

# Mrs. Endicott's Splendid Adventure; a novel

(a summary by Pat Evert)

## Surrey, England 1938

"Ellie, I want a divorce. Please do not blame yourself for this, Ellie my dear," he said hastily. "Nobody could fault the way you have taken care of this house. It runs like clockwork. Now this has nothing to do with you. I've met someone I want to marry. We've grown comfortable with each other, but not exciting. I'll make it as smooth as possible for you. No unpleasantness. I'll admit to be in the guilty party, of course. I'll make sure you're given a good allowance. You won't have to worry about money." "If we're going to divorce, I want the house. It's not easy when my husband of 30 years announces that he wants a

divorce. But I can assure you I am not going to keel over and play dead. **I am going to fight for what I want. Perhaps this is the time for me to spread my wings.** We'll have the house valued, and all our other possessions, too. You can pay me half. Oh, believe me, Lionel, I have earned half this house and more. Now, are you going to see reason, or do I have to find my own solicitor and fight this in the courts?" And she allowed herself a small smile.

"I told him I wanted the house," Ellie said. Ellie allowed herself a smile. "I could hardly believe it myself that I'd said it. I just opened my mouth, and it came out. If he wants to be free of this marriage, he's going to pay for it." She gave a big sigh. "Golly. I'm going to hate this. Leaving all that I love behind. My lovely house. My garden. It's not fair, after all I've done." Mavis nodded. "If you want me two pennies' worth, you're better off without him. It's about time you got to live your own life, have a bit of fun." She had kept her figure. And she walked every day. And yet she wasn't good enough to keep her husband's interest, apparently. Ellie had finished school with very good marks and could've gone on to university. But according to her father, more schooling was a waste for a young girl who would only get married. Lionel had seemed like a good catch: he had come from a humble background himself. His father owned a green grocer's shop. But Lionel had studied for his accountancy exams and been hired by a major Bank. He was ambitious and he needed a wife with class to make the right impression on business associates. And so they married. The requisite children had arrived: two boys, one after the other. Lionel had insisted they be sent off to boarding school as was required of their station in life. Ellie had enjoyed raising them and missed them horribly after they were gone, but had had no say in this. Lionel had made it quite clear. Richard had gone into the army, and Colin was now working for a bank in Hong



Kong. Both far from home. She received the occasional letter, but all those years of boarding school had left them with no strong family ties. As yet there were no marriages, no grandchildren. **"I've lived his life,"** she said to her reflection. Oh, there were women in the village she had coffee with worked with as a volunteer at church. Nice enough women, but nobody she could describe as a real friend. "I'm doing what you told me, Mavis," she said. I'm going to that solicitor." Mavis chuckled. "You show your claws, love," she said. "You've let him walk all over you for far too long. So now is your chance, love. You open that door and go and live whatever life you want. Only make sure he pays you enough so you can enjoy it."

Old Mr. Furnace, the solicitor, had told her, "Ask for more than you really want. Give him some wiggle room. Pretend it's Baghdad market and make him bargain. Then he'll feel satisfied that he's got the better of you, and you'll get the right amount." He had suggested 50 pounds would be adequate as long as she had the lump sum in the bank from the sale of the London flat. Now all she had to think about was where she wanted to go and what she wanted to do.

"Back to France? Yeah. Why not? Only yourself to please now? About time you did something nice for yourself. Not a tour. I think I'd like to find a little pension or something and stay put for a while. **Just learning to be me and finding out what I want.**" Ellie laughed. "It's been years since I've had my bottom pinched. I think I'm a little too old for that. But I might even enjoy it." She gave Mavis a wicked grin. "I'm sure I'd be fine." "Well good luck to you. That's what I say, Mrs. E." "How funny," Ellie said, her face now serious again. "I won't be Mrs. E. for much longer, will I?"

Over the next days, Ellie and Lionel were awkwardly polite to each other. She cooked his boiled eggs as a gesture of Goodwill and sent his shirts to the laundry as she always had. **It will be all right, she thought. I'll manage by myself.** Eventually Lionel produced papers for her to sign. They all seemed in order. He was admitting guilt. She was leaving the marriage without a stain on her character. She was provided for financially. The monthly allowance, and then the deed to the flat with the proceeds from the eventual sale, just as she had requested. "Thank you, Lionel. I'll take these to my solicitor, so that he can check them," she said. "I assume there are various items around the house that you'd like to have for sentimental reason, when you set up a place of your own," he said. He was being generous because he felt he had won, got the better of her in the deal. "So where do you think you'll go now?" "The seaside, I thought. The French Riviera." "How long do you think you'll be gone?" "Now what possible interest could that be to you? Maybe a month, a year, whatever I feel like. **I am now fancy-free,** Lionel. No longer your wife. Free to do exactly what I choose."

She had never really been alone in her life, moving straight from her parents' house to marriage with Lionel. Was she insane to think she could go to the Riviera by herself? You are alone, she said to herself, you have nobody now, so it's about time you learned how to survive. The trip to France would be a good test so she wrote to both of her sons.

*My dear Colin/Richard, you will no doubt have heard by now from your father that he is divorcing me and plans to marry someone called Michelle. He expected me to melt away without much protest and live the rest of my life in a tiny cottage somewhere. However, I have surprised him by deciding to go to the south of France. I'm not sure how long I'll be gone. I send you my love and hope that you stay healthy and happy. Your loving mother.*

She had to let people in the village know that she was leaving. She couldn't just leave the church alter Guild and the women's Institute in the lurch. "**I envy you,**" Miss Smith Humphries said. "**A new start. New experiences. What an opportunity for you.**" Once home Miss Smith Humphries came. "So I wondered..." again, a long hesitation. "Whether I could come with you. Oh, I know it's awful cheek," she went on, the words just spilling out now, "and you can be as rude as you like. But my doctor tells me I don't have long to live, and I got this great urge to go to somewhere beautiful again, to a place I once loved." "This is so unexpected. But yes. I'd welcome the company." "Then we'll leave when you are ready. I've made no bookings. We'll be fancy free and open to any place that speaks to us." Compassion overtook all other emotions. The woman didn't have long to live. One good thing that Ellie could do was to make sure that her last days were pleasurable and that she didn't die alone.

"You must know that the situation in Europe is not looking good, I'm afraid. That blighter Hitler has designs on conquest, you mark my words. Our bank is already moving assets from vulnerable countries. We had a meeting today, and I can tell you that the bank's president is taking this whole thing very seriously indeed. I do still feel responsible for you, Ellie. I'm very fond of you in my own way, and you've been a good wife to me." Mavis was helping her to get the last items into a trunk. "What did you do to your arm?" "He hit you. It always escalates, Mavis. When he finds he can get away with it once or twice, it gets worse." "Love?" Mavis gave a bitter laugh. "I can't say I ever did. I didn't know he'd turn out to be a worse bully than my old dad." "Mavis, you've got to leave him," Ellie said. "Why don't you come with me?" Ellie said impulsively. "I'll pay your way. It will give you time to think about what you want to do next, just as I'm doing." "He ain't going to like me going away," she said. "Of course I'm not bloody happy, but . . . I did promise for better or worse, didn't I?" "And so did I. And look where it's got me," Ellie said. "Now's a good time to make the break, Mavis," Ellie continued. "Don't tell him ahead of time, but leave him a note to say you are accompanying me to the Continent. And then, if you decide you are better off without him, you write to him again and say that you're not coming back. That way you never have to face him." It's your perfect chance to escape, **to lead a life you want.**" "Oh, I didn't tell you. Miss Smith-Humphries is joining us." Mavis recoiled. "Her? Oh no. Stop the car. Turn around. I ain't coming if she's part of it. She's a critical old cow. Told me I didn't polish the church brass properly." "She's dying, Mavis. She wants one last trip to a place she loved. We can't deny her that, can we?" "If you had to choose between Miss Smith-Humphries and a trip to the Continent and being left at home with your husband, which one would it be?" Mavis gave a nervous little chuckle. "All right, then. "We could take the Bentley," she said. "He'll just have to lump it," Ellie replied. She and Mavis exchanged a delighted grin.

She bought a summer dress for Mavis and a pair of navy linen trousers for herself. Lionel did not approve of women in trousers, so it made the purchase all the sweeter.

