

THE  
LIBERTY  
SCARF



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*The Liberty Scarf*

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# PART ONE



# CHAPTER 1



*Iris*

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IF THERE WAS ANYTHING IRIS BRAXTON KNEW, IT WAS THE PULSE OF design. Her manager, however, hadn't exhibited the beat of life in the past decade.

"Mr. Fletcher, this is an ugly war we are fighting, but there is still beauty and hope to be found. The world is changing, and Liberty & Co. must adapt with it or else be trampled under the heel of progress."

"Changing." Mr. Fletcher fanned himself as if the very thought might send him into a faint. "I should hope not. When this war concludes, the nation will want security and normality. Values and ideas they are accustomed to seeing and understanding. The last thing we wish to do is upset them with unfamiliarity."

Iris recognized that they were heading for the same disagreement they'd had only last week, so she switched tactics.

“After experiencing nothing but mud and dirty uniforms for the past three years, I’m certain our Tommies will adore nothing more than coming home to slippers and a pipe offered by a pretty wife.”

At this wholesome image of domesticity, Mr. Fletcher brightened. “Pretty wives, certainly.”

“After so long a separation, women will be looking for ways to attract their husbands’ notice, but rationing has made buying new frocks and shoes a frivolous expense. A new scarf, however—well, that can go with any outfit for a fraction of the cost.” Encouraged at his nodding, Iris opened the leather portfolio containing her sketches. “A scarf filled with a brighter hope for tomorrow and designed with a famous Liberty print—”

“Not this again.” He pinched the thin skin on top of his nose. “Miss Braxton, how many times must we go through this? We sell imported woolen shawls in modest shades of taupe, gray, cream, and black. The few shawls that do have splashes of color strictly follow the Aesthetic palette—”

“Which passed its prime with Queen Victoria,” she muttered.

“—and were designed by men. We do not hire female designers.”

“Right now, Liberty spends a sizable amount on freelance designers that come in, work a single project, collect their payment, and leave. They know nothing of the brand Mr. Liberty labored to build here, the legacy, the history. By using the talent we have in-house, we can cut costs while encouraging creativity among our own.”

“By our own, you mean yourself.” Mr. Fletcher stared in a manner meant to intimidate.

A waste of his time, really. She stared back. “Yes.”

“Miss Braxton, as I’ve told you before—”

“I’m a hard worker. I arrive before anyone else and I’m the last one to leave. My paintings are turned in on time or before. I know every color in the recipe book and have created new additions. I have even found and corrected inconsistencies in the original sketches.”

He held up his hand to stave off her list. “No one doubts your skill or work ethic. It is simply company policy.”

“Mr. Liberty built his legacy around the exotic, the unattainable made attainable, and luxury for buyers to surround themselves with, yet the attire presented here is lagging behind and quite frankly outdated from our changing times. What could be more luxurious than for a lady to step out of the drab brown and tired patterns of her grandmother’s generation and slip on a cobalt or cayenne-red silk in a design from this century to welcome home her soldier in celebration?” Iris pulled the first sketch from the leather folder. “As in this one. Fresh, bold lines. Geometric patterns. Daring strokes of color.”

His eye didn’t so much as twitch toward the sketches. “They must find other ways to celebrate, perhaps by purchasing a signature Liberty oriental vase. Our Japanese folding screens are always popular.” Snapping back the cuff of his pressed black sleeve, he checked his watch. “Ah. I see your lunch break is over.”

With that, she was dismissed back to the workroom. The familiar scents of turpentine, oil, paper, and paint mixed with the voices of paint girls returning from lunch greeted her as she stepped into the space that had been her life for the past six years. It was a long rectangular room stretching the attic space of the store’s Regent Street location. Peaked skylights drew in glorious lighting for sketching and painting while offering stolen glimpses of heaven.

“Any luck?” Sara, one of the other paint girls and Iris’s soon

to be sister-in-law, settled onto her stool in front of the worktable they shared.

Iris shook her head as she dropped the portfolio on her side of the table and slipped on a paint smock.

Reaching into her skirt pocket, Sara pulled out a roll and tossed it to her. "You need to remember to eat."

"That's why I have you." Iris bit into the roll and chewed, her stomach sighing in gratitude. Yet no amount of baked dough was enough to tamp her frustration. "The world is changing, yet Liberty & Co. wants to stick its head in the sand and sell the same imported rugs and design gowns from last century. The motto has always been bold and daring, yet it's lumbering along like an elephant in a zoo. Still exotic, but a sight the crowds have seen. High time the elephant was set free."

"You move too fast for them. Give them time to catch up." Sara smiled in her kind way. "The company must find its feet again after the recent passing of Mr. Liberty, God rest him, but I hear his nephew and successor, Mr. Ivor Stewart-Liberty, is eager to bring in new ideas."

Iris brushed away crumbs from the unfinished design on her table. Another exhausted Art Nouveau design of curling vines that an unknown had sketched, and it was now her job to fill in with shades of mind-numbing green. The painted design would then be taken to Merton Abbey for block printing onto fabric used to cover a scroll-legged chair in some aristocrat's posh parlor.

"I don't want to spend the whole of my life painting another's designs," Iris said. "I want to create, to experiment, to capture possibilities. To be a part of these new ideas."

Tying on her smock, Sara pulled out her brushes and paint jars, clumping them into a corner. "A dreamer. That's what you are. A dreamer of beautiful things, which is why you will design

me the most brilliant bridal gown that has ever graced a wedding.”

“Only if you allow me to use all my cast-off scarf designs. They’re of use for nothing else.” After polishing off the roll Sara had brought her, Iris set about arranging her work tools one by one. The jars of paint in a straight line from darkest to lightest. Brushes standing vertical to her right. Pot of clean water and smear cloth to her left. An orderly space freed the mind of clutter and ushered in artistry.

Sara swirled her brush in water, loosening the stiff bristles. “How unique I will look twirling in a scarf skirt. The ends fluttering out like butterflies.”

“Very bohemian.”

“Should I add a chain belt that jingles when I walk? Arthur would never lose me. That man would lose the nose right off his face if it weren’t attached. Last week he wrote me that his first sergeant threatened to chain his rifle to his belt because he was forever misplacing it.”

