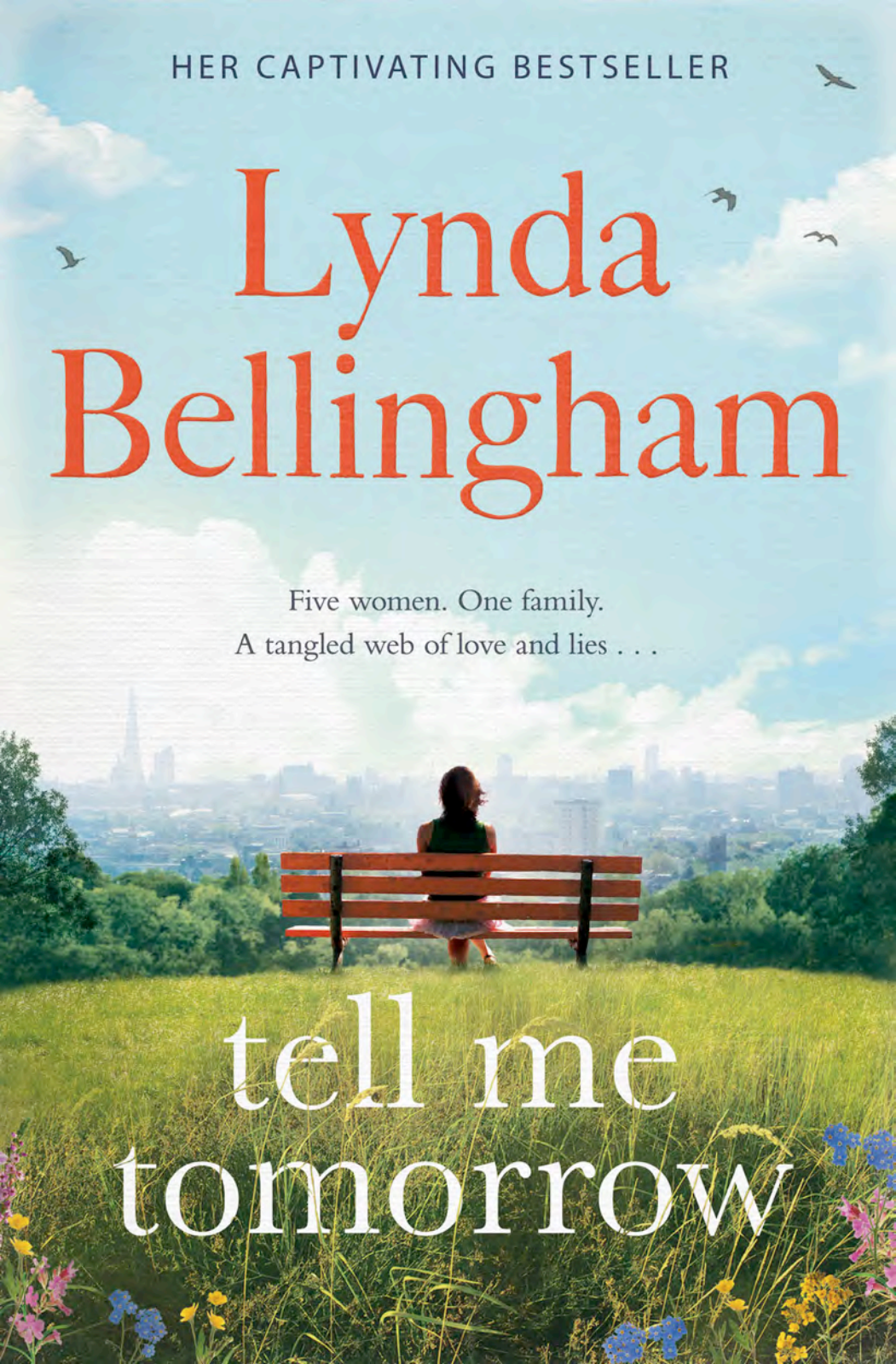


HER CAPTIVATING BESTSELLER

Lynda Bellingham

Five women. One family.
A tangled web of love and lies . . .

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark green sleeveless top and a pink skirt, is sitting on a wooden bench. She is facing away from the camera, looking out over a city skyline. The city is visible in the distance, with a prominent tall building (The Shard) on the left. The foreground is a lush green field with tall grass and some small yellow and blue flowers. The sky is blue with some white clouds and a few birds flying.

tell me
tomorrow

tell me
tomorrow

Lynda
Bellingham

tell me
tomorrow



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters,
places and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination
or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people living
or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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To mothers everywhere

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‘A mother’s treasure is her daughter’

ANON

PROLOGUE



Spring 1995

The tiny violet flower slipped from between the faded yellow pages of the prayer book and wafted gently to the floor. Anna watched the drop of mauve, like a lilac tear, intrigued. She brought the prayer book up to her nose and inhaled the smell of age and leather and just the faintest trace of violets. She then bent down and picked up the flower, careful not to break the petals. It was almost like holding a butterfly without the wings.