*Dear Lionel, You will notice that I have taken the Bentley. I took your concerns to heart about me taking trains on the Continent, so the car seems so much easier. And you did offer me my share of our possessions. So consider the Bentley my share of everything that we owned together. You may keep all the furnishings, including the two paintings in the sitting room that came from my family and I understand may be quite valuable. Also the Queen Anne desk. And you did say you wanted to get a newer model car—now you can. I hope you have a good life. Yours sincerely, your former wife, Eleanor Harkington (formerly Endicott)*

Miss Smith-Humphries wanted to revisit a happy memory before she died. Mavis wanted to escape an abusive husband. How could she deny them their own share of happiness? “Well, I’ve gone and done it,” she said. “I left him a note like you said. I hope we’re across the Channel by the time he reads it, or else . . .” “We will be,” Ellie said. “You did settle things with your husband about taking his motor car, I hope,” Miss Smith-Humphries said. “Not exactly. But I did leave him a note, making my position clear. I don’t think he’d know how to track me down in France.” And she laughed. She had escaped. She was free. All the tensions of the past weeks were already slipping away.

They came upon a small town. “We are celebrating. The harvest is in. It’s the Feast of Saint Michael.” “It’s all right, Mavis, they are friendly,” Miss Smith-Humphries said. “They are inviting us to have a glass of wine with them. It’s a feast day.” “Look, there are plenty of women, too, and children. Whole families,” she said, turning back to Mavis. “Immediately room was made for them at one of the tables. Wine bottles were passed down, and glasses were poured for them. These were followed by plates of bread, cheeses, pâté, sausages, tomatoes, various salads and bowls of grapes. The sounds of music, the shouts of children, the laughter. And she felt a bubble of happiness rising within her. “You don’t see them having a good time like that in England.” “No, Mavis, you don’t. And I’m sure English people would not take strangers to their hearts the way these people did.”

“Aidez-moi. Help me,” the girl said in French. “He will be back soon,” the girl said. “I accepted a lift from him. But then he started saying what we would do when we find a hotel for the night. Awful things. And I couldn’t run away because I have nowhere to run.” “Then come with us,” Ellie said. “We’ll take you safely where you need to go.” “It’s all right, Mavis,” Ellie said. “We have a girl hiding in the back seat. She was being kidnapped by the driver of that lorry.” “I had to leave my home in a hurry, madame,” Yvette said. “I was not wanted there. “I am seventeen, madame. I come from a farm. There was little opportunity to go to school when I had to help with the farm chores.

Ellie turned to Mavis. "I hope you don't mind for one night. It will take a while before she stops thinking of you as a servant." Ellie would sleep with Yvette in her maid's quarters, and Dora would take a grand room overlooking the garden with Mavis. The set-price menu was consommé followed by duck breast and crème brûlée. A carafe of red wine was brought to the table, and they all ate heartily. Ellie noticed now that Dora's skin was quite transparent, and that she had a frail look about her. **"You've opened my eyes, that's what you've done, and I'm grateful. I expect I'll miss home eventually, but right now I just want to take it all in,"** Mavis said. "I really must insist that you stop rounding up strays, Mrs Endicott," Dora said. "For one thing, there is no more room in the motor car." Ellie smiled. **"But we're all strays, don't you see? I'm a stray. You're a stray. We've nowhere to go, and everywhere to go."** "I suppose you're right." Dora frowned. "Why are you so darned optimistic? Fate has dealt you a dirty hand, the same as it has for all of us. I'm being cheated out of time, Mavis out of a loving husband and enough money and Yvette out of a loving family. You've been cheated out of your nice, comfortable life and your lovely home and all the work you've put into it . . ." **"I am on my way to the South of France where who knows what adventures we'll have. What could I want more?"** Ellie said. **"Dora, I've spent my entire life trying to please other people."**

It was about four o'clock when they approached Marseille. "It doesn't look too savoury around here. We certainly couldn't leave Yvette in a place like this." "I ain't half glad we're getting out of here," Mavis said as they drove back up the main thoroughfare. "I would have worried about getting murdered in me bed. I've never seen such unsavoury-looking types." "My father threw me out when he discovered I am pregnant," Yvette said. He told me I am no longer his daughter, and never to come back." Dora moved closer to Ellie. "I hope you know what you're doing," she muttered. "First you saddle us with a housemaid and now with a pregnant girl. **Are we to be a Noah's ark for the lost souls of the world?"** Ellie looked at her, then she smiled. "If that's what it takes, then yes." The road was entering a wild and mountainous area, the hillsides covered in bushy scrub. Do you smell burning?" A white mist was rising from the bonnet of the Bentley. "It must be the radiator. How far to the nearest village, do you think, Dora?" Dora peered down at the map. It was now quite dark and hard to see. There are villages along the coast. Maybe we should head for the closest one. Take the next turnoff." Then, at the moment the valley was about to be plunged into darkness, it widened out. There were small farms with stone farmhouses in the middle of cultivated fields. On either side of the village steep cliffs rose, the sandstone glowing blood-red in the last of the setting sun. "Oh my." Ellie slowed the car, her mouth open, staring in wonder. **She had never seen anywhere more perfect. The thought came to her that she didn't want to leave.** As if confirming this, the Bentley gave a hiss and died.

At that moment she noticed a man stand up from the group at the bar and come towards her. "Hey, what do you think you are doing? This is not a place to station your car. Move it at once," he roared in French. "Monsieur, I'm afraid the car will not move."

Is there a mechanic?" She thought she saw a flicker of amusement in those dark eyes. "There is Louis," he said. "He does the repairs around here." "Is there a hotel where we can spend the night?" "I regret there is not, but there is the pension," he said. The others pushed, and the car was steered off to the left, then maneuvered next to the harbour wall. "I will take a look at your motor car in the morning," an older man with a shock of grey hair called to them. **It didn't matter** if the car had broken down or if it would take days to mend. **It didn't matter** that they hadn't reached their final destination and didn't even know where they were going. **The worst was behind them. They were here at the Mediterranean, and everything was going to be all right.**

Beyond the harbour the Mediterranean Sea sparkled in dazzling sunlight. "You may come to like it, Mavis," Ellie said. **"I have to tell you that I'm feeling better already. I'm glad I made this decision, and I'm proud of us for getting this far. I like this place.** I'm glad the car died here." "Home." She toyed with the word. It was no longer home. She had no home. That was alarming but also freeing. "I told Yvette that you and she will have a lesson in reading and writing French every day."

There was a fresh breeze off the sea, reminding Ellie that even here in the South of France winter was approaching. But she breathed in deeply, savouring the saltiness and that hint of seaweed. It felt good to be alive, and she thought that she had not felt this way for ages. **When did she last feel such excitement and energy that she was ready to tackle anything?** She couldn't even remember. "I was there once, after the Great War. In England, I mean. I did not enjoy it. Rain and more rain, and the people always looking so gloomy. Nobody laughed. Nobody sat and took time to enjoy a glass of wine with friends. **Everybody in a hurry, shut away with their own little lives and their own little problems.**" *He's right*, Ellie thought. *That's how it is in England.* "He's right," Dora said as they walked away. "We should make the most of our day. Of every day. Especially for me." They found a narrow path that hugged the foot of the cliff. It was shaded by pine trees, and they were enveloped in that wonderful piny smell. As they came around the headland, they saw a small bay ahead of them, a tiny half moon of white sand beneath steep craggy rocks. "Oh, how perfect," Dora exclaimed. She hurried forward, almost breaking into a run. "Wonderful," she said. "Not even too cold. "Try it, Mavis," Dora called out in English. "Come on, Yvette. You have to try new things. When I came of age, there was only one option for a girl of my class, and that was to marry. I'm afraid I was rather too forthright in my opinions for many young men, and the ones that wanted me, I did not take to. My father died. I stayed as a companion to my mother until she, too, died. I shrank," Dora said. **"I should have dreamed bigger. I accepted what society wanted me to be."** "I've done the same," Ellie said. "I've been the dutiful wife and mother, and look where that has got me. Cast aside like an old shoe." "I think I'll enjoy my freedom, even if it's for a little while," Mavis said. "It will be the only time in my life that some man hasn't bossed and knocked me around." "I have examined your vehicle," he said, delivering the words slowly and

gravely. “And from what I can tell, it is the hose that connects to the radiator that is broken. A new hose will be sent out with the next visit from the postal van.