“Mother used to threaten the same with his shoes.”

They dissolved into giggles, which had the unfortunate outcome of drawing the stern eye of Mrs. Philmore, the floor matron. The woman marched over with flat black shoes smacking the wooden floor and stared them into silence through her small, round spectacles. “You are not paid to chinwag. Do that in your own time.” Her glare slipped to the sketches peeking out of Iris’s portfolio. “Along with your doodles.”

“Yes, Mrs. Philmore,” they replied in unison.

Sara made a face behind the woman’s back as she marched to another girl who had forgotten to tie her smock strings. “Old toad.”

“Her shoes are probably too tight. Cuts off any humor to the brain.” Iris carefully slipped her sketches into the leather

binder and tucked it under her table. Doodles. Ha! She couldn't wait for the day until it was one of her creations being hand-painted in this very workshop with a color palette to banish all thought of dreary gray. Until such a revolutionary day, she would continue dreaming and sketching and refining her argument to Mr. Fletcher that she deserved to help further Liberty's appeal with freshness and a pulse for modernity.

At six o'clock sharp, the dismissal bell rang. Brushes were cleaned and stored away next to unused paints while unfinished paintings were left to dry on the worktables. Iris tapped the edge of drying vines. With any luck, soon she might be given a floral design, the new Poppy and Daisy design perhaps. It was still blues and green, but at least petals hoped to break up all those twisting stems.

Donning her wool coat and warm knitted cap in a bright poppy red that was all the rage due to the popular poem "In Flanders Fields," Iris descended the stairs to the ground floor with all the other employees clocking out for the day. She punched out her time card, collected her paycheck, and left with Sara through the store's rear service entry into a back alley. Cold winter air tumbled between the buildings, biting their noses and cheeks. High above the city, the spherical barrage balloons bobbed like round soldiers on guard in hopes of deterring enemy planes from crashing into them or tangling in their wires. Another silent reminder of a war that had breached their once-peaceful shore.

"Nothing sweeter than pay day," Sara said as they stepped around to Regent Street, where the Liberty Georgian-style storefront loomed over them in five stories of windows and gray sandstone. During the day, they reflected the sun like mirrors, but night doused them in blackness so as not to attract further attention from the German Gotha bombers. "Where

shall we go? The English Ruff? The Black Hare? Their sticky toffee is divine.”

Iris strolled by and lingered over the wares on display in the darkened windows, where each department had been allowed to arrange a window as it saw fit. The fabric window with rolls of material draping this way and that. The metalwork window with dozens of clocks, silver spoons, and Tudric tea sets. Interiors and furniture emphasizing Arts and Crafts style. All exquisite in craftsmanship. All the same designs for the past twenty years.

“They really should find a more appealing way to display wares,” she said, winding her scarf snug around her neck. “There’s a lack of cohesion among the departments.”

Sara tugged her arm. “We’ve punched out. Time to think about anything other than the workplace. I’m starved. And freezing.”

“You should eat your lunch next time.” Iris quirked an eyebrow at her.

Sara quirked a blonde one right back. “As should you so I don’t have to give you mine.”

A man stepped out from the front doors and locked them behind him with a shiny brass key. Tall and thick about his middle-aged belly, he was dressed in fine wool with an expensive cut.

Iris’s feet stumbled to a halt on the footpath. “Sara, look! It’s Mr. Ivor Stewart-Liberty.” Where is he going, do you suppose?”

“Likely somewhere too posh for us. I’m in need of the nearest chippie.”

Checking his pocket watch, Mr. Stewart-Liberty turned right onto Great Marlborough Street.

Iris’s instinct flared to life. “Let’s follow him.”

“Are you off the crumpet? I’d rather my employer not have

me arrested for stalking.”

“We’re not stalking, merely walking in the same direction.” She linked her arm through Sara’s so she couldn’t escape and walked toward Great Marlborough. “Do you know what it would mean to have him look at my sketches?”

“Correction. We wouldn’t be simply arrested but thrown into the asylum for being an upstart thinking above her place in the pecking order.”

Once on Great Marlborough, they followed at a discreet pace as he turned left down Argyll Street, where little eateries and pubs welcomed in evening guests on wafts of vinegar and beer.

“No one who achieved anything great did so by orderly pecking. There. He’s gone into the Argyll Arms.” Holding tight to Sara with one hand and gripping her portfolio in her other, Iris dashed across the street with a light of hope burning hot inside her. “And wouldn’t you know? They serve fish and chips.”

## CHAPTER 2



*Rex*

THE ARGYLL ARMS SERVED A DELICIOUS FISH AND CHIPS AND AN EVEN better beer, but tonight Captain Rex Conrad kept a clear head and ordered tea for his upcoming meeting with a potential client for his architectural firm of Messrs. Higg & Hill. Rex had been a patron in prewar times of many London pubs, and the Arms was a favorite with its original eighteenth-century mahogany paneling and Victorian booths with etched glass partitions. It was an architect's dream, but tonight he wasn't here to dream. Tonight was for business, which his friends took every opportunity to distract him from while they waited for the client to arrive.

"If you refuse to take the bet, you must spend the entire evening in the barracks polishing our boots while we're kicking up our heels at the Christmas dance. If the girl says no—"

"She won't say no." Rex leaned back in his chair with all the confidence of a man who rarely failed.

His friends, Captains Stan Holloway and Clive Windeatt of His Majesty's army, exchanged a knowing look. "Not even after

she discovers you've a bum leg?"

"I can still manage a few turns around the dance floor without my cane." Shrapnel had torn Rex's left leg apart, but it wasn't enough to stop him. Most days.

"If you take the bet and she says no, you still miss the dance and must shine our boots," Stan continued, his one blue eye a stark contrast to the black patch covering his missing one. A souvenir from Ypres.

Clive grinned as he tipped back his pint of beer. "I like my toes nice and shiny, in case you were wondering."

Rex stirred his sugarless tea. Rationing knew where to hit hard. "You two drum up the most absurd bets. Like who could catch the bigger rat in the trenches, or who was willing to eat the last tin of pottage meat that had been sitting on the canteen shelf since the start of the war. At least this latest one won't leave me with indigestion."