Placing it on the dressing-table, with the other dried flowers that had been pressed between the pages, she turned to the front of the prayer book and read the inscription written on the flyleaf.

*To my dearest daughter Mary.
God bless you and keep you safe forever.
Your loving mother,*

1910

Anna was overwhelmed by a sense of sadness she could not explain. There was something so tender in the neat, spidery handwriting that it tugged at her heart. Who did this prayer book belong to, she wondered. She found more writing on the next page.

*Dear Jane,
You will always be in my heart.
Be kind and strong, and keep safe.
Love, Mother,
1944*

Anna realised that the Jane in question must be her grandmother. There was more to come, as another inscription was written below this.

*Dearest Meredith,
When in doubt,
Be kind and think good thoughts.
With all my love, Mummy, xx
1963*

Anna smiled to herself. How weird was this? One by one she replaced the dried flowers inside the prayer book then went to find her mother.

Meredith Lee was sitting at her desk in the study of their cosy cottage in the Vale of Health, a leafy sanctuary in the heart of Hampstead, North London. She was typing furiously. She always complained that she was never able to type fast enough to keep up with her thoughts.

‘Mum, you never told me about this.’ Anna came towards Meredith, holding up the prayer book.

‘What? Anna, please don’t interrupt me, I have to get this done tonight,’ answered Meredith, peering at the screen.

‘But this is part of my heritage, Mother, to be passed down through the years. When were you going to write something in it and hand it over to me, your darling daughter?’

Meredith stopped typing and looked up. ‘What on earth are you blabbing on about?’

‘This, Mommie dearest.’ Anna handed her mother the prayer book and waited.

Meredith turned it over in her hands very gently, as if she knew there were flowers inside. She opened the book and read the loving inscriptions – and suddenly, she was transported back to her childhood. She could smell her mother in the room, that special scent of her Yardley lipstick and Bourjois Rouge powder.

‘Oh my goodness, where on earth did you find this?’ she asked, her deadline completely forgotten.

‘In the attic, under a pile of photo albums. I have been looking for photos of the family for a project we are doing for GCSE History. Isn’t it lovely? I have decided I am going to write about the importance of the mother figure through history.’

‘I think that is a lovely idea,’ said Meredith, holding the prayer book in her hands and remembering so clearly how much it had meant to her. How much it had meant to her mother Jane and, in turn, Jane’s mother Mary.

‘It is very important to celebrate motherhood,’ she went on. ‘Your great-grandmother Mary would be proud of you.’

Meredith let her thoughts drift back half a century, to her own happy childhood.

‘I used to love going to church on Mothering Sunday,’ she said, smiling to herself. ‘I even sang in the choir, can you believe it? All the mothers were given flowers by their children as part of the service. It made us feel very important. Your gran had loved doing the same thing for her mother, Mary. It goes right back to Mary’s mother, Alice. Look – that’s her handwriting there. But there is such a sad story connected to that first inscription by Alice.’

Meredith reached out to take Anna’s hand and her eyes sparkled with tears.

‘You see, she was dying, Anna. In fact, she died on Mothering Sunday 1910 and these were the last words she ever wrote ...’

PART ONE



Chapter One



Hertfordshire, Spring 1910

John and Alice Charles had three sons, loud, strapping lads always up to mischief, but only one daughter. She was called Mary, and she was the youngest of the family. John was the vicar of St James' Church in a small village called Allingham, not far from the historic town of St Albans in the county of Hertfordshire.

It was on a church outing to St Albans that Alice Cooke entered the young would-be curate's rather lonely life, and love blossomed. Alice was the daughter of a wealthy landowner in Buckinghamshire, and her marriage to John was deemed a drop in the social scale. Once it was clear to Alice's parents that she was determined to marry beneath her station, they sent her packing, albeit with a quite substantial dowry. However, Alice never saw her parents again. They regarded her as feckless, and a disappointment, and concentrated their hopes and ambitions on their two sons instead. As the only child of elderly parents who died when he was embarking on his career in the clergy, John was alone in the world. Alice was now abandoned, so the two young lovers made their world themselves, and thanks to

Alice's optimistic nature and goodness of heart, between them they created a loving family.

