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Chapter One

MARY JO SHIVERED as she trudged through the steadily falling March rain. In spite of raincoat, boots and umbrella she felt pierced by the chill moisture. She hadn't wanted to come out. She thought of the warm living room she had just left, of DeeDee curled up in a big chair trying to study Spanish and watch TV at the same time, and of the fragrant kettle of soup Mother was preparing in the kitchen.

"What am I doing here anyway?" she questioned herself. "I'd much rather eat with the folks at home than try to satisfy my appetite on the dinky little sandwiches we're bound to have at Roach's. And *why* didn't I just tell Kathy I was busy when she called last night? We haven't been friends for almost four years and she wouldn't be speaking to me now if she didn't need me. What a nerve she has! To think that I'd fall for that silly fib about my invitation having been lost in the mail. I know, and she knows I know, that she never sent one. But she's in a tight spot now and she yells for help, and Mary Jo Hallet, the good old easy mark, comes running as always. Oh, well, I'll live through it, I guess, and next time I'll have better sense, I hope."

How far it seemed to the Roach house! Maybe it was because of the rain. In the days when she and Kathy could not exist longer than a few hours without seeing each other, the distance had not seemed great at all. Of course, they had scuttled through alleys and across back yards then, and the urgency to get together had lent wings to their feet. If it had ever rained in those days it had certainly failed to chill and dampen as this rain did.

Those days were gone, and forever, she was sure. And she was not sorry. Kathy did not interest her at all any more. Why she ever had was a mystery to the whole Hallett family. She must have *something* however, otherwise how could she have captured Gerald Frayne? His father was the suburb's wealthiest citizen, and Gerald himself was handsome and reputedly very brilliant. Mary Joe had her doubts about the latter, for how could a smart young man choose for a wife such a "bird brain" as Kathy?

"Wonder what will happen when he finds out how really dumb she is. She has flunked two schools that I know of; she is probably getting married to keep from trying to graduate from another. Wow! Mary Jo Hallet, what a cat *you've* turned out to be! Wouldn't your mother give you fits if she heard your thoughts! Are you just jealous because Kathy is getting married while you are still plugging away in high school, and have never had a real date in your life? Would *you* want to be getting married?"

For the next block she pondered this question, then answered herself so vehemently that the sparrows who had sought shelter in the branches of the cedar tree by the walk flew away frightened.

"I certainly would *not*. I think Kathy is silly. She's only eighteen. She's not even through high school. I'd hate to miss out on all the fun we have, even for a guy as rich and good-looking as Gerald Frayne. I'm glad this is not *my* wedding I'm practicing for. Definitely, but *definitely!*"

The guests were already crowding around the table and buffet when she reached the dining room and she fell quietly into line. When she had filled her plate and refused Mrs. Roach's urgent demands to take more of the assortment of appetizers, salads and sandwiches, she looked about for a vacant chair by someone she knew. Not one familiar face did she see, except Kathy's smiling one in a far corner of the big living room where she sat by the side of her soon-to-be bridegroom. All around the room were chattering and laughing groups with loaded trays, but not one person familiar to Mary Jo.

"Just as I thought. Not one of the old crowd except me. If I weren't a jellyfish I wouldn't be here. Wonder what happened to the girl whose place I'm taking. Maybe she got sick of Kathy's silly laugh and just quit. Well, I guess I'll stand up in a corner and eat alone."

She saw Mrs. Roach approaching with her gracious-hostess smile, and fled into the hall. She didn't intend to become a fifth wheel in any of those groups. She remembered a seat back under the stairs, where she and Kathy used to go to whisper secrets to each other and plan their escapades in the days when it was not so important that Kathy's friends be of her mother's choosing. Perhaps it was empty now and she could eat alone. She had been hungry for an hour, and the food looked delectable. She didn't want to talk to any of these people anyway. All she wanted was to rest her feet and satisfy her hunger before going to the church for the long practice that she felt sure lay ahead of her.

She reached the semidarkness of the under-the-stairs retreat, then began to back out in confusion, finding it already occupied. But looking more closely, she laughed in relief.

"Well, Little Jack Horner yet!"

"And another well! The chairman of the decorating committee yet!"

"May I come in and eat with you?"

"I sure wish you would. Come in and bring all your playthings and stay awhile. Never was I so glad to see a friendly face. I've begun to feel that I have crashed the gate at the Queen's garden party. I'm lost in the woods, in deep water over my head, and most definitely out of my class."