"Does that mean you take the bet?" Stan leaned forward, eye shining with mischief.

Rex met it with a twinkling challenge of his own. "When have you known me to turn down the opportunity to charm a pretty girl?"

"Looks have nothing to do with this. You simply must ask the next unattached and unmarried woman who walks through the door to the dance."

"And she must say yes by the end of the night," Clive added.

Rex glanced around the establishment, which was mostly filled with shop workers enjoying their few hours of freedom before punching into the drudgery of work the following morning. They were the only three in uniform and drew quite a few stares from the other patrons, especially the girls in their dark skirts and white blouses fresh from behind the service counters. He inclined his head to the nearest table, setting off a girlish

wave of titters.

Turning back to his mates, he nodded. "Done."

The door swung open, kicking Rex's pulse into action. Alas, no lady, but a well-heeled gentleman that was pointed to their table by one of the waiters. The man swerved between tables and stopped in front of them, doffing his hat.

"Good evening," he said. "My name is Ivor Stewart-Liberty. Richard Conrad, I believe?" His eyes flickered to the bars on Rex's collar. "Forgive me. Captain Conrad."

"Rex, please." Rex stood and shook his hand, then offered introductions. "Captains Holloway and Windeatt."

"A pleasure." Mr. Stewart-Liberty shook their hands. He skipped only a fraction of a beat when Clive offered his left, as his right had been blown off by a grenade, then took a seat. "Firstly, I must extend my gratitude for your service to our country. May the war be over before Christmas."

"It'll take a miracle to pull that off in the next two weeks, but cheers to that." Clive raised his pint in salute.

"I trust your tour is going smoothly."

The Wounded Warrior Tour of England. A grand idea thought up by some Parliament leader to showcase the brave Tommies injured in glorious battle for king and country in order to bump contributions to the war effort by touting them about the country. The fact was, the fighting men were exhausted and barely had a leg left to stand on. If reinforcements didn't arrive soon, there was every chance that Britain and her allies might lose the war. With a slew of medals between them and none too grotesquely damaged to scare the civilians, Rex and two of his regiment mates were rounded up and shipped back to Blighty for a bit of rest and drum pounding.

"As well as can be expected," Rex said. "Nothing stirs up patriotism or promotes enlistment like parading around the

glorious wounded.”

“Liberty & Co. is at the military’s service. We would like to contribute blankets and of course a generous donation.”

“On behalf of His Majesty’s forces, we thank you, sir.”

“Yes, you see this is where we might be of service to one another.” Placing his hat on the table, Mr. Stewart-Liberty leaned forward. The polite gentleman slipped into shrewd businessman. “The world is full of uncertainty, each day more so than the last. I want to bring reassurance to the people of Britain, particularly here in London, as a reminder of our deep roots that can never be broken. Much like her people. My uncle had an affinity for the Tudor style, that most genuinely English period of domestic architecture, and to honor him I should like to redesign our premises behind Regent Street to reflect those half-timbered marvels of the past.”

“A splendid idea, sir. Messrs. Higg & Hill would be delighted to assist you in this project.”

“That is precisely what they said when they offered me your name.”

Ah, there it was. The point to Rex’s confusion as to why he was sitting here with a client and not his superiors. “I don’t know how my services can be of more help than Mr. Higg or Mr. Hill. I’m merely a junior architect when out of uniform.”

“Your uniform is precisely the help I require. That, and you were rising through the ranks to become one of the firm’s most brilliant architects before the war.”

“A job I gladly look forward to returning to.” The day couldn’t come soon enough when he could finally trade in his officer’s pistol for a pencil and scale ruler and leave the bloody business of war far behind him.

“I would like to ask you to come to my store and take measurements and create initial drafts for this Tudor project.” The

businessman's eyes lighted on Rex's insignia. "A man in uniform working to help build an English model of assurance and steadfastness is precisely the boost we both need. Customers will want to shop in a store that supports the Tommies and by which a percentage of proceeds will go to help in winning the war effort. A better way to pound the drum than supping with the blue bloods, eh?"

A few months away from the trenches had seemed like heaven to Rex, but night after night paraded out in front of aristocrats, with their glittering jewels and starched bow ties, was its own minefield of polite smiles and stiff dancing when all he really wanted to do was skip the formalities, collect the offered checks for the war effort, and sleep for the next decade. This man was offering him a chance to put his true skills to work. Not the bloody destruction of a rifle, but pencil to paper in lines and angles of creating something good.

Pushing aside his teacup, Rex leaned his forearms on the table. "Let me make certain I understand you, sir. You're hiring me to come to your store and take initial measurements in my uniform as a type of goodwill campaign."

"On behalf of your employers, Messrs. Higg & Hill, yes. Though I hope this will not interfere with your tour dates."

"Our tour consists of several legs between which we return to London for a few days. That should allow me plenty of time to devote to projects not in relation to the tour, which is scheduled for another month and a half."

"Excellent. I've already drawn up the contract for their services. Though this is not a pretentious campaign. These measurements will be the first steps toward a new blueprint for my store."

The door opened on a rush of frosty air. In breezed two women bundled against the cold. The fairer of the two huddled

in her coat while the other, taller with dark hair spilling out from beneath a bright red cap, stood straight and cast her gaze about the room. When those dark eyes of directness landed on Rex, they nearly knocked him out of his chair. An unsettling reversal considering it was typically he who sent women's lashes to fluttering and blushes to flaming, yet here he was with every coherent thought stunned straight from his head.

Clive nudged him under the table. Why was he—oh! The bet. The dance. The first girl through the door. This girl! Rex rubbed a hand over his mouth to smother his grin. This wasn't going to be quite so bad after all.

Her gaze moved on then snapped back to Rex's table, though this time it settled upon his well-dressed gentleman visitor. The woman's gloved fingers curled around a satchel hanging from her shoulder. Her companion nudged her and pointed to a table where three other ladies sat waving in recognition.