Their daughter Mary had the advantages of being brought up with three brothers – and the disadvantages. She was protected and spoiled, but also very innocent, and unaware of life outside her family. But she had a lively mind and had inherited her mother's warmth and optimism. She loved to learn, and if truth be told she was the brightest of them all. However, life in those days was ruled by the men. Mary had to play a secondary role to her brothers even though she often taught them herself, as school was not something they went to willingly. There was many a day when cries could be heard from the scullery as one or other of the boys was beaten for playing truant.

But not today; nobody was going to be shouted at today. It was Sunday, Mothering Sunday to be precise, and it was a beautiful morning, with the promise of spring in the air. Mary had been waiting for this special day to arrive for ages. She had made a card for her beloved mother and helped her brothers to make one from them. The back door of the scullery was wide open as the girl searched the garden for early snowdrops and budding daffodils to put on her mother's breakfast tray. She could hear a lark showing off in the field behind the house, and paused to listen to the clear notes soaring above her. It was hard not to enjoy the promise of the day, outside here on the step.

But Mary was under a dark cloud that morning. Her mother, Alice Charles, lay upstairs grievously ill with pneumonia.

Mary was only ten years old but was already taking on the household chores. With her father and three brothers in the house, the work never ended. Mrs Edge came in every day to help. She was a lovely round lady who lived in the village. Her duties covered everything from cooking a hearty tea for Mary and the boys, to arranging all the flowers in the church and

leading the ladies of the village in the cleaning of the brass. She was a great comfort to Mary as her mother's illness took hold. The little girl was very much alone as John Charles did not seem able to cope at all with his wife's decline. He had always been a rather distant figure to Mary. He worked very hard, dividing his time between the church and his parish duties, and spent hours shut away in his study. He always had time for his wife, of course, for Alice was the light of his life, and she tried to ensure that the house was calm and tranquil. Not an easy task with three sons around. Now Mary was trying to ease the burden of her mother's care, so that her father could write his sermons, and perform his pastoral duties. But the house had lost its brightness since her mother had taken to her bed.

Mary had spent most of the night beside her mother, tending to her and trying to keep the fever at bay. She had just changed the bed-linen and Alice's nightgown. Having washed the other sweat-soaked sheets by hand and stuffed them through the mangle, she was hanging them out in the morning sunshine to dry. She felt a little faint from lack of sleep but paid no heed. Time enough to sleep when her mother was on the mend.

Back inside the kitchen, she put her posy of flowers in a tiny glass vase and placed it on the tray. Then she went to the range to pick up the heavy black iron kettle that was boiling on the top. She made some tea and spooned plenty of sugar into a cup. Mrs Edge said sweet tea could cure anything. This would make her mother feel better. She was not supposed to touch the heavy kettle, but these were difficult times, and all the child knew for sure was that she had to do her very best. She cut a slice of bread very carefully, with the sharp bread-knife threatening to do her mischief at any moment, and spread some butter and jam on the extra thick slice. How she loved the sweet-smelling sticky jam her mother made. It smelled of summer and strawberries and fun.

She carried the tray upstairs to her mother's bedroom. The curtains were closed and the room was dark and stuffy, and it smelled sour. Mary put down the tray and tiptoed to the bedside. Alice was propped up against the pillows, her eyes closed, breathing with great difficulty. The little girl took her hand and squeezed it gently.

'Happy Mothering Sunday. I've got your breakfast, Mother. A nice cup of tea, and some bread and jam. Now you must eat it all up to make you strong.'

Alice Charles opened her eyes and smiled wanly at her daughter. 'You are a wonderful nurse, Mary,' she managed to whisper. 'I'll have it in a minute. But first, will you open the drawer in my bedside table, please, dear?'

The little girl did as she was told. Inside the drawer were some lovely lace hankies and a lavender pouch. Mary picked it up and smelled the wonderful fragrance. As she did so, Alice tried to turn her head but the effort was too much. She breathed hard and it caught in her throat as a gasp. Mary was frightened by the sound.

'Mother, please be still,' she implored. 'Please get better.' And she tried in vain to stop the tears that were desperately forcing their way down her cheeks.

Alice drew herself up, praying silently for the strength to do what she had to do, and said, 'Mary, dear, now don't cry. It is going to be fine. Inside that drawer you will find my prayer book. Please pass it to me.'

Mary found the book and put it in her mother's trembling hands. Alice opened the book at the first page and showed it to her daughter.

'Look here – see? I've written you a note. Promise me you will keep this prayer book with you always, and every night when you go to sleep, you will say your prayers and think of me. I'll be watching over you all the time, my dearest daughter. You will

have a lot to do, but your father and your brothers need your help. Please don't be sad, I will be with you always in your heart.'

The dying woman made a last superhuman effort as she gasped, 'Now be a good girl and go and call your father to come quickly. I need to speak to him.' Then she fell back on the pillows, exhausted.