“I am Thomas Ramsey,” he said. “Resident of this place.” “Ellie Endicott.” Ellie shook the hand he had extended. She could see Mrs Adams still glaring and couldn’t understand what there was not to like about the gentleman. “I came to invite you to luncheon today, if you’ve nothing on your calendar.” “How very kind. Thank you,” Ellie replied. “We shall be delighted. There are four of us. Is that all right?” “The more the merrier,” he said. “I’ll expect you at twelve, then. “I hope you know what you’re doing,” she said. “He’s one of them, you know.” She leaned closer, as if she were imparting a secret. “He lives with another man. Lived with him here for years, right out in the open, like.” “Please call me Mr Tommy,” the man said. “That’s what everyone calls me around here.” “And let me introduce you to my friend Clive,” he said. “Clive Webster—three lovely English ladies. What more could you want? **Father André is remarkably broad-minded in his version of Catholicism. He happily baptizes babies of unwed mothers and makes people like us feel welcome.**” “So how long have you been here?” Dora asked. “We came in twenty-two,” Clive said. “So almost seventeen.” “Clive and I met during the Great War. I registered as a conscientious objector. I thought it was quite wrong to kill other human beings. So I was sent straight to the front as a medical orderly. My job was to go out on to the battlefield and retrieve the dying and the bodies.” “Naturally they picked the worst job possible to teach people like Tommy a lesson,” Clive said with bitterness in his voice. “I was young and naïve enough to do my duty and enlist at eighteen, and I was sent straight to the front. Absolute hell. It’s no wonder men’s minds snapped. Anyway, I was one of the bodies that Tommy retrieved. Just about alive. Horribly wounded. He brought me to safety, and he came to check on me all the time while I hovered between life and death.” “When Clive was discharged from the convalescent home, I realized he wasn’t ready to live alone, so I brought him to live with me. And all went well until a meddling female teacher found out about us and alerted the authorities. We learned they were coming to arrest us, so we made a rapid exit. Clive is a painter, so we came to the South, where the light is so marvelous. Found this place. Loved it. Sold my house in England, inherited a small amount from my parents and here we are.” He brought out a large pie from the oven and put it on a mat in the middle of the table. “Mushroom tart,” he said. “It’s the time of year for mushrooms. And don’t worry, we gather them all the time. We’re not going to poison you.” The pastry was light and flaky, the mushroom filling rich and almost meaty, and it was accompanied with a salad of mixed greens, including what Ellie assumed to be dandelions. Silence fell as the women ate. “I’d love the recipe for this,” Ellie said. “It’s delicious. So we escaped together, three of us on an adventure, only now we are four. We rescued a young French girl who finds herself pregnant and abandoned.” “You’re as bad as us and our cats,” Clive said, making them laugh. “There’s a villa for rent?” Ellie asked excitedly. “Who owns it, then?” “I believe it was a famous opera singer. She stopped coming, and then we heard that she had died. So presumably she has a next of kin somewhere who still owns it but doesn’t want to live in it. It’s in bad shape, anyway. The locals think it’s haunted.”

Ellie studied Dora as she went ahead, holding on to Mavis's arm. **It was as if Dora had already shed the strict and haughty exterior of her previous life.** Maybe it had been a shield, Ellie thought. *Maybe we all build up walls around us as a defense, so we can't be hurt.*

"Very well," she said. "I suggest you try to patch the radiator. And if that does not work well, then we will send off for a new one." Ellie said. "And I don't know about you, but I'm not ready to go anywhere yet. I like this place. It seems like a sort of refuge where I can come to terms with what has happened and what is going to happen. Also, I have this strange desire to see the villa." **"It may sound silly, but when they mentioned a villa I found myself thinking that I'd been waiting for it, as if it was all planned."** "I must admit that I'm a little curious about it myself. Built for a duke's mistress, then abandoned . . . It sounds very romantic."

"You will be delighted with what I have prepared for you this evening," he said. "I have made the poulet Basquaise, the chicken in a rich sauce of the Basque people. And to begin the meal, a terrine." "I don't think I've enjoyed food so much for years," Dora said when they had finished. "It didn't seem to matter that the stupid heart would just stop one day. But now . . . I don't think I'm ready to go after all." "Yes," Ellie said. "We are happy to stay a little longer. This place is most agreeable."

"I have good news, mesdames. The owner, he says that I may escort you to see the villa. But he warns that you will not find it agreeable, and please be careful as it could be dangerous." Ellie entered but then stood transfixed as she looked around her. It felt as if she were in the book *The Secret Garden*, or rather in *the magic realm of Sleeping Beauty*, fallen asleep for a hundred years. In front of them what had once been a lawn was now a dying mass of dried grass and weeds. The ubiquitous bougainvillea tumbled over the walls, in a riot of reds and oranges. At the far end of the lawn was an orchard of fruit trees: a pomegranate still bravely producing its brilliant red fruit after so many years of neglect, what might have been a persimmon and several citrus. Ellie turned the other direction and saw the villa itself. Before it was a gravel forecourt in which stood a stone fountain, now long dry. And behind this was **the Villa Gloriosa. Now no longer glorious.** Ellie had expected a ruin but found she was looking at a perfect villa with a red tiled roof. She began to walk towards the house. The path was lined with an avenue of palm trees, now casting a neat row of shadows across the gravel. Ellie looked past him, to her left, and gasped. "Wait." She broke into a run. "Careful, madame. Watch your step," he called, but she didn't care if the flagstones were cracked and uneven. She crossed the terrace and stood with the whole panorama unfolding before her. Directly below her Saint-Benet lay nestled in its little hollow, the village mainly in shadow, the cliffs on the far side glowing in the sun. The harbour into a Mediterranean that went from shades of pure turquoise to deep, rich blue. **"Oh," she said out loud. "This is heaven."**

Ellie looked back at the other women and saw the hesitancy on their faces. "I'll take a look first, if you like," she said. "Just to make sure it's safe." Then she took a deep

breath and stepped over the threshold into a marble entrance hall. An impressive white marble staircase curved up to a second floor. There was a green marble side table on which stood a huge vase containing some very old and faded silk flowers. Ellie opened a door leading to the back of the house. These were the rooms with the lovely view over the water. The first was a pleasant sitting room. The walls were painted in a fresco of palm trees and beaches, echoing the real-life view. And next to it was a smaller room that made her heart beat faster again. That shape under the sheet in the window had to be a grand piano. This had been a music room! Of course it had. Its occupant had been a famous opera singer. The famous opera singer had made this place beautiful and then left, never to return. Why? What had driven her away and made her leave all her lovely things under dustsheets? She went up the stairs, her hand feeling the cold smoothness of the marble banister. Upstairs doors opened on to a small square landing. As she stood there, she heard a noise that made the hairs on her neck stand on end. "Ooooh. Ooooooh." Just the sort of noise one would expect a ghost to make. Ellie opened the first door cautiously. There was a flapping sound. Something white brushed past her face. She screamed. "Only pigeons." Ellie grinned. "The roof has a hole in it, and they got in. It's rather a mess in there, I'm afraid." As she opened a door, she heard Dora give a little gasp. **"Oh, what a perfect view."** The cream-coloured silk drapes were tied back, and the whole coastline spread out below them. "I should die happy if that was the last thing I saw," Dora said. "This must have been her room. Look at the bed." It was a huge brass bed piled high with quilts. There was also an enormous wardrobe. She followed the notaire out. "So, monsieur, what do you think the owner might say if we wanted to rent this for a while?" Monsieur Danton gaped at her. "Rent this place? Madame, you cannot be serious. You have seen with your own eyes. It will fall on your heads." "No, I think it's quite sound. Most of it, anyway," Ellie said. But the moment I heard about this place, I knew I had to visit it. **And the moment I stepped inside, I felt it calling me to make it whole again.** Something sad happened here, and I think I should make it right, somehow." Ellie said. "All my life I've been sensible and reasonable. **I've done the right thing, tried to please everybody, when nobody ever tried to find out what I wanted. I had dreams once, just like you did, Dora. Those dreams were always stifled until now.**" What have we got to lose? We have no plans, no destination. We could stay on at the pension until some of the rooms at the villa are properly habitable again. Oh, and I wouldn't expect you to do any hard work. I don't mind funding it myself if you don't agree." "But that's going to take months, isn't it?" "I will have no problem in contacting the owner through his representative, but he may want to think this over." "If we did want to do this, are there any men around here who would be willing to do the heavy work, do you think?" "The fishermen are always glad to pick up extra work during the stormy winter months," Monsieur Danton said. "So did you ever know the opera singer? The one who owned the villa?" "Jeannette Hétreau? Sometimes we would hear the music. Someone would play the piano, and she would sing. That sound, floating out over the waters . . . it was enchanting. Magical. It was much later when we read that she had died. During the Great War, I believe, although I'm not sure how and why she died." "You will tell the owners that, won't you? That we are keen to restore the villa to its former glory. **Villa Gloriosa can live again.**"