“—so of course the project will need to be kept quiet for now,” Mr. Stewart-Liberty continued. “It's not a good image for the store to be spending so much on expansion with a war on, but seeing a soldier involved in the blueprints will perhaps bring encouragement that the end is coming swiftly. Encouragement is precisely what we need to help ring in the Christmas spirit.”

The woman and her friend settled at the table with the other ladies as a waiter scuttled over to take their order.

Rex tore his attention away and focused on the important matter at hand. “If my employers are in agreement, then so am I.” A task like this could finally move him out of the junior pool.

“Wonderful! You may start tomorrow. Nine o'clock, shall we say?”

“I look forward to it.” Rex stood and offered his hand. Mr. Stewart-Liberty shook it, then gathered his things and took

the stairs labeled Private to the first floor, where private dining rooms were offered away from the bar crowd.

Having observed the entire exchange with more than simple curiosity, the woman left her table and headed in the direction of the stairs.

“She’s getting away,” Clive taunted, swirling his beer.

“Wish me luck, lads.” Ignoring the throb in his leg that tended to come on at night, Rex moved around his table and cut her off.

She stepped back in surprise but quickly regained her composure. “Pardon me.”

“No pardon necessary, miss, but I would be obliged if you’d allow me to buy you a drink.” He offered his most dashing smile.

She didn’t return it. “Has that line ever worked out?”

“I’m waiting to see.”

“You’ll be waiting for a while.” She moved to go around him.

Not so easily thwarted, he moved with her. “A dance then.”

Her dark eyes flickered to his cane. “Sorry, soldier. I don’t dance.”

“Don’t let the cane fool you. Providence was forced to whittle down my abilities in order to give the other fellows a chance to keep up.” He widened his smile. The melting one.

“I see a sense of humility has remained intact.”

“Unlike most of my leg, you mean?”

Her expression paled to horror. “Oh no! I didn’t mean—”

“It’s quite all right. Lying in hospital, I decided to seek the humor in my situation rather than let the blue devils take me.” He laughed, which had the desired effect of clearing the embarrassment from her lovely face. His doctors had told him that

those seeking the silver lining in every situation often fared better than those who didn't, and so he'd taken the challenge to chase the silver at every opportunity. Well, what resembled chasing for a man with a bum leg.

The coolness thawed from her eyes as she adjusted the strap on her shoulder. "I believe you have rather a great deal of cheekiness to beat off any devils that may come to call. They don't stand a chance."

"Ah, but it's not the devils I wish to take a chance with."

"I take it by that suggestive waggle of your brow that you mean me."

"If you play your cards right." He didn't mean to waggle again, but habit was habit.

"Afraid I'm dealt out for the evening, but I'm sure any other lady here would be happy to deal you in for a dance or a drink."

"They're not as pretty as you."

She didn't blush or look away. She held his gaze with a steady one of her own that was more than intriguing. "Is this how it's done now? Dropping all pretense of subtlety?"

"War has a way of clearing the unnecessary from a man's objectives."

"Your objective being . . . ?"

"To get you to say yes and dance with me. And I know, you claim you don't dance, but that's because you haven't danced with me."

"You're persistent, soldier. I'll give you that, but I'm afraid—"

"Iris! Pardon me." Her fair friend, eyes wide in alarm, popped up next to her. "Mr. Stewart-Liberty is leaving."

"What?" Iris spun around as the man of the hour exited the pub. "Drat!" She bolted after him.

Behind Rex, Stan and Clive brayed with laughter. "I'll have my boots lined up for you!"

“Got a fresh can of polish with your name on it, Conrad. Never been used.”

Never one to back down to a scratch against his pride, Rex grinned at them. “Merely a warm-up, lads.” With a lofty salute in their direction, he hobbled after the girl doing her utmost to slip the hook.

Flurries dashed against his face as he stepped out into the cold night air. He looked up and down the street and spotted her chasing a taxi. She tripped, falling to the footpath as the automobile rounded the corner out of sight. Papers fluttered from her satchel into patches of snow and slush.

He hurried as quickly as his tormenting leg would allow. “Are you all right? Let me help you.” He grasped her elbow and pulled her to her feet. His bum leg buckled, but he caught himself as a hiss of pain escaped through his teeth.

Concern lined her face. “Are you quite well, sir?”

He patted his leg. “Just a little souvenir from the Huns. Comes back to bite me after a long day.” Out of military habit, he did a quick check for bashes or blood on her. “Are you hurt?”

“No, I—my sketches!” She grabbed at the papers scattered about, clutching them to her chest like precious jewels.

Bending down, he plucked a paper from the slush. Water melted down the pencil strokes and dripped off the corner in gray droplets. The delicate details were ruined, but enough remained of the basic lines for him to note the skill. “Will you be able to salvage these?”

“Perhaps some.” Her crestfallen expression told him otherwise.

“They’re lovely.”

“Thank you. Not that he’ll ever see them.” She gestured to the corner the taxi had disappeared around.

“Mr. Stewart-Liberty? I didn’t take him for an artist.”

“He’s not. He’s the owner of Liberty & Co., though I presume you know that considering you were meeting with him when I arrived at the pub. I work in the paint department coloring designs for printing.” She ruffled the pages, but their soginess stuck them together. “I was hoping to show him a few of my own designs, but it seems my two left feet had other plans. One more reason I would make a terrible dance partner.” She tried to smile, but her lips didn’t appear to have the heart for it as she stared at her ruined work.

He understood all too well the pain and disappointment of a design gone wrong. Laboring hours night and day over a single project, perfecting each line, ticking each measurement, only to wad it up and toss it into the rubbish bin. Or worse: Have his supervisor rip it apart and demand he start over. “Do you have more you can show him at the office?”

“The owner of Liberty & Co. does not simply come to the attic workspaces for tea each afternoon.”

“Ah, so you followed him in the off-hours.”

“I did not follow . . . very well, I did, but I had no other choice. My direct superior isn’t inclined to bother the important owner with the doodles of a mere paint girl.”

“Why is it imperative he see these?” He nodded to the paper in his hand.