To Mary it seemed as if she had fallen asleep.

'Mother, please wake up, you haven't eaten your breakfast.' She shook her mother's arm and it dropped heavily off the bed and just hung there. The little girl slowly backed away from the bed and a scream rose in her throat.

'Father! Come quick!'

The funeral service seemed very long to Mary. She tried hard to sing all the hymns well for her mother, but she wanted to cry all the time. As she sat in a pew with her prayer book clutched in her hands, and her eyes screwed tightly shut, she prayed and prayed to God to make her mother come back. But He didn't. Mary would often talk to Him at night, after that. She never gave up asking, and she always kept her prayer book close by, along with the card she had made that day for her mother.

Mary now became a mother to her brothers even though she was the youngest. It was a lonely life, for her father could offer her little comfort as he was grieving himself, and the boys were busy growing into men. Mrs Edge still came in every day and helped with the chores, but it was clear to everyone in the village that the vicar wanted to be left alone. He performed his duties with care and diligence, but the spark of life had gone out of him.

Mary never really had time to make friends at school because as soon as the bell went, she was off home to cook and clean for the household. But it was not all bad. There was a farm just up the road from the vicarage owned by a couple called Ernest and

Olive Cooper. They had two sons of their own who went to school with the Charles boys, and all the lads loved to play on the farm. Haystacks and cowsheds made great hiding places, and every summer the boys would spend long hot days in the fields. For Mary it was a magical place to go and be with all the animals. She loved the smell of Olive's kitchen where there was always an animal of some description in front of the range. Cats, dogs – even baby lambs. One afternoon there was a sheep giving birth and Mary sat with Olive who was keeping an eye on it, because it had been having difficulties. At last the lamb dropped to the ground as Mary watched in awe. The farmer's wife picked up the lamb and placed it under the mother's nose, rubbing it with the afterbirth.

'They need a bit of help sometimes, to understand what it is all about, God bless 'em!' she explained to the little girl.

But the ewe did not want to know. She butted the still wet and bloody lamb, and walked away. Mary was so distressed to see this that she burst into tears.

'Don't fret yourself, dearie,' said Olive kindly. 'I will take the lamb indoors and put it by the fire, and you can help me feed it by hand.'

Sure enough, they carried the lamb indoors and soon it was lying in Mary's lap in front of the fire, while she fed it from a glass baby bottle. It was love at first sight. Mary was round at the farm every minute she was free. The lamb grew bigger and bigger each day. Mary called her Alice after her mother. Her brothers teased her mercilessly and ran round her singing the old nursery rhyme:

*'Mary had a little lamb
Its fleece was white as snow.
And everywhere that Mary went
The lamb was sure to go.'*

She even took it to school one day to show her class. Mary could never quite get over the way the mother sheep had rejected and abandoned her baby, but the farmer's wife was very matter-of-fact about it. She said it happened quite often.

'But how could you not love your baby?' whispered Mary.

'Well, there are some women as have the same problem, dearie. There's naught you can do about it though. You can't *make* people love you.'

Having three brothers meant that Mary was always learning all sorts of things, not all of them good either. They taught her to spit and she was really good at it. In addition, she could skim a stone across the pond with the best of them and ride a horse and drive a cart like a champion. Her happiest memories were of sitting on the hay cart at the end of a hot summer's day. The sun would be setting as they rolled back to Coopers Farm full of fresh air and cider and homemade pies. The boys would be fighting and scrapping on top of the hay like young lion cubs. She would sit up front with her eldest brother Joseph, lulled by the swing of the horses' rumps in front of her and the jangling of the harness and the screeching of the bats swooping around them in the dusk.

As they reached the farm gates, the last streaks of the red sunset collapsed on the horizon, and darkness would fall. The boys would walk Mary back to the vicarage and then they would go to the pub. The landlord of the Wheatsheaf in Allingham was well aware that the boys were not only too young to be drinking but also the vicar's sons, so the boys were given non-alcoholic ginger beer and big plates of shepherd's pie. At home, Mary would creep in and check on her father, who was usually sitting at his desk preparing a sermon or writing letters to do with parish matters. Sometimes she would find him fast asleep with his head on his arms. The Reverend Charles made Mary feel a little frightened because he was

always sad and often stern with them. He just could not give his children the affection they needed, and while the boys had each other for comfort, it made the girl miss her mother so much, especially at bedtime when she could remember so vividly her tender embrace as she tucked Mary in, with loving words to help her dream wonderful things. Just before she fell asleep, Mary would remember her mother's words and slip out of bed to kneel on the floor and say her prayers, because she knew her mother was watching.