“Where else would the girl go at this stage?” Dora said. “And a pair of strong arms might be helpful, although in her condition she shouldn’t do too much. But she can help with the garden and the kitchen. We can train her to be a maid so that she has job prospects for after the child is born.” “It probably ain’t her fault that she’s in the family way. I can show her how to do housework properly and maybe even teach her some cooking,” Mavis said. “Yvette,” she said. “If you wish, you may stay here with us. We will provide for you. Your food and a place to live. You will help us as much as you are able until the baby comes. What do you think of this idea?” She saw relief on the girl’s face. “I am happy to hear this,” she said. “Splendid,” Ellie said. “We will have English classes, and you will help Mavis learn French. It will be a time of growing and learning for all of us.” **Whatever was going to happen, it was good.**

“I presented your offer to the guardian of the estate,” Monsieur Danton said. “He was intrigued. He says you have three months in which you pay no rent, but after that you agree to rent it for one year at a price to be decided based on the current value of the house.”

“I was told there is a so-called simple boy whom we could employ.” “Bruno? Oh, he’d love to help you. Not exactly a boy any more. Maybe late twenties, but still with a child’s mind and a sweet nature, too. And strong. Perfect for you.” By the end of the morning Louis had checked out the boiler, the bathroom geyser and the roof. He told them he could get everything back in working order and even put in a radiator based on the present boiler, but he wasn’t going to tackle the roof. He had a fear of heights, he said. They’d have to call in someone else for that. But he thought he knew someone. “A mouse just ran across the floor, right in front of me. What you need is a cat,” Clive said. “There are certainly plenty of those in need of a good home. I’ll keep my eye out for a nice kitten.” The grand piano clearly needed tuning, but the notes seemed to be all there. “I shall so enjoy sitting here, with this lovely view, playing and thinking of the opera singer, sitting here before me.” Dora shook her head. “You never struck me as a romantic before now,” she said. **“I think this trip has awakened a new side of you.”** Ellie looked up, smiling. “Maybe,” she said. “And a new side of you, too.” Ellie found Bruno quite lovable. When you praised him, he’d give the most beaming smile, and it didn’t matter what you asked him to do—he’d nod his head and off he’d go, not stopping until it was done. When Ellie or Dora misunderstood and got it wrong, he would laugh and say he was supposed to be the stupid one. Louis went hunting and discovered there was a well outside. After much grunting and quite a lot of swearing, he got the well cleaned out and the pump working again and declared the water was good. How long did Ellie intend to stay away? Until I’m ready to go home, she decided.

Move-in day came in November, just as the weather turned really wet and blustery. Bruno had been put to work collecting dead wood from the gardens for the various stoves. Luckily there was plenty of it, and it was now stacked under the veranda, ready for use. Louis had also managed to find a radiator, which he connected to the boiler, and so the living room would be warm. The walls had been painted a pristine white apart from the mural on the sitting room wall that Ellie couldn’t bear to part with.

Enough furniture had been restored that they had places to sit and eat. they did rescue some silk undergarments, a fur stole, a jacket or two. Mavis took some of the long dresses, saying she could use the fabric to make herself summer dresses and a maternity outfit for Yvette, who was now beginning to burst out of her own clothes. They ate a first meal, a simple stew, and toasted each other with wine. **“To our new home,”** Dora said. “May it bring us health and happiness.” “It don’t seem real,” Mavis said. “Imagine me here, in this lovely place, with you ladies. **How did I get to be so blessed?**” Ellie looked from one face to the next. How happy they looked, except Yvette, who hadn’t understood and sat silently, spooning soup into her mouth. Ellie had passed along the address for army headquarters. That first night Ellie stood at the window of her new room, looking out over the gardens. She had generously given Dora the best bedroom that faced the sea and taken the second-best one. **Who knew how many more months Dora had left?** She still seemed well and quite energetic. Maybe the doctors had got it wrong, and **this trip could turn out to be a miracle cure.** As Ellie peered into the darkness, she thought she saw a figure, moving swiftly. It vanished into shadow, and she lost sight of it. The moonlight had been playing tricks. **“My new life,”** she said. If Lionel could see her now, would he even recognize the old Ellie? Dora nodded. “I think a party is a lovely idea. It doesn’t have to be too fancy, does it? Wine is so cheap here, and bread and cold meats, cheese and olives. Just a thank you gesture to those who have helped us.” Mavis grunted as if she didn’t agree. “There’s something not right about Yvette,” she said. Mavis was no fool, but was she just prejudiced because the girl was foreign and she didn’t understand her? When they announced the date for the party, they found that providing the feast would not be as hard as they had imagined. Tommy and Clive said they would bring the wine. Henri offered to bring a terrine and smoked fish. When Ellie went to pay him, he shook his head. Everyone came. Louis, Tommy and Clive, Bruno and his mother, the priest, Monsieur Danton. Ellie was a little surprised that the Adamses came. Father André, the priest, introduced himself and offered to bless the house for them. The doctor and his wife also came. Everyone brought some sort of gift—cheeses, wine, cognac, tomato plants and a lemon tree for the garden. Tommy and Clive had a special gift in a basket: a small orange striped kitten. “Here is your mouser,” Tommy said. Tiger he was named. There was lots of toasting and wishes of good luck. Lots of laughter. Ellie stood watching, **feeling her heart so full it might burst. All those years in her village at home and she had never felt this warmth or joy.** She realized that she hadn’t felt much at all for years.

The next night Ellie undressed in darkness. Before she got into bed, she went over to the window and looked out. It was another clear, moonlit night. There was no breeze, and the garden lay still and peaceful. Then she froze. The figure was there. He’d come back. Definitely a man. This time he was coming out of the trees at the far end of the garden and walking towards the house. Hastily she put on her robe and slippers. “What do you think you are doing here?” she shouted. “This is private property.” As he came closer, she saw that it was Nico. “I came to retrieve some fishing gear, that is all. I store things in the shed at the back of the garden, and I use the steps from the terrace to go

down the cliff to the water, where I sometimes moor my boat.” “Who gave you permission to do that?” She still sounded haughty. “The owner. He knows.” She had to remember that she was a newcomer, maybe not even here for very long, and **she had to get along with the local people, not antagonize them.**

Mavis sewed at the long table, while Ellie or Dora instructed her in French. Ellie was rather impressed how easily she picked it up. **Mavis clearly had a good brain but had been forced to accept her role in life.** *How many people are held back because of lack of education?* she thought. “Oh no. No pain. It’s my heart, you see. Congestive heart failure. It’s funny, but for a while I’d forgotten that I was supposed to be dead by now. All the excitement of coming here, finding this place. I’d really forgotten. And it was only now that I noticed how quickly I became out of breath and how weak my pulse had become.” “Are you afraid to die?” “Afraid?” Dora shook her head fiercely. “No, I’m not afraid. Only annoyed.” Dora smiled at her. “**You’ve been a good friend, Ellie.** One of the only true friends I’ve had. I’ll be sorry to leave this place. I’ve always spoken my mind and never hidden my intellect. **Men like a pretty but dull wife. Not too smart. In no way a challenge to them.**” “Eventually I became personal assistant to the company director. Mr Ambrose. Such an interesting man. Powerful but not arrogant. He appreciated my good brain and never talked down to me. And then . . .” “And then we drew closer. Too close. I became his mistress.” She looked up and laughed. “I see you are shocked. I was a little shocked myself. But we had some good years together. I knew my place. I realized our time together was precious and this would be the closest to happiness I’d ever come. I had some good years. I travelled with him—here to the Riviera once, and to Paris, of course. Then one day he had a heart attack and died,” she said. “He left me a bequest in his will. *To my devoted secretary who has given me years of unflinching loyalty and service.* Quite a nice sum. I decided I didn’t want to work for anyone else, so I moved to the village and bought my cottage. My parents had died around the same time, so I inherited enough money to live quite comfortably. And with my organizational skills, I soon found that I had taken over the running of almost everything.”