"The same here," she said, sitting down with a sigh, and slipping off her shoes. "I couldn't see a familiar face except Kathy's and it's really not very familiar any more. I often used to sleep and eat in this house, and this old corner here was our favorite hide-out. But that hasn't happened since eighth grade. I'm on a detour tonight."

"Who is Kathy, may I inquire? And why did you part so abruptly? Fight?"

"Kathleen is the bride. And if you didn't know that, just *what* are you doing here?"

"I'm beginning to wonder about that myself. I think Miss Kathleen wanted a military wedding, and the groom was ordered to bring along a sufficient number of his friends to match the horde of gals she had assembled."

"I didn't know you knew Gerald Frayne."

"I don't. I see him every day—but he doesn't often see me. I eat in the same mess hall with him. And once in a long while we exchange a word or two—if we must."

"Aren't you his friend? Then why did he ask you for this?"

"He couldn't find enough fellows who were willing to come all this way for what this is likely to be. I was glad to come because I wanted to come home and didn't have the money. He paid my way, so here I am. We drove over five hundred miles today to get here tonight and I haven't had a chance to meet the fair Kathleen. A guy does like to say hello to his mother and wash his face after such a trip! We came twelve hundred miles in two days and a night. I was glad to get my plate loaded and find this place to eat undisturbed."

"And I came along and spoiled it!"

"You never spoiled anything in your life, Miss Chairman. You're such a good decorator that already this dark corner has become a most pleasant place."

"Is *that* what the Air Force teaches you? You never talked like that before you went away."

"When I went away you were still a crude Sophomore, I believe. Too young to have pretty things said to you. As for the Air Force. You'd be surprised what you learn there. Not all your education has to bear on flying. Or even on filing, typing, or sweeping the offices, which is my lowly lot. Nor does all the education prepare you for war. And speaking of war, there's a question hanging in the air. What makes in the war between you and the bride? What happened in the eighth grade that sent you off on a sideroad while the fair Kathleen traveled down the highway?"

"I'll answer that question some other time. Just now

Kathy is my hostess, and the last thing my mother said to me was to mind my manners. I'm afraid she thinks that sometimes I don't."

"I think they are trying to round up the crowd for the next act. I have my mother's car here. I'd like to take you to the rehearsal if no other arrangements have been made for you."

"I'd like to go with you. I hate to leave all this good food, but I'm afraid they won't wait."

* * * * *

As Jack started the car he said, "You'll have to show me where the thing is. I wasn't even favored with an invitation. I have a deep, dark suspicion that I am a last hope but I couldn't care less."

"Oh, I know I'm a replacement! I'm even to wear a dress that was made for another girl. I am sure I was picked because I'm a chunky five foot two, and because I'm such a sap that I can't say no when asked."

"I'm sorry for you, but I'm glad for me. Your presence is going to help a lot. I hope we get to come back down that long aisle together after the big show. I never ushered at a wedding before, and I'll need a lot of support. In fact I never attended one. I've just heard of them as something awful—like when a fellow stands before the judge and hears a life sentence pronounced against him."

She laughed. "It oughtn't to be quite that bad. It's my first time as bridesmaid, and I'm not getting the thrill out of it that I am supposed to get. Maybe that is because I've just remembered what Kathy and I quarreled about, and I think I'm still angry at her."

"Whew! What a long time to hold a mad! Especially if you had once buried it, and then dug it up again."

"I'm really not very angry with her. I don't care enough about her now. I won't spoil her wedding if that's what's bothering you."

"What *was* it all about to cause such a split? Was it a real hair-pulling match?"

"Nothing of the sort. It was in our freshman year at high

school, and she was beginning to want to run with the kids from up on the hill instead of the ones she'd always gone with. They had a banquet for our football team—why, you should remember that banquet! You were in Earl's class. He had been quite a star, and the coach told him he should take a girl to the big event of the season. He was terribly bashful then. (He isn't now!) He couldn't think of anyone to ask except Kathy who had been in and out of our house ever since we could remember. So he asked her, and she turned him down flat. None of us has ever forgotten how furious he was. He came home saying he wouldn't go to the banquet, and that I was never to say Kathy's name to him again. He said she had acted as if the dust she was made of were a lot less dusty than was used in our family. It has been a family joke ever since. Even he laughs at it now."

"And *that* caused the big split?"