One morning Mary got out of bed and was horrified to see blood on the bed-sheets and on her nightdress. She checked herself all over for cuts and could find nothing wrong. In the bathroom, she suddenly felt her stomach contract in pain. She sat down on the lavatory and bent over to ease the cramps, but felt a rush of liquid between her legs and heard it splash into the bowl below. Looking down, she cried out in panic as the water in the bowl turned pink. Sobbing now with fear and disbelief, she grabbed a flannel and held it between her legs. What was happening to her?

There was a knock on the door and she heard Joseph's voice outside. 'Mary? Come on, girl, we want our breakfast. What are you doing in there?'

Mary tried to rise from the seat, but another trickle of blood stopped her in her tracks. She called out, 'Joe, something dreadful has happened. I am bleeding and I think I am dying. Please fetch the doctor.'

As a young man of nineteen, Joseph had already picked up a good deal of knowledge about the opposite sex. However, it was one thing to discuss the female anatomy with his friends, but quite another to speak of such delicate matters with his sister.

But he knew someone who could help. Telling his sister to

stay calm and to hold on for a few minutes while he fetched help, Joseph sped off to Dr Jeffreys' house two streets away, and banged on the door. The doctor's wife, Lorna, answered his knock. She was a trained nurse and often stood in for her husband when he was too busy to deal with minor ailments that arose during surgery hours.

Blushing, Joseph explained to her what he thought was Mary's problem. Lorna Jeffreys was very understanding, and quite impressed by this young man's grasp of the sensitivity of the situation. Fetching her coat and hat, and an old but clean sheet, she followed Joseph back to the vicarage, where poor Mary was still closeted in the bathroom. Joseph led the nurse upstairs and tapped on the door.

'Mary, dear, don't panic,' he called. 'Mrs Jeffreys is here to help you. Please open the door. I will go downstairs and make us all a cup of tea in the meantime, and don't worry about breakfast. I will see to everything.'

Once Mary had heard her brother go downstairs, she opened the bathroom door and Lorna was soon attending to her, helping her bathe, showing her how to cut up and make a cloth pad and fetching her clean clothes from the bedroom. At the same time she was giving the poor girl a welcome lesson on the female anatomy.

'You must think me very foolish,' said Mary, as Mrs Jeffreys explained about her monthly cycle. 'I am so sorry to cause you all this bother. I just had no idea what was happening to me. Mother died two years ago now and my education mostly consists of housekeeping and reading books that my father suggests to me. There has been no room for girlish talk or another friend or their mother to teach me about such things.'

'Oh, you poor child,' said Lorna. 'Please don't apologise. It is a very natural thing to be worried when you start your cycle. But all is well now – and if you ever need to ask me anything again,

anything at all, please do not hesitate to come and see me. I am very happy to talk to you at any time.'

With that the doctor's wife packed her bag and was gone, leaving Mary feeling as if her life had changed forever, and she was still not quite sure why.

Life went on and Mary toiled from dawn till dusk in the vicarage. She was quite content with her life, however, and loved nothing better than to see everyone round the table of an evening, eating the food she had cooked and laughing and animatedly discussing things going on in the world. She still visited the farm all the time to see Alice, her pet sheep. Mr Cooper suggested they might let her ewe have a lamb of its own one day soon.

The Charles boys were finding their feet now. Brother Joseph had been away in London studying to become an accountant and would come home on his rare leaves full of stories of drinking all night and dancing till dawn. Joseph was the only one of the three boys who had left home, albeit temporarily. Reginald was still at school and studying very hard. He had a rather serious side to his nature and his father had great hopes that he would follow him into the Ministry.

John Charles remembered his own years of study with great fondness, even though he had lost his parents so young. His meeting with Alice had changed his life completely. Not just because of her sunny disposition and warm and caring spirit, but due to her inheritance. Although John vowed he would never touch his wife's money, Alice had persuaded him to buy their first home – a small terraced house in St Albans – as a means of securing their future. When they left to take up residence in the vicarage at Allingham, the couple did not sell the house but found a lodger and his family. And to this day, the rent still provided extra income for the family – a welcome boost to the Reverend Charles's modest stipend.

Alice had turned the sombre vicarage into a house full of light and joy, and the sound of happy children. John Charles missed his wife with every fibre of his being every day of her passing.

Stephen was the youngest of the boys and closest to Mary. There were only three years between them. He shared her love of animals and the two of them spent all their spare time at Coopers Farm. Recognising the lad's love of farming, Ernest Cooper encouraged him to learn all he could about animal husbandry. One day, as they were sitting in the farm's big welcoming kitchen, Stephen announced that he wanted to be a vet when he left school.