Ellie decided to tackle the garden. She searched for a water spigot to attach a hose, finally found one and turned it on. Nothing came out. “I believe it comes from the viscount,” Louis said. “That would be his property on the hillside above your driveway. We heard he put in a swimming pool recently. Maybe he has taken your water source.” She retrieved the Bentley. “Monsieur le vicomte, I am Madame Endicott,” Ellie said. “I have rented the villa next to yours.” My handyman thinks the water has now been diverted to your property instead. Maybe to your swimming pool?” “Have your man meet with my gardeners. They can determine what has gone wrong for you and hopefully put it right.” As she drove away, she had a revelation: **What if Roland was the actual heir to her villa?** He did say his father had had something to do with choosing the site for the opera singer’s villa. **What if she had actually been his father’s mistress,** and his father had built the villa for her but never made her the owner? When he tired of her, she had to leave, and when he died, the villa came to

Roland. Of course that made sense. Rumour had it that the aristocrat was a duke. She would keep Roland's secret if he didn't want anybody to know. Then her thoughts went one step further. **Perhaps he was really the love child of the duke and his mistress, not the rightful heir.** That was why he kept silent. Aha.

Christmas was approaching. The water-pipe drama was sorted out satisfactorily for both sides, and Louis had finally managed to get the fountain running again. Bruno turned the soil at the back of the grounds for a future vegetable garden. Dora turned to Yvette, "I have sent off for white knitting wool and patterns so that we can all knit outfits for the baby. And we have agreed to pay for a doctor to keep an eye on you and to deliver the child when the time comes." And to Ellie Dora said, "But you've given us the present, you brought us here. You fought to get this villa, and you've given us a new home. I am enjoying myself, something that hasn't happened in years." Ellie turned away, tears in her eyes. "I feel the same way," she said. **"You have all given me a new life, too.** I can't tell you how abandoned and depressed I felt a few months ago, and now look at us. Dora is healthy. Mavis has turned into a dress designer, and I am friends with a viscount."

Winter soon turned into spring. the viscount had returned from Paris in the new year, and Ellie found herself invited to his château. And so a weekly lunch became a standard practice.

"I'm saying she ain't—isn't—what she says she is. I don't know who she is or what she's doing here, but I get a feeling she's up to no good." Mavis shrugged. "I don't know. I just don't think she's telling us the truth." "Yvette, we have taken you in and fed you and looked after you," Ellie continued. "I think we have the right to know the truth. So who are you and where do you come from?" I am not from a farm. I'm from the city of Lyon. My lover is not Gaston. He is not in the army. He is Pierre Lupin, and he is in prison. A stupid robbery," she said. "He wanted money for us to marry. When he was arrested, I ran away because I thought they would come for me, too." Yvette could not stay with them forever. She had to get on with her life, and that certainly meant giving up the baby. *When it's born I'll go into Marseille and find a convent that helps to adopt babies,* she thought.

She was just putting the finishing touches to a big steak and kidney pie, her hands floury, when Henri came into the kitchen. "There is a man here who is looking for you," he said. "Mum?" Ellie started at the word, squinted, and her son Colin came into focus. "Colin? Is it really you?" "I'm home on leave," he said. "Oh Colin, it is lovely to see you," she said. "And as for what I'm doing here, I'm enjoying myself for the first time in years. **I'm here because the place chose me,**" Ellie said. "You remember Miss Smith-Humphries from the village?" She has softened considerably; in fact I've become very fond of her." "And you remember Mavis?" "You brought her to clean for you?" "No. As a friend." "Mavis's husband. Reg Moss? Was that his name?" "That's right." "I heard at the pub that he'd just died." "Died?" "Was killed, actually. Hit by a car on his way home from the pub. Staggered in front of it, blind drunk. And my bank sent us home from Hong Kong until they see what's going to happen next in the Far East. You obviously

by Rhys Bowen

read about Nanking and what the Japanese have been doing. Absolute monsters.” “I’m touched that your father is concerned for my welfare,” Ellie said. “But do tell him that I’m running my own life now and actually enjoying myself for the first time in years. Now let me give you a tour of the villa.” Ellie took him around the villa. “I must say you’ve landed on your feet,” he said. “This place is bloody impressive.” “Make sure you tell your father,” she said. “And Michelle.”

“This is quite lovely,” Colin said. “I can see why you want to stay, but I do think you should listen to Dad and plan to come home soon.” “My home was taken from me. Everything I had worked for—my furniture, my garden, my lifestyle—all taken from me. Why on earth should I come back when people like me here, and I feel as if I belong?” “Well, I wish you luck then, Mum. Let’s hope there is no war and you continue to have a good life here.” He gave her an awkward hug. She had to admit she did find it flattering that men showed interest in her. At home she had felt like part of the furniture, a nebulous object in the background who put food on the table and laughed dutifully at her husband’s jokes. **How long since she had felt desirable?** Ellie broke the news to Mavis. “He drank so much before. And he came home and he hit you and pushed you around, Mavis. You’re free of him. You don’t have to worry any more.” “You’re right,” she said, pondering this, frowning. **I am free, aren’t I? I’m a widow.**”

Nico came about seven thirty, almost unrecognizable in a dark suit and striped tie, his unruly dark curls smoothed into place. Ellie had a desire to laugh but was actually charmed. The fish was produced on its long platter, crisp on the outside but stuffed with herbed butter and plenty of garlic. Nico nodded at his first bite, impressed. “Ah, I see you have learned to prepare the fish à la provençale. I congratulate you. You are Cordon Bleu. Perfect.” “I have bought a new motorboat. A proper speedboat.” They went out in the boat the next day, but the warning voice in her head told her *not to get too friendly*. “Your turn,” he said. “Be brave. See, I knew you could.” He gave her shoulder a friendly shake. It was the first time he had touched her, and it felt as if a new level of intimacy had been reached. *Watch out*, a voice whispered again.

Yvette screamed, tossed, sweated, then grew calm again. The doctor came into the room, carrying his black bag. “Now, young lady,” he said firmly. “Stop that noise. I am here. There is nothing to concern yourself about. This is all quite normal.” *What if she does want to keep it?* a voice whispered. *Couldn’t we make it possible for her?* And then it was decided for them. One morning two weeks later they woke up to find that Yvette had gone. No note. No message. Just her clothing taken from the wardrobe and the baby lying in its bed, howling to be fed. “For all her faults, I did become fond of her. And she could have taken all our jewellery, but she took just enough to get by for now. Let’s give her a chance to make amends.” “Hmph,” Dora said. “So you’re thinking that we could be that loving family?” Mavis asked. “For now, anyway. Poor little innocent babe. At least we can love her.” Ellie picked up the baby and nuzzled her against her cheek, smelling that sweet smell of talcum powder and baby softness. “Dora, I’ve been so glad to have you here with me. You’ve made all the difference to such a difficult time. **Instead of feeling lost and worthless I’ve never felt more alive and hopeful. Let’s hope the miracle has happened and you live another twenty years.**”

“Oh no,” Ellie said. “I couldn’t put Jojo in an orphanage. We’ll raise her if we have to.” Nico had told her she could take the boat out if it was not being used. She knew where he hid the key. It was a beautiful, calm day. She would do it! A sudden storm forced her to take refuge on a nearby island where there was an abbey. “Do you think that your prayers can prevent a war from happening?” she asked. “Everyone is worried. Can you ask God to remove Hitler and Mussolini?” He laughed at that. “I don’t think God works in that way,” he said. “In fact, I wish I knew how he works. But I know one thing. **He works through us. That’s why we are here—to be his hands and voice.** I grew up in very privileged surroundings. A rich family. A small château. I entered the seminary, but frankly I was not comfortable. I did not like what they were saying to us. It was very much holier than thou. ‘We are advising you on how to live your lives,’ not ‘We are trying to become better men.’ But I stuck it out until I was ordained. When the Great War broke out, I volunteered to be a chaplain on the battlefield. I held men who had had their legs blown off, or were hopelessly entangled in barbed wire, and I gave them the last rites as they died in my arms. I saw the worst of human suffering. After it was all over, I was assigned to a parish in Marseille. A tough parish. Lots of suffering made worse by the Spanish flu. I did what I could, but the darkness began to overtake me. Why was God allowing all this? I had a crisis of faith. What I was doing couldn’t make a difference. I was stupid. I should go and have a good life and forget about it.” “But you didn’t.” “My superiors told me I was burned out, spent from what I had been doing. They sent me on a retreat to this place. I found tranquillity and peace here. I took to the Benedictine lifestyle, the Rule. And I applied to join. I’ve never regretted it for a moment.”

