymore paydays at the mine. *Tell the truth*. Didn't her mother say the truth always came out anyway? The marshal must know something because he was still stationed on her bed.

"He was drunk," she stammered.

"Who? I don't like guessing games." The marshal's bushy eyebrows arched high on his forehead. He moved closer to her, his broad shoulders dwarfing her petite frame.

"Please, I don't remember much." She twisted the bed linens into a sidwinding snake.

The marshal fidgeted, intensifying his lawman stare.

"Maybe we should come back," Mr. Chambers said. He rotated the glass in his hand.