When he told his eldest brother of his hopes and dreams, Joseph gave him a friendly punch on the arm and said, 'That's a fine ambition to have, young Stephen, but beware you don't get led astray like me and spend too much time in the pub instead of attending to your studies.'

Their father had just quietly entered the room and overheard this – and they fell silent, waiting for a reproof. But he hardly seemed to see them and just turned and went out again without a word. Mary ran after him to make sure he had everything he needed. She hated to see her father so lost. When she returned to the kitchen, the boys had already forgotten the interruption and were laughing and joking as Joseph continued his tales of life in the big city.

One day, Joseph came home with a friend called Henry Maclean. Henry was in the Army and talked about how there was going to be a war soon, with the Hun, and everyone would have to fight for their country. All the brothers sat round the kitchen table listening to him and drinking beer, which Mary served them. She could only feel dread at the thought of a Europe at war, but the boys were bright-eyed and full of plans to join up. She was secretly entranced by Henry, who seemed

different from her brothers somehow. More sophisticated and well-groomed. He had beautiful sandy hair that flopped in his eyes, and he had to keep brushing it out of the way as he talked. His voice was very mellow and he was well-spoken, but not too posh.

When Henry left that night, to return to his regiment, he squeezed Mary's hand and gave her a kiss on the cheek. The spot burned from the touch of his lips. She was so young, but already she felt the catch in her belly, the tightness in her throat – and the pain in her heart.

Henry Maclean was proved right. War did come – and it spread across Europe like a huge black cloud, covering everything in a net of death and destruction. Hundreds of thousands of lives were lost. Stephen Charles was killed in battle, blown up in a German attack on his regiment, three months after he arrived in Passchendaele. Joseph somehow managed to survive but came home a broken man. The carnage he had witnessed left him shell-shocked and staring into a bottle of whisky. Reginald took all the pain and suffering as a sign that he should follow his calling and enter the Church – much to the delight of his father. The Reverend John Charles went straight to his wife's grave to share the good news with her.

Although devastated by the news of Stephen's death, John had somehow found a new strength during the war. He had worked tirelessly, travelling from village to village to take services in times of need; many of the clergy had joined up to provide spiritual support for the soldiers and to work with the wounded. Often with Mary at his side, Reverend Charles would seek out bereaved families and offer his help and comfort.

Mary herself felt that she had been pretty much deserted by everyone. She mourned her brother's death and prayed for his soul to that same God who had taken her beloved mother from her. She shed many bitter tears. But life had to go on and there

was so much to do and so many people in need that she had to push her own hurt to the back of her mind and just get on with life. She worked with the Red Cross, helping to care for wounded soldiers, and she also taught classes in the village school when necessary. She grew up very quickly, as did so many young people at that time.

One summer evening in 1919, Mary was picking strawberries in the garden when she heard a motor car. This was a rare occurrence. She knew no one who owned a car except the doctor. She ran out to the front of the house and saw Joseph, looking very much the worse for wear, slumped in the front passenger seat of a Bentley. At the wheel was Henry Maclean. He looked just the same as always, if a little tired and lined around the eyes. Mary's heart skipped a beat. Joseph stumbled out of the car and staggered up the garden path, waving his arms in the air and attempting to sing 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary'.

'Joseph, calm down! What are you doing here? Whose car is that?' she asked, dancing excitedly round the two young men as they walked into the house.

'Got any of that homemade sloe gin, Mary?' Joseph hiccupped and fell into the nearest chair.

'I think you have already had quite enough,' she retorted.

'Oh, come on, old girl, don't be such a killjoy. Poor Henry here needs a drink. He has fought a war, for God's sake!'

Mary turned to Henry, who was standing in the doorway with his hat in his hand looking rather bemused.

'I am so awfully sorry,' she said shyly. 'Please do come and sit down. Of course I will fetch you a drink, and some food maybe? You look like you could do with a good meal inside you.'

'That would certainly be very welcome. Thank you, Mary.' He gave her a huge smile and her legs went quite wobbly.

An hour later, Henry and Mary were tucking into homemade

soup and bread and cheese, followed by bowls of strawberries just picked from the garden.

‘Oh my God, this is heaven,’ said Henry through mouthfuls of food. Joseph was sprawled on the sofa now, practically asleep. He was red-eyed and unshaven and stank of whisky.

‘I have made a bed up for you in Stephen’s room. If you don’t mind, that is, sleeping in his room because he ...’ Mary stopped and felt the tears fill her eyes. She hurriedly left the room and went into the kitchen to compose herself. She was leaning on the sink wiping away her tears with her apron when Henry came to find her.

‘Please don’t worry,’ he said gently. ‘It is so hard for everyone. We have lost so many of our friends and loved ones. Joe only gets drunk because he is grieving so much.’