A recognizable spark lit her dark eyes. “Because the company needs a breath of fresh air. As does the world. This war has dragged us into misery and gloom, and when it’s finally all over, we cannot go back to how we were. We must look to new possibilities. Excitement, color, boldness.” The spark sputtered, sending a red glow to her cheeks. “Forgive me. My passion runs away with me sometimes.”

“It’s good to have things that light a fire within us.” That was what he recognized. A kindred passion for the creative.

Creatives weren't given enough credence in a world consumed with rigidity and boxes to check off. "Perhaps I can help you. My company has recently been hired for a project by Mr. Stewart-Liberty, and it would give me great honor to show him your work."

She raised a single eyebrow that glistened with dotted snowflakes. "Your company? Is the war not demanding enough that you require a second occupation?"

"Believe it or not, I did not always wear the uniform. In my former life and one I hope to return to, I was—am—what you might consider a bit of a sketcher as well."

The eyebrow slanted down. "I've been working long enough to know there is no such thing as benevolent favors. What's the catch?"

"A dance with me."

"Right now?"

"Hardly." He laughed and stamped his feet to get the blood moving. "My toes are about to freeze standing out here. One dance with me at the Royal Troops Christmas Auxiliary on Christmas Eve next week at Banqueting House."

She glanced at the warped bundle of papers in her hand, indecision twisting her lips. "One dance?"

"Unless you're completely swept off your feet and keen for a second round."

"I'm confident enough to say that will not happen. Very well, Mr. . . . ?"

"Conrad. Captain Richard Conrad at your service." He offered a salute that looked less than smart with the soggy sketch in his hand.

"Iris Braxton. Very well, Captain Conrad. We have an agreement."

"There you are." The fair friend Iris had arrived with stood

in front of the Argyll Arms. Pulling mittens on, she hurried toward them, with each step a deeper frown pulling at her mouth. “What’s happened here?”

“In my haste to get Mr. Stewart-Liberty’s attention, I slipped. Captain Conrad here was kind enough to come to my aid, though I’m afraid there’s little to be done for my sketches.” Iris flashed the soggy papers.

“Let’s get home and see if we might hang these to dry next to the fire. Maybe a few can be salvaged.”

Iris smiled without conviction, then made quick introductions. “Captain Conrad, this is my soon-to-be sister-in-law, Sara Penrod. Another paint girl.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Miss Penrod.” Instead of another failed salute, Rex offered a small bow. “Miss Braxton, I’ll see you soon. Hopefully with a sketch to present.”

“Might I take that one from you? Add it to my rubbish collection.” Iris pointed to the sketch in his hand.

Reluctant to relinquish it, he held it close. “I’d like to keep it if you don’t mind.”

“It’s ruined.”

“A bit of blotting and it’ll be a fine memento of our meeting.” Whipping out his handkerchief, he pressed the wet sketch between the folds. It required more than a simple blotting, but he wasn’t allowing this token out of his grasp for all the dances in the world. “Ladies, before we all freeze out here, I bid you a pleasant evening and look forward to our next meeting.”

They said good night and walked away. Iris cast skeptical glances over her shoulder before offering a small smile as they turned off the street back to Regent. He opened the handkerchief, peering through the smeared pencil to her signature in the bottom corner. Iris Braxton. A smile tugged his lips. He wasn’t going to have to polish boots after all.

## CHAPTER 3



### *Iris*

FERNS FOR NEW GROWTH. NO, TOO ART NOUVEAU. GEOMETRIC. Too rigid. Teapots and Buckingham Palace. Too on the nose. Iris mentally sketched each design and then tossed it. Nothing that came to mind was the design she sought. The design that would astonish Mr. Stewart-Liberty into hiring her as the first female designer and bring a smile to the war-weary world's face.

“Are you listening?” Sara’s paintbrush waved in front of Iris’s face. “You’re doing it again.”

Iris snapped out of her reverie. Paint dripped from her own brush, creating splotches on the worktable. “I’m sorry. What were you saying?” She grabbed a towel and wiped up the paint mess.

Sara sighed and pointed at the clock at the far end of the room, where it ticked over the dozens of heads bent silently over their work. “It’s after noon and you’ve barely grunted at me all morning. You’ve got that far-off and deep-within look, which means there’s a pencil whirling in your brain. Have you come up with a new design to show Mr. Stewart-Liberty?”

“Everything I come up with is passé, overdone, boring, and bland. Last night I dreamed of a silk scarf with multicolored sheep that came alive to eat octagon-shaped hedges. Livestock and geometry. That’s where my inspiration has spiraled to.” Iris tossed the dirty towel into the used bin behind her stool.

“Perhaps you should spend more time with that captain fellow. He’s handsome enough for inspiration.”

“Handsome?” That came out louder than Iris intended. She busied herself by straightening her paint pots and lowered her voice. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“Likely not, as you were too busy crying over your sketches, which I don’t blame you for in the least, but let me reassure you that the gentleman was indeed handsome. And he went after you in the cold without a coat on.” Sara smugly smiled as if that settled the man’s suitability. She always was the romantic one with her Jane Austen–esque ideals of courtship. It was a miracle Arthur managed to stand a chance, preferring fishing to cotillions, and *Punch* magazine to poetry.

“How many gentlemen would offer to take your sketch to Mr. Stewart-Liberty? None, I’d wager. So kind of him to offer.” Sara swirled her brush in the jar of water to clean blue paint from the bristles. “What surprises me more is that you agreed. You, the island of independence.”

It was true. Iris came from a long line of people doing things on one’s own through hard work and perseverance. Yet none of those qualities were beneficial in a situation like this. Quite honestly, she needed help getting her sketches seen, and her stubborn pride on the matter did not fall into the helpful category. So she had done something completely at odds with her character. She had swallowed her reflex refusal and buried it beneath gratitude.

Sara continued, too preoccupied to ramble on about Iris’s

self-imposed isolation. “Though I do wonder at his generosity to a complete stranger, considering his own work agreement with the store.”

Iris had told Sara all about her conversation with Captain Conrad from the previous evening. All except one thing. “It wasn’t entirely selfless generosity.”

Sara stopped swirling and leaned forward, eyes wide in anticipation.