It had been obvious that Louis came up to do small jobs around the house more often than he needed to. He seemed like a kind man, and Ellie was glad for them. Soon after this, Dora received a letter from England and drew Ellie aside. “I’ve just heard from my solicitor,” she said. “I’ve drawn up a new will, making you my heir. There’s not a lot: the cottage, a small bank account, my jewellery, but I want you to be provided for when I go.” “That’s very generous,” Ellie said. “I have certainly proved that idiot doctor wrong so far,” she said with a satisfied nod. “It’s amazing what sunshine and good food can do. Oh, and good friends.”

On the first Sunday of May, Ellie had taken the ferry across to the island for the abbey’s first open house of the season. It was filled with picnickers, the curious and family members of the brothers. They were shown around the gardens, the process of liqueur making was demonstrated, with samples, and there was an organ concert in the abbey. Ellie had not hoped to spend any time alone with Abbot Gerard, but he sought her out and walked in the gardens with her, apparently interested in her latest news. After that he made time for her each month, sharing a dish of fruit with her or sitting on a bench overlooking the sea. If only I’d married a man like this, Ellie thought. **A man I can really talk to, who listens, doesn’t judge, is wise and yet can laugh at the absurdity of our human frailty.** She found herself counting off the days to the next ferry. I mustn’t be selfish and take up more than my share of his attention, she told herself, but she sensed that he also enjoyed talking and walking with her. Then, on September 1, just

when all the summer visitors had gone back, the news came that German troops were amassing on the Polish border. His troops swarmed over the border, and on September 3, 1939, war was declared. Bruno was to be spared, but not the baker's son, or Luc, married to the baker's daughter, or the two sons of François the fisherman. They all went out, proudly wearing uniforms, boasting how they were going to stop Hitler. They had been in Saint-Benet for a year. Dora continued swimming for a while, although she had given up her painting lessons. It was true that Dora was fading. She had taken on an ethereal look, her skin like parchment. As Ellie went down the garden path towards the motor car, she saw the gate opening and someone coming towards her. It took a moment to recognize it was Yvette.

Yvette swept up the little girl into her arms, covering her with kisses. "I've come to take you home," she went on. Jojo tried to squirm out of her embrace and let out a loud wail, holding out her hands to Ellie. "Maman!" she cried. "The doctor signed the birth certificate with my name on it. You can't stop me from taking her." The lean man joined Yvette. "She is the rightful mother. It is her child. You were just the nursemaid. "So her lover wasn't an innocent young man who only stole to allow them to be married. He was a crook, a gangster," Dora said. "That makes sense. That's why she always hid away when we had guests. In case she was recognized." "You mean we've let Jojo go off with criminals?" Ellie said.

Even though she told herself it was all for the best, grief continued to consume Ellie by day and plague her dreams at night. On May 10 the Germans swept around the north of the Maginot Line and poured into France from the north. Ellie and the women listened, horrified, on the radio as the evacuation was reported and, miraculously, almost all the soldiers were brought across to England in small boats. "I don't want to start all over again. I think we have to hope that we live in a small village and nobody would be interested in us." Mavis gave a little smile. "Louis has asked me to marry him. He wants to make sure I'll be taken care of if it comes to being a French citizen. Louis is a good man, and I think I could be happy with him." "I think you could, too," Ellie said. "Well, God bless you. When are you planning to do this?" "As soon as possible now," Mavis said. On June 14, the German tanks rolled into Paris. Everyone in Saint-Benet listened to the news in stunned silence, then wept and embraced.

France was to be divided into the occupied zone in the north and the free zone in the south. Mavis's wedding happened a few days later at the village church. Henri managed to get his hands on a young goat and it was roasted on a spit outside the bar. Everyone brought items for the feast—fruits, cheese, bread and wine. "Who would have thought it was our little Mavis who made the whole village forget the tragedy of war?" Dora said. Mavis and Louis went on honeymoon up to a nearby hill town where a cousin owned an auberge. Ellie lent Louis the Bentley for the occasion. The day after the wedding Ellie received a note, hand-delivered, from the viscount. Would she like to come to lunch? Upon her return it took her a moment to realize that Dora was dead. Then she understood, with utter clarity, that Dora had chosen her moment to die when Ellie did not have to witness it. **She had slipped away without causing a fuss. So typical of her.**

Dora was buried in the small cemetery behind the church. Father André was kind enough to admit her to a Catholic burial ground because, as he said, “The good Lord loves us all.” Mavis and Louis were still on their honeymoon, and Ellie didn’t want it spoiled by this news. Afterwards they had a drink and a simple snack at Henri’s, and she went home to an empty house. Dora’s journal lay on her bedside table, and the latest entry:

*I see the way ahead quite clear. I take those steps. I have no fear. For all ahead is good and gold, And all my story has been told . . .*

“I’m all alone,” she said. No Mavis, no Jojo and now no Dora. “You are in distress. I see it in your face,” the abbot said. He sat beside her on the bench. “Are you frightened because you are now trapped here by the war?” It was fine when I had my friends with me, but now I find myself alone,” Ellie said. And she told him about Jojo, and Dora and Mavis. I have this lovely big house and beautiful view but nobody to share it with. I sit down to my supper in silence. I’m afraid at this moment I seriously wonder if there is a God.” “I can only tell you from my own experience, but I have to say that yes, there definitely is a power behind this universe. **Reach out to others, do what you can to make their lives better. And reach out to God, too.** There will be sorrow and suffering and need, and **we all must make sure that we do our part to bring a little light into that darkness.**” She realized that everything he had said was true. She would have to be careful. She was already more than a little in love with him.

“If you married me,” Tommy said. “Listen, my dear, this idea is not entirely unselfish on our part. You must know what happens to men like us in Germany. We’ve heard about it from friends in England. Off to a work camp, and the more brutal the better. It could well happen here. So if you and I were a couple, and Clive was our nephew . . . You see, Clive here trained as a draftsman before the last war. He does meticulous work. He’d make an excellent forger. He’ll make us a fake British marriage certificate that should hold up to scrutiny. I have my parents’ old marriage certificate. He’ll copy that. If the war ends and we’re still in one piece, we burn it in a celebration bonfire.” **“Perhaps it’s time for me to take a risk.** At this stage, what do we have to lose?”

“Is it true what they say?” he asked, frowning at her. She smiled then. “Nico, don’t worry. If ever there was a marriage of convenience, this is one. I couldn’t get an identity card and could have been arrested and sent to a camp. Now I’ll be safe. It makes sense to only use one house, and it helps Tommy and Clive, too. Now he’s a respectable married man if the Germans ever come here and start probing.” Ellie wasn’t at all sure what it would be like living with two men, but she soon saw the advantages. They were constantly busy. Tommy loved to cook. Clive enjoyed working in the garden and tending to the livestock. “We’ve managed to find a wedding present for you,” Clive said. And he pointed to a beehive. “We got it from the man who owns the vineyard close to the main road. With any luck we’ll have honey when there is no more sugar. And the bees will fertilize our crops.” “I have lunch with the viscount quite often,” Ellie said. “For some reason he has taken to me.” “Of course he would,” Tommy

said. **“You are the least judgemental person in the universe. He’d feel comfortable with you.”** *So I do have a few good qualities, she thought. I must tell Gerard when I write to him again.*

It seemed almost embarrassing to be in this beautiful haven with enough to eat. From the snippets of news, they gleaned Britain was being heavily bombed and the invasion could happen any day.