Mary looked into Henry’s eyes and could see the pain. ‘Was it very bad?’ she whispered. Henry didn’t answer for a long moment and seemed to be fighting with himself for control.

‘Yes,’ was all he said, and then he took her in his arms and kissed her. Long and hard. Needing to feel her softness, her goodness and her innocence.

They stood absolutely still, holding each other. Mary wanted the moment to last forever, but it was broken by the sound of Joseph’s snores from the other room.

‘We’d better get him into bed,’ she said, gently breaking away from Henry’s arms. ‘Would you be kind enough to help me?’

‘Of course, come on.’ Henry led the way and the two of them hauled Joseph off the sofa and somehow managed to push and heave him upstairs to his room, where Henry virtually threw him onto the bed. Joseph moaned and turned on his side and was fast asleep again before they had reached the door. They laughed and turned to go downstairs. A moment held between them. What now?

There was a bang from the front door downstairs and the

Reverend Charles called out, 'Hello? Anybody home? Mary, where are you?'

Mary quickly moved away and went to the top of the stairs, calling out, 'I am here, Father. Henry and I have been putting Joe to bed.' She ran down to give her father a hug and turned to indicate Henry as he came down to join them.

'Hello, my boy, good to see you home safe and sound,' the minister said. 'Terrible business – thank God it is all over at last. Are you staying the night? Has Mary fed you?'

'Mary has done us proud in every way, sir. She has kindly offered me a bed, and if you will excuse me, I will retire to it now. It has been a long day. Goodnight, Mary, and thank you for everything. Goodnight, sir.' He turned to go up the stairs and Mary put her hand on his arm.

'Wait, let me get you a towel.' She went to fetch it and her father moved off to the kitchen in search of his supper.

Mary came back with a clean towel and handed it to Henry, her eyes never leaving his face.

'Thank you.' He leaned in and softly kissed her on the lips before turning slowly and climbing the stairs. He might have been going to the moon. Mary felt so bereft. What could she do to keep him close?

'My dear, have you got my dinner ready?'

'Coming, Father,' came her reply.

After he had finished his supper, John Charles left the table, kissed his daughter goodnight, and retired to his study, where he shut the door.

Mary cleared away the dishes and went out into the back garden. It was a beautiful summer's night. The sky was so clear she could see every single star.

'Twinkle, twinkle little star ...' Mary whispered to herself and she looked up at the window of Stephen's bedroom, as if she could transport herself to where Henry lay asleep. At the

thought of him, a tremor ran through her entire body. She felt as if she was on fire. What was happening to her?

Sensing movement behind her, she turned – straight into Henry's arms. He held her very close and she could smell him. Touch his skin with her lips. She caught her breath and tried to look at him but that meant pulling away, and she didn't want to do that. She wanted to stay close to him forever. Oh, but what about her father? She let out a little gasp of fright.

'What is it?' Henry asked.

'My father is in his study. He must not see me this way.'

'He just went to bed. I heard his door shut. I was lying awake thinking of you. I couldn't sleep, Mary. I had to hold you once again.'

Henry took her chin in his hand and slowly pressed his lips to hers. Oh so gently, did his tongue prise her lips apart, and play against her teeth. Oh so gently, did his tongue go deeper, teasing her tongue to respond. She seemed to be melting into his arms her body pressed into his, as he lifted her up in his arms and carried her towards the little summerhouse at the bottom of the garden. Never letting his lips leave hers for a moment, he lowered her onto the garden seat and started to unbutton her dress. Mary could feel nothing but the beating of her heart and a sound like rushing water in her head.

As he kissed her, Henry's hand moved down to touch her breast and then her nipple. He teased it between his fingers, making it hard, and Mary let out a moan of pleasure. Could anything be more wonderful than this? Henry had lifted her dress now and was exploring beneath it. He ran his fingers, feather light, up the inside of her thigh, pausing to stroke the soft skin above her stocking top. Her body jerked involuntarily as he found her secret place. She could not control the waves of ecstasy and opened herself to his fingers as they gently pushed into her warm moist self. With this exquisite sensation, her head

lost the battle for logic or reason; her innocent young body responded naturally to his touch, to his closeness, and her very being demanded to be satisfied.

Her legs fell open to take Henry's body between her thighs. Her hands instinctively found his hard erect penis and fondled it. The anticipation was unbearable. She was gasping with need. And suddenly he was inside her, pushing urgently into her warmth and wetness. There was no pain, just the pleasure of being full up with his manhood. He moved and she moved with him. It was so natural, both these young bodies wanting affirmation of life after so much death. As their passion grew, their lovemaking became more intense and he penetrated deep and hard into her, touching her to the core. She followed his rhythm, and felt him spurt into her, her muscles clasp him as if her life depended on it. She let out a cry of pure joy and held him to her until they were spent. He looked down at her and smiled to reassure her all was well. She took his face in her hands and kissed every inch of it, laughing and crying all at once.