“I agreed to attend the Royal Troops Christmas Auxiliary with him on Christmas Eve.” Iris cringed.

Sara squealed. All eyes swiveled their way, including Mrs. Philmore’s. Sara tapped her chest as if it had been a cough. “Pardon me.”

“It’s a business transaction. Nothing more.”

“With dancing shoes.”

“I tried to explain it was a rather poor deal considering I don’t dance, but the man was incorrigible.”

As was Sara. “Excellent. Just the sort of chap you need. One to break you out of your comforts and spend an evening with something more exhilarating than a sketchbook and a set of charcoals.”

Giving up all pretense of working, Iris set aside her brush. “If I want to be taken seriously in this profession, I cannot spend my time at frivolous parties or worrying about the most fashionable way to style my hair.” Without thought, she reached for a pencil and added curlicues to the sketch in front of her. Another designer’s sketch, never her own. “Sometimes I wonder . . . if I really have what it takes. Do I stand a chance, or am I setting myself up as a fool?”

“A person seeking their dream can never be a fool.”

“Do not quote your grandmother’s stitched pillow to me.”

“I love that pillow and I’ve spotted you snuggled up with it

a time or two.”

“It’s soft,” Iris mumbled, shading in her additions.

“This war cannot last forever. A brave new world is coming, and when it does, you’re the woman to meet it head on. Talent like yours will not go to waste. When opportunity finally comes to call, be ready to welcome it in with all the Braxton confidence that can charm a square into a circle.”

“No geometry, please. I half expect a sheep to spring out of nowhere and start munching.” Was it her or were the curlicues starting to resemble ram horns?

“I know what we should do! Tonight after work we’ll visit Carnaby Street. I hear they have the most delightful Christmas window displays.” Sara’s brow puckered. “A shame they won’t be lit thanks to those pesky German bombers, but perhaps something will catch your eye, and Bob’s your uncle, no more sheep dreams.”

“Miss Braxton.” Mrs. Philmore marched between the worktables and stopped at theirs. “As you seem incapable of performing your tasks for today, you can be our runner since Bernard has taken ill. Take the outgoing paintings to Merton Abbey. They must arrive before three o’clock this afternoon, so no dillydallying.”

“Yes, Mrs. Philmore.” Iris hid her smile beneath a quick bob of the head.

Liberty Print Works located in Merton Abbey had been the center of printing and dyeing of fabrics by hand for centuries. Liberty & Co. used them extensively for their textiles. Iris’s father also happened to work there as head printer, and it had been through his influence and impeccable reputation that she had gotten a position at Liberty.

“Sorry. We’ll have to do Carnaby Street another time,” Iris said to Sara as she slipped off her apron. Merton Abbey was an

hour's ride away by train and bus to southwest London. Possibly more if part of the line wasn't running due to worker shortages.

Sara waved goodbye. "Say hello to your father for me."

Gathering her hat and coat, Iris hurried to the ground floor reception and delivery office, where a bundle of painted sketches carefully stacked inside a leather messenger bag awaited her. Before the war, deliveries were made every Monday and Thursday by a delivery lorry, but petrol rations had reduced many businesses to the old methods of bicycle or foot.

Taking the leather bag from the harried clerk who was juggling three times the amount of work thanks to the holiday rush, Iris started for the worker exit that led to the back alley but quickly changed direction. It had been weeks since she'd dared to walk through the main lobby of the store, but hearing all the shopgirls exclaim over the seasonal decorations in the canteen, Iris simply couldn't help wanting to take a peek herself.

Stepping through the curtain that divided the no-nonsense worker areas from the storefront, Iris found herself in an exotic land of silks, woven carpets, and electric lights. The emporium was an enchanting cave of wonders that reflected Mr. Liberty's fascination for all things foreign and colorful. The rooms of the sprawling premises were swagged in oriental draperies, and antique sculptures with touches of Christmas greenery enveloped the air in scents of pine and fir. She drifted to the Japanese smoking room with its silk painted screens, through the Arab tearoom where customers sipped Chinese tea, and at last into the textile room where displays were festooned with fabrics of all color and design: heavy damask with Moorish prints, ikat muslin, and Egyptian cotton with hieroglyphics.

Iris passed her hand over a Tana Lawn with a pretty pink

and green flora motif, then glanced around. Similar pretty patterns were draped over tabletops as grand dames of London society with their iron-gray curls and Victorian corsets decided which to add next to their wardrobe. Not a single lady under the age of fifty to be seen. Iris sighed over the lack of excitement around here. She didn't consider herself fashion-forward, but not even she would be caught dead wearing something of her granny's taste.

"Looks like a funeral shroud." She eyed a rack with black and gray scarves drooping down like sad flower petals. "Are these our only options? Outdated or drab? What woman wishes to dress as if she were dead every time she leaves the house?"

"I shouldn't mind for a touch of blue or red." A pair of brown eyes peered over the rack at her.

Iris jumped, catching one of the dead petals—er, scarves—on the messenger bag. The fringe tangled around one of the strap's metal rings.

"Allow me." Captain Conrad came around the rack, and with a few deft flicks, freed her from the scarf.

"Thank you." Iris smoothed the scarf back among its compatriots, then turned to him. "You have a habit of popping up."

"I like to take people unawares. Breezes past formal courtesies to a more genuine reaction."

"And what does my reaction tell you?"

"That you just got caught with your hand in the biscuit tin."

Iris lowered her voice. "I'm not supposed to be in here."

"Why not? Is it not your lovely paintings that adorn these very fabrics?"

"Yes, but I'm not a paying customer. And they're not *my* paintings. I merely color another's design."

"Their loss. Speaking of which, have you that new design for me? I must say, I'm eager to see what you come up with."

“It’s only been eighteen hours. Hardly enough time for a proper sketch, much less an idea.”

“What you need is a lightning idea. One that strikes quick.”

“I’m afraid I’m not a lightning kind of girl. I prefer to take my time, soak in details, allow them to bubble around, then begin work with a sure vision.”

“I’ll have a white beard waiting that long.”

“Wonderful things cannot be rushed.”

“If I thought that, I wouldn’t be so eager to dance with you where I know we’ll have a wonderful time.”