In May the first boat came to take visitors to the island, and Ellie was amongst the handful of people who went across. Abbot Gerard looked pleased to see her and embraced her warmly. “We have our first honey, and I’ve been taught to make goat cheese. I’ve brought you some.” Ellie left with a bottle of liqueur, a basket of strawberries and the knowledge that she could come again, once a month, all summer. Then in December 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the United States entered the war on the side of the Allies. Still Ellie felt they were safely hidden in Saint-Benet, until May of 1942. Then an edict came from the French puppet government that all Jews were now to wear a yellow star. Then in November German warships arrived in Marseille. The announcement was given that the free zone no longer existed. German tanks rolled down the route nationale to occupy most of the South. “Nico, are you a smuggler? Are you bringing in black market goods?” “I will be taking messages. I may be bringing items up to store in the shed . . . items that could be useful, like guns.” Suddenly she understood. **“You’re helping the Resistance?”** “The less you know, the better,” he said. “My dear Ellie, I am going to tell you something that is strictly between us, I want you to know the truth about me . . . I was born in this house. In the room where you are now sleeping.” She stared at him, trying to digest this. She saw the twinkle in his eyes. “You’re joking,” she said. He shook his head. “Not this time. My mother was Jeannette Hétreau. When Jeannette became pregnant, Marcel, the very rich duke, decided he couldn’t allow a baby. She found a childless couple in the village, and they agreed to say it was the child of a cousin who had died in childbirth.” When the relationship with my father came to an end, she never returned to the villa.” “But then she died and left you this villa?” He nodded. “The villa and a good amount of money. That’s why I don’t need to work hard, which is nice.” “Why didn’t you take over the villa?” “Two reasons. Because the truth would come out and it would upset my mother, the woman who raised me, and second because Jeannette never wanted me in her lifetime. I bore a grudge against her and wanted nothing to do with her. Let the villa crumble into dust. But if I do have to come again . . .” “I’ll have the spare room ready,” she said. “And I’ll leave the front door unlocked.”

That Nico was Jeannette’s son was almost too much to believe, and yet it explained his behaviour. If he stayed at this house, he would put them in danger, too, and yet she couldn’t say no if he needed help. And there was the other matter, the fact that he desired her, that she had definitely felt something for him. *I’m too old for such nonsense*, she told herself, but there had been a shiver of excitement when he looked at her that way and told her he wanted her. “So he’s working with the Resistance, is he?” Tommy said. “I must talk to him about that. I feel that I’d like to be doing something useful, and Clive can offer his forger’s talents. Don’t worry. I can’t see myself

blowing up any railway lines or shooting generals. But I'm sure there's a small job I could do." The small job turned out to be a radio positioned under the floorboards of Tommy's bedroom and started leaving messages he had received in the big stone urn on the terrace for Nico to pick up at night. Rations were cut severely, and they heard that local farms had had their livestock taken.

The viscount was in their sitting room, positively unkempt, as if he had dressed in a hurry. "Thank God you have returned safely," he said as Ellie walked in. "None of us is safe any longer. They came to my villa today—German officers. Horrible, rude men. They pushed my servants out of the way, looked around the house and told me to get out, as they would now be occupying it. And keeping my servants to look after them." "Of course you can stay here," Ellie said. She turned to the other men. "If that's all right with you?" "The more the merrier," Tommy said. It was going to be a big adjustment for Roland, Ellie thought. He'd probably never had to do a thing for himself his whole life. "The Germans have taken Bruno? Why? The officer saw him, asked why he wasn't working in a factory and then realized he was not as other men. So they came in a big black lorry and took him away. They said there is no food for those who are not useful to society. "My mother," said Nico. "If anything happens to me, will you take care of her? Take her in? Look after her? I'm all she has." "Of course." Some prisoners escaped. Most ran away but Bruno just stood there, unable to decide what to do next. The Germans shot him.

A funeral was held for Bruno, which the whole village of Saint-Benet attended. Everyone wept. Even Ellie, raised to show no emotion in public, sobbed. **That such a sweet and gentle soul could have been taken so brutally seemed the ultimate inhumanity.** "I keep thinking this is just the beginning. Who will be next? Which person I love will be taken from us? Who would have thought it when we left England that we'd both be living with strange men." In the middle of January, Tommy came downstairs with a grim look on his face. "They have started rounding up French Jews," he said. "In Paris now, but I'm sure it will include the rest of the country soon enough. Taking them on trains into Germany." Ellie noticed then that Mr. Adams was carrying a small bag with him. His expression was of terror. "There's a German lorry in the village, and they're going house to house looking at papers," he said. "I don't know what to do. They'll take me away, won't they? My ID card gives my race." "But I could take him out to the island. That abbot is a good fellow. I'm sure he wouldn't mind hiding Mr Adams until we could work out the next step." Nico shook his head. "I don't want the Germans to find Adams here," he said. "They shoot people for harbouring Jews. The sooner we get him away, the better. Don't worry."

"We made it to the island . . . A little choppy, I have to agree. Mr Adams had to keep bailing, or we would have filled with water." He laughed at the memory. "He was scared silly, I can tell you. But we found the abbot. He agreed this was a good plan, gave Mr Adams a habit to wear, and all was well. When we can, a boat will come for them and take them across to Corsica. Or if we can get a big enough boat, then over to Majorca, which is part of Spain. Either way, they'll be safer than here." "You want the men to come here?" "That would be ideal." He paused, looking directly at her. "If someone

takes them from the city, directs them to a point on the other side of the hill, where they would be out of sight of the village, then we'll alert by radio. Maybe one of the men in your house can lead the Jewish man down to you, you'll put out the signal for me and at night I'll come for him in the boat. Always a risk." "Rounding up Jewish people like cattle. Taking them off to God-knows-where. It's not human. And if I can help get a few of them to safety, then count me in." "The viscount. Is he safe, do you think? Just watch what you say in front of him." He paused. "I have an absurd desire to kiss you, but that would not be wise. Then I should not want to go home." He blew her a kiss and hurried off, leaving her heart beating a little faster. *What have we got ourselves into?* Ellie thought. *Will we be able to bluff our way through if the Germans find out?*

"I never thought it would happen to me. I thought I was a respected member of the community. I'm the conductor of the Marseille symphony orchestra, you know. I've held the position for years. I have so many friends . . . so when they said all Jews have to report I didn't think for a moment that I would be involved. But then one of my violists got a tip that they were coming for me. I left in the middle of a rehearsal." "What about your wife?" Ellie asked. "She is not Jewish, thank God," he said. "But she has gone up to a friend in the countryside, just in case they come to question her." And a tear trickled down his cheek. More Jewish men followed. They were always men of consequence: professors, scientists, artists, writers. **It seemed unfair to Ellie that some lives were considered more valuable than others**—how could anyone determine that a professor had more worth than a baker or a shoemaker?—but she understood that not all could be saved.

"You're a lucky man Nico," she said. "It just grazed the side of your neck. A centimetre to the left and it would have struck your jugular vein and you'd be gone. You must lead a charmed life." "I want to be with you," he said. "I want to remember what it feels like to be close to someone, to fall asleep in someone's arms. It's been so long . . ."

She lay there, savouring the long-dormant feelings he had awoken in her, the utter joy of being loved and wanted by someone. A German soldier stood behind Tommy, a gun pointed at his back. "You are the wife of this man?" "Yes, I am," she said. "We have reason to believe that this man is working with the Resistance," the officer said. "What was he doing waiting for a Jew on the path from the road? And who else lives in this house?" "Our nephew from England," Ellie said. "They will now search your house," he said. "That will be all for now. One of my men will be waiting to intercept the Jew when he comes. And we will proceed to take care of the rest of your little operation—the man with the boat, and the so-called churchman on the island." He laughed again. "But for the moment we just take this man." He prodded Tommy in the side. She looked out of the window. There was a German guard standing at the far end next to their garage. Another one at the gate above the steps down to the village. "We're prisoners here. They'll be back for us." They were living on borrowed time. *How can I possibly warn Nico?* Ellie found a couple of fishermen on the beach. "If you find Nico, just tell him they've taken Mr Tommy. Tell him they know everything, and he must not come to the villa."