Eventually, Henry got up and dressed himself, then helped Mary gather herself together. They did not speak a word as they walked back to the house, under the starry sky, holding hands. Henry kissed her lightly at the kitchen door and went to his room. Mary stood at the kitchen sink drinking a cup of water and feeling every bone and muscle in her body tingle. This was what it felt like to be alive, she knew it! She wanted it to last forever.

But it was not to be. The next morning, when Mary woke up, Henry had gone. Joseph explained to her that he had made his apologies, but said he had to drive back to London to attend a job interview with a City bank. He sent his thanks to Mary for everything, and hoped they would all meet again soon. Mary had to run out of the room, so as not to give herself away. She raced into the garden and was violently sick under a hedge. A terrible blackness swept over her as she seemed to understand her fate.

Three months later, she was sat in front of Dr Jeffreys, white-faced and trembling, as he gave her the results of her night of passion. A baby, due to be born in the spring. Mary left the surgery in a daze. Despite the warm summer sunshine she was shivering and her legs felt weak; she had to sit down on the bench outside the doctor's house.

'Hello, Mary. Are you feeling all right, dear?' Lorna Jeffreys was looking down at her. The doctor's wife remembered so clearly their shared secret of all those years ago – Mary's ignorance of her body. Now she could see the naked shame in the young woman's eyes and her heart went out to her.

Putting her arms round her and lifting her up, Lorna said quietly, 'Come on, let's go and have a cup of tea, shall we?' She led Mary round the side of the house to the living quarters at the back of the surgery.

Neither woman spoke until they were sitting at the kitchen table with their tea in front of them.

Lorna broke the silence: 'Do you remember all those years ago, when I said that if ever there was anything I could do to help, you should call on me?'

Mary sighed deeply and searched Mrs Jeffreys' face. The woman had obviously guessed what was wrong, but there was no reprimand in her voice. No disapproval in her gaze. Mary started to cry. She felt so alone and so ashamed. What could she do? She was a fallen woman. This news would surely kill her father.

Charles had grown quite frail in the last few months, so much so that they had called Reginald down from his Theological College in Hendon in North London. The family hoped that it might be possible for Reginald to do his curate training with his father, at St James' Church in Allingham. The Reverend John Charles was highly regarded in the Diocese, and the Bishop of St Albans was a close friend. The proposal had been discussed, and as things in the local parishes were still a little disordered

since the war ended, it was agreed that John Charles could do with the help, and to have his son close by was the best thing to do for all concerned.

It was a comfort to think that her father would soon have Reg to support him. As Mary's tears slowly subsided, she was able to drink her tea and think more clearly.

'Is there anything I can do to help you?' asked Lorna, taking Mary's hand.

'No, not really. But thank you for all your kindness to me. I don't deserve it.' Mary stood up and made for the door. Turning, she told Mrs Jeffreys, 'I am going to talk to my brother Reginald; he will know what to do for the best. Thank you again. Goodbye.'

Mary walked home, consumed with her guilt and shame and fear. Her father must never find out. How could he ever forgive her? She thought of her dear mother and the tears sprang afresh. How could she have been so foolish? Reg would be coming home in the next few days to make arrangements for his training, and until then, she would have to keep her own counsel.

On reaching the vicarage, Mary went straight to her bed, telling her father that she had a headache. She hated to tell him a lie but needs must. Yet another sin to add to her long list. Before getting into bed, Mary prayed to her mother and begged her forgiveness. She held her prayer book to her heart and fell asleep with it in her hands.

'It's all right, I will help you. We will get through this together,' Reginald told his sister as he handed her a cup of tea; he and Mary were sitting in the front parlour. The vicarage was empty as John Charles had gone to visit a sick parishioner. Mary had poured out her story to her brother and was now once again collapsed in tears in her seat.

Although Reginald had always been the most serious of the

brothers, he possessed a very kind heart. Deep down, there was a romantic streak inside him and he was currently in the throes of falling in love, thanks to a meeting with a girl called Leonora Matheson, who came to his college for Bible Studies. But now was not the time to confess these feelings to his poor dear sister.

‘Leave things with me and let me have a think,’ he said, handing Mary a large handkerchief so she could blow her nose. ‘I have an idea already that could be a solution but I need to find out more. Take heart, dear Mary. God will find a way and He will forgive you. Now stop crying and go and make yourself busy.’

Mary did as she was told, but nothing could take away her deep shame and sense of foreboding. What did life have in store for her now, she wondered.