“Blatant flirting will not get you far with me, Captain.” Though she was surprised at how much she was enjoying it.

“Then I shall consider changing tactics for our next meeting.”

“As to meetings, is that why you’re lurking among the textile racks? This project you have with the company?”

“Yes. I have an appointment with John Llewellyn to discuss further details, none of which I can spill no matter how you flutter your lashes at me.”

“Keep your details and I’ll keep my fluttering.”

“Then at least allow me the pleasure of taking you to dinner tonight.”

“I’m afraid I must decline.” She hitched the bag strap higher on her shoulder. “I was just on my way to—”

“Miss Braxton. What on earth are you doing here?” Mr. Llewellyn, the store’s director, appeared. His tight-lipped smile for the customers’ benefit failed to hide the annoyed lines on his forehead as he stared at Iris as if she were a milkweed among his prized roses. His gaze shifted to the bag on her shoulder. “Are those the Merton prints?”

“Yes, sir. Bernard is out ill and Mrs. Philmore asked me to deliver them. I was on my way there now.”

“The service entrance is best suited for work deliveries.” Turning his attention to Captain Conrad, Mr. Llewellyn’s expression smoothed into congenial politeness. “I do apologize, sir. Our holiday displays are difficult to resist, even for the employees. How may I assist you today?”

“No apology necessary. Miss Braxton is an acquaintance of mine who was happy to lend her opinion on a scarf choice for my mother.” The good captain turned on that charming smile of his. “And I believe it is I who may assist you. Richard Conrad of Messrs. Higg & Hill.”

“We’ve been expecting you, Captain. Please follow me and I’ll show you to the meeting room where we can go over a few of the particulars for this project.”

Before following Mr. Llewellyn, Rex turned back toward Iris. “Miss Braxton. I look forward to seeing you again, and thank you for your opinions on the scarves. They proved insightful.”

Iris mumbled a hasty goodbye before backtracking her way to the service entrance and out into the cold, crisp air of December. She took a deep breath, chilling her lungs until they hurt. Icicles were more pleasant than the heat fusing her face. To be caught browsing, and with a man, she would be lucky not to have her pay docked.

“Enough of that.” She secured the satchel strap on her shoulder. “The man has a job to do, as do I. Time to get on with it.”

Except the man wouldn’t leave her alone when she boarded the Underground. His suggestion of a lightning idea followed her as she got off in Chelsea and caught the bus to Battersea. Another bus took her to the far outskirts of London, where the gray buildings gave way to green grass and Captain Conrad’s words bumped against her with each rut in the road. He was

eager to see her sketches. Most people, besides her father and Sara, thought her sketches a nice way to pass the time before a husband came along and offered her real duties to complete her life. More important than his eagerness, he was going to show them to Mr. Stewart-Liberty. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and one she was terrified to squander.

In her mind, she sketched sheep, squares, diamonds, flowers, and ferns with such overwhelming concentration that she nearly missed her stop until the woman next to her elbowed her.

“This you, dearie? Liberty Print Works?”

Iris snapped to attention. “Oh yes! Thank you.”

Gathering her satchel and small purse, she climbed off the bus and started down the street dotted with Arts and Crafts style buildings. Textiles had been important to this area for hundreds of years, the Merton Abbey Mills established in the eighteenth century by Huguenot silk throwers. Sometime around the turn of the century, Liberty & Co. began operating the site for their own textiles. Beauty and history were crafted here, but it was much more than that to Iris. It was a home away from home. Here she had watched at her father’s knee the creativity of color and thread weave to life. Here she had learned to appreciate the beauty of seeing the world around her and breathing it into existence on silk. Here her father had taught her to pull the shapes from her mind and interpret them into something unique that might change the world’s view. Or at least give the world something to hope about.

The River Wandle chugged along with its flecks of ice as it churned the water mill with a soft slushing sound. In warmer months, she and her father would pinch off flower blossoms and toss them into the river for good luck. Coins were forbidden as they could clog the wheel. With no blossoms to be found, she

plucked a dried leaf from the ground, spun around once, made her wish, and dropped the leaf into the river. It floated along, collecting ice chips before tumbling under the rotating wheel.

Swinging into the printing building, Iris scanned the rows of workers hand-blocking paint onto massive lengths of silk. In the center of it all stood her father, Jim Braxton, manager of Liberty Print Works. He'd started off as a stock boy and quickly worked his way up the ranks to printer, master printer, and at long last, manager.

"Hello, Papa." Iris kissed him on the cheek. "Beautiful pink there."

"Needs a touch more fuchsia." He trundled down a row and stopped next to a block printer. "Bit more fuchsia here, aye."

The printer nodded and added the appropriate paint to his palette before dipping his brush into the mix and spreading it over the large woodblock stamp. Lining the patterned stamp on the silk fabric, he pressed it down with a light tap from a leather-wrapped hammer.

Retying his waistband apron that protected the prints from smudging, Papa came back to Iris eyeing the satchel. "What have you brought me. Prints? When did you become a delivery boy?"

"Since the regular one decided to get ill today." She handed the bag over. "Here you go. Another delightful selection of vines, florals, and acorns in a dizzying array of cream, brown, and green straight from the last century."

"Not everyone sees the rainbow as you and I do, my girl. Let's take it to my office and see the latest offerings."

The office was a mere ten yards away and within direct eyesight down the center aisle, but it took only five steps before her father swerved down a row to adjust a printing block. Another two steps and he winged off to sort confusion over a misplaced

pattern. And half a row over, he called for more drops of ochre and vermillion. Smiling and shaking her head, Iris wandered over to the ceiling-high built-in shelves where all the patterns were meticulously stored in numbered books. She took one down, smoothing her hand over the worn leather cover with all the reverence due a prayerbook. Inside was a treasure trove of ideas, longings, dreams, and art. She knew each one by heart, having memorized them since the first day her father brought her here as a little girl. She had sat quietly at his feet watching him hand-block the patterns onto the fabric until the shelves caught her eye. It was love at first sight and she knew right then it was her destiny to fill a pattern book with her own designs.

Only her destiny was taking its sweet time in coming about.