They waited for Tommy's return, for the German officer's return. They could not eat. At last they went to bed, but Ellie couldn't sleep. The officer now laughed. "Oh no, dear lady. He has committed a crime. He is on his way to a camp, maybe in Germany." When she gasped, he added, "You should consider yourselves lucky. I could have had you all shot here and now. As it was, your husband kept insisting that he was the only one involved in the stupid scheme and you and his nephew were completely innocent. So you can thank him. Oh, didn't I tell you about your other friends? The so-called churchman and the fisherman? How remiss of me. Our navy met up with them, trying to flee to Corsica. Their boat was sunk, and both of them were shot in the water." "You monster." She spat out the words. Clive stared at her, his face bleak. "But how shall I go on?" "I'm asking myself the same thing." "Roland, you told the Germans about our little operation here? You betrayed us? Why? We've taken you in and made you welcome. How could you do this?" "I don't like Jews," he said simply. "I want you out of here," Ellie said. "Pack up your things and go. I thought we were friends," Ellie said. **"But friends don't betray each other. Now go."**

As Ellie stood alone on the back terrace, the pain overwhelmed her. No Nico, no Abbot Gerard. Two men she had truly loved and respected. She tried to picture life without them and saw only a dark tunnel with no light at the end. As soon as Ellie had processed her loss, she thought of Nico's mother. She would have to give her the news. And she remembered that she had promised Nico to take care of the old lady. Why did I ever come to this horrible place? I could have stayed in England and done the sensible thing. Accepted my fate as a rejected woman . . . and not had to feel . . ."

Mavis put her hands on Ellie's shoulders. "Would you, really? Never have played with Jojo and listened to her laugh? Never have learned to love Dora or Nico? Never have looked out at your view? At least you experienced those once, didn't you? At least you were loved by a good man. How many people can say that?" "Come in, my dear," Nico's mother said. "I'm afraid I've come with bad news," she said and told her the whole story. The old woman didn't weep but shook her head. **"I knew he was doing something brave. That was my boy. Always wanting to take a risk, and I knew he'd want to be involved against these invaders. At least he died doing something good.** But I'm not sure how I'll go on without him." Ellie enlisted Clive to help carry Madame Barbou's possessions up the hill. She was most impressed with the villa. "I was here once, all those years ago," she said. She was settled into Nico's room and taken around the garden to be introduced to the animals. The next day German soldiers came back and took away the chickens and one of the goats as well as any spring vegetables that could be grabbed. Everyone in the village had learned of the death of Nico and the abbot. A Mass of the Resurrection was held for Nico. As they came out after Mass, Monsieur Danton drew Ellie aside. "Nicolas came to me a while ago," he said. "He made a will. He's left everything to you on the condition that you look after his mother for the rest of her life. You're quite a rich woman." I wanted you to know that you don't have to worry about paying for the villa. It's yours now."

The Germans oversaw the harbour and took the best of everything, but the local inhabitants were allowed to buy the rest. In September 1943, the Italians surrendered.

Germany poured soldiers into Italy. Finally Germany was losing. On August 15, 1945 the American Seventh Army landed along the south coast of France. The German soldiers were pulled away from Saint-Benet, and everyone held their breath, waiting for good news. A week later the Free French army, with the help of the Americans, landed in Marseille. After three days of fighting, the Germans withdrew. Marseille was free. There was a great celebration in Saint-Benet as French troops came into the village.

***Will I ever be happy again? she asked herself. Will I ever laugh? Have hope? It still seemed impossible.*** But at least her neighbours were feeling their freedom.

It was September 29, a naval vessel was approaching. The American flag was spotted on it. A lone man had left the boat and was coming towards her. She began to run. He spotted her and started to run, too. "Is it really you?" "Does this feel real?" he asked, and he kissed her. "It's Nico." "A fishing boat picked us up. They got the abbot up to a hospital and patched me up too. We were hours in the water, both bleeding, but no sharks came near us." "Did he survive?" "He did. he was sent to a monastery up in the mountains to recover."

Ellie went with Clive and managed to speak to the Red Cross, asking for news about Tommy. They were able to find out that he was at a camp called Natzweiler-Struthof. They immediately made a package of nourishing foods for him and asked for the Red Cross to deliver it. Over a month later they received a letter from Tommy, heavily censored. They read it and cried. He was alive. Later he had been moved to a camp in Eastern Europe as the Allies approached. A camp called Auschwitz. It was much later that they found that Tommy had not survived the transport there. Clive gave a great wail of anguish. "I think I knew all the time that I'd never see him again. Oh my poor sweet, kind Tommy. How could they do this to him?" There are still people in camps as Tommy was, still waiting to be liberated, and so many people displaced from their homes."

The invitations went out. The dress was made, and Ellie and Nico were married in a simple ceremony. Somehow enough wine was found for everyone. As the toasts were raised, Nico stood up. "I would like everyone to raise your glasses to a brave man who gave his life for my wife and me. To Mr Tommy." Visitors started to return, as did Mr Adams. He had spent the war in Gibraltar, having been taken from Corsica to the coast of Spain and then making his way south. But he said he had not suffered as they had. Life in the British enclave had not been unpleasant. A brief, impersonal letter arrived back saying that Richard was still stationed out in the Far East but was well and had been promoted to major. Colin had been demobbed from the RAF and returned to his bank. Richard hoped she was well and looked forward to visiting when he returned from the Far East. Colin wrote a longer letter. He had survived flying four years of Spitfires before being put on to training new recruits. He had also met a young lady and hoped to bring her out to meet his mother when travel was reestablished. *She's from a good family, you'll be pleased to know. Her father is a vicar, so quite holy! And she was jolly brave in the WRAF.* Ellie treasured the letter, **looking forward to a future wedding, grandchildren, hope for the future.**

She received a reply from Gerard almost immediately:

*My dear Ellie, I had been called to the priesthood not to make liqueurs and minister to pious young men but **to make the world a better place**. So at the end of the month I am leaving the order and volunteering as a priest at a refugee camp in Germany. It's in a former concentration camp. I hope you might visit us sometime. I will continue to pray for you both. Your friend,  
Gerard*

Ellie held the letter to her and fought back tears. "You cared about him, didn't you?" Nico asked. "Very much. I always thought he was the sort of man I'd like to have married. Gentle, studious, good sense of humour . . ." "Instead you married a loud fisherman." Nico laughed. "And I have no regrets," she said.

"I came to see how you were, if you were all right," Lionel said. She found him out on the terrace, looking out across the bay. "This view is magnificent. How can you afford to rent something like this? Your monthly allowance wasn't that big." "No, it wasn't," she said. "Luckily I don't need to pay rent any more because I own it." "Ellie, I really came to bring you home. I want you back. I miss you. Goddammit, it's never been the same since you went away. Nothing was ever right." I realize now that I made a big mistake in marrying her. I suppose I was flattered that such a bright young thing could be interested in me." Ellie gave him a sweet smile. "I'm sorry, Lionel. But I like it here. I'm happy here. And besides, I'm already married." "You married a Frenchman?" "I did," she said. "This is his villa, then?" "It is." "We can drive you into Marseille," Ellie said, "Or better still, Nico can take you in the speedboat. It's a lovely ride. Look, at least stay and have a meal with us," Ellie said. "Lunch on the terrace." "No. I ought to go. Too painful," he said. "I suppose it's gradually dawning on me what lies ahead. It was bad enough during the war, but now that Michelle has gone, I'm rattling around in that big house." Lionel looked at her, then at Nico on the dock, as the latter started to unwind the ropes. "Your husband is not coming?" "No. He thinks it's better that I drive you." "You? You know how to handle a speedboat like this? Are you sure? Are you qualified to do it?" "Oh yes, Lionel," she replied. "**You'd be amazed at the things I can do now. So hold on tight.**" She steered the boat away from its mooring into open sea, then she pulled back to full throttle. The boat surged forwards with a roar, flinging Lionel against his seat. Ellie allowed herself a big smile.