“When can I start adding your designs to my collection?” Papa peered over her shoulder, reaching down to point at a print of buttercream flowers and moss-green oak leaves. “This could use a pinch of harbor blue.”

“Cerulean. Brings out the yellow of the cream.”

“See. A natural.”

“Not natural enough for Mr. Fletcher. He turned me down again.” She slid the book back onto the shelf.

“Don’t be blaming him. The man has no taste that isn’t dictated to him. He said no. You go back again and again until he says yes. Show him your sketches.”

She gave a dry laugh. “Yes, I could if they weren’t all ruined by a slush puddle.”

“Oh, my darling girl. Sorry I am about that.” He tapped her under the chin with his work-worn finger. “Chin up. One day something brilliant will come along and you won’t be giving two seconds’ thought to those slush sketches. Just no more florals, eh? Reminds me too much of the grannies.”

Iris laughed, a real one this time. “How about florals and

something else? We don't want to cut the grannies completely."

"Compromise. That's my girl thinking." Lifting the corner of his stained apron, he rubbed at a spot on the bookshelf. "Your mum's been asking if you're still alive for all the times you've come to visit lately."

"I'm sorry I've been a ghost. There's been more work to do with most of the men gone to the front, and trying to find time to sketch . . . I've been a horrible daughter. Tell Mum I'll come round soon." Grabbing a scrap of cloth that had been discarded from the cutting table, she dusted loose fibers from one of the design book's spines. Like her father, her hands were never idle for long. Their minds bustled with activity that released through their fingertips.

"It's Christmas she'll be expecting."

"Wild horses couldn't keep me away. Not with sticky toffee pudding on the menu." Her favorite, and none made it better than Mum.

"And the Christmas Eve service? She's already told the vicar you'll be there to pass out holly wreaths."

Iris's hand paused over a spine labeled "Wildgrass 1896." "Er, not Christmas Eve."

Papa's thick brow scrunched into a frown. "Surely the store won't have you working late that day."

"No, it's not the store." Avoiding his eye, she busied herself wiping nonexistent dust from a shelf corner. "I'm attending a dance."

"Are they still having those during a war? I didn't think there were enough lads left in London for a proper go."

"Oh, there are some. It's the Royal Troops Christmas Auxiliary." Saying it out loud caused a funny flip in her stomach. She couldn't possibly be looking forward to it. Must be from skipping lunch.

“Mr. Braxton,” called one of the blockers.

Papa hurried to sort out the problem that appeared to be a design overlapped during the stamping process. Iris couldn't hear what was being said, but by the relief on the blocker's face and the reassuring hand her father placed on his shoulder, she could tell all things were well. Papa knew every trick of the trade and one mistake wasn't about to throw him off. Or his temper. In fact, the only time she'd seen her father turn an alarming shade of crimson was when a worker lit his pipe too close to the fabric. A dangerous scenario for any workplace handling flammables.

Problem sorted, Papa weaved his way back to her and picked up the thread of topic again. “Soldiers. Well, that does put a shiny spin on things. A uniform turn your head, did he?”

“Nothing like that. Captain Richard Conrad is his name, and he was kind in offering his help when my sketches were destroyed. He's an architect by trade and is working on a project for the store. He offered to show one of my designs to Mr. Stewart-Liberty if I agreed to go to the dance with him.” There was that silly flipping again. Perhaps she should stop in the canteen for an apple before catching the bus back to London.

“Clever lad. I like him already. Stepping out with a soldier is about the only excuse your mum will allow for your absence on Christmas Eve, mind. She'll expect to see the ring all the earlier the next morn.” He tried to keep a serious face, but the twinkle in his eye gave him away.

“Papa!” The heat rushing to Iris's cheeks most likely gave her away.

He continued as if not hearing her embarrassed objection. “Now for me, I wouldn't mind you holding off on an engagement. Lets me keep you as my wee girl for a bit longer.”

“I'm not so wee anymore.”

“Think that all you like, but a father has his rights to claim it so.”

Iris shook her head. “It’s one dance. Nothing more.”

“Your mum and I were engaged at a dance. I need to meet this young man before you start ringing church bells.”

She groaned. “*One* dance, Papa.”

“They’ll have chaperones, a major or general keeping an eye out for all things proper?”

“No generals, but I’m sure they’ll bus in a pack of grannies.”

At this he nodded. “Good. One granny chaperone is worth ten generals. Nothing gets past them.”

Slinging the now-empty bag over her shoulder, she started down the aisle to the door. “I need to get back to the city before blackout begins. The sun is setting sooner and sooner these wintry days.”

Papa followed her. “They don’t have you working past sundown, do they? Too dangerous for you girls to be walking home with those German Gothas on the raid. I read in the paper a few weeks ago, a bomb was dropped right outside Bedford Hotel on Southampton Row. Less than two miles from the store.”

They stepped outside into the late afternoon light: a hazy yellow that did little to thaw the frigid air.

Iris tucked her hands into the wool mittens Mum had knitted for her. A leftover pair with a crooked thumb that wasn’t suitable to send in a care package to the Tommies. “We’re being careful, Papa. I promise.”

Papa stood in the doorway, shirtsleeves rolled to his elbows without a single hair quivering in the cold. The man was impervious to any sort of unpleasantness, weather or anything else threatening to cast a gloom. “And tell that Tommie I’m not above putting him in his place if he should go and step on your toes at the dance.”

“Goodbye, Papa.” Smiling, Iris kissed his scruffy cheek.

“I still have my old print-blocking hammer.” He made a smacking noise against his palm. “You tell him.”

Iris waved goodbye and headed toward the bus stop that would take her back to London and all its gray dreariness. On instinct, her mind whirled together greens as rich as grass, blues as bright as a country sky, and purples, reds, and pinks. Warmth and light and beauty. The colors swirled together, stretching into lines, circling around into different shapes. Not florals. Not practical colors. Something new.

*Beep!*

The bus barreled down the lane and stopped in front of her with grinding gears. The burgeoning image faded to dust beneath the bus’s large black tires. Iris sighed and pulled out the bus fare from her change purse. Better luck next time.