"Yes. Weren't we all silly? But Earl is my only brother and I thought *any* girl should be glad to date him. And Kathy soon let it be known that she didn't care for me any more. I shed a few tears over it, but not enough to spoil my looks, such as they are. Then when Earl went to college I found Kathy's and my pictures. He had cut them from an old year book and pasted at opposite ends of a long strip of cardboard. In between he had printed a part of a poem. He said Browning wrote it about us. Mind if I quote? 'They stood apart, the scars remaining like cliffs that had been rent asunder. A dreary sea now rolls between, and neither heat nor frost nor thunder can ever do away, I ween, the marks of that which once had been.' That made me see how foolish I'd been to care so much. I'd dare even Earl to find any marks now of that which once had been. But you can see why I think I'm a softie to go to all this trouble for her wedding. And mother made me go downtown after school and buy her a gift! Phooey!"

"You're a cute kid. And a nice one to be willing to do this for such a 'friend.'"

"Nothing of the sort. As I said, 'just a good old easy mark.' Here's the church. I never was in this one before, and I'll

guess that the Roach family didn't darken its doors often. Come on, let's get the operation over."

Inside the church they found that their part for the first hour and a half consisted in sitting quietly in a pew while the "ringmaster," as Jack dubbed him, worked with the more important members of the party. It was a tiresome procedure, for there was no chance for conversation, and the arguments, disagreements, and repetitions were uninteresting to those who waited in the pews. The two young people who felt outside the circle sat alone.

"I'm sure glad you are here," whispered Jack. "I feel like I've wandered into the wrong planet. I'd feel a heap worse if you weren't here. Mind if I go to sleep for a spell? Wake me when it's my turn to put on an act."

He folded his arms on the back of the pew in front of him, pillowed his head on them, and closed his eyes.

Mary Jo looked at him, realizing that he must be very weary. If she were so tired after an easy day at school and an hour's shopping, how wearing all this must be to one who had come twelve hundred miles with only such rest as he could get in a car while another drove! He was thinner than he had been when he went into service almost two years ago. She had never known him well. He had been in Earl's class at school, but never had seemed to take part much in the school activities. One of the fellows had brought him to Youth Group at the church and he had been faithful in attendance. Just before he left for camp he had been baptized and joined the church. She had had no close fellowship with him except for one occasion when she had been responsible for a decorating committee; he had been drafted to help with the heavy work. When he went into military service he had left no apparent void behind him. She had forgotten about him until tonight. In another situation they would have passed with a casual greeting, but in this place they seemed to need each other for moral support. She was certainly glad he was here, and each minute that passed made her feel more keenly her own lack of accord with these

people. She wished the evening were over so that she could go home.

When the director signaled that he desired their presence, she touched Jack lightly on the shoulder.

“Wake up, pal. It’s time for you to get in the ring.”

With a yawn and a sigh he arose. “Will you make a note of this for me please? When I get married I intend to elope!”

The ordeal over at last, they were free. As the crowd departed together, Mary Jo and Jack refused to join them. When the car stopped in front of her house she prepared to alight, feeling that he must be too weary for even a friendly chat. He protested.

“I’m awake now and I’d like to talk awhile. It’s been so long since I had any word from the old crowd that I want to hear the gossip—who’s dating whom, what fellows are in service, and all that. Can’t we just sit and calm our ragged nerves and chew the fat awhile?”

Mary Jo thought many times in after years that if she had insisted on going in, say after the first half hour, the whole course of her life might have been different. Had she been able to look ahead and see the joys, the heartaches, the frustrations the years would bring, would she have done differently? She was never able to decide.

Something about darkness elicits confidences. Many a secret thought or hope that cannot be uttered in daylight or in the brightness of a lighted room, is easy of utterance when darkness hides the self-conscious flush. These two found, as they talked in the quiet car with the bare branches of the great elms that bordered the walks making weird shadows between them and the street lamps, that there was much to learn about each other. So much had not been known during the casual acquaintance of a few years ago. He told of his intention to become a chemist after he had finished his education and she confided the aspiration which was the dearest dream of her life.

“I’m going to be a dress designer. I’m crazy about that sort of thing, and the teachers at school say I’m really good.

Daddy says that if I will complete two years of college, he will let me take a course in some good school of designing. When I'm through with that I'll get a job and save my money and go to Paris and study some more. I'm going to be good! That's what I've wanted all my life."

"You'll be good. You have the stuff! I saw some of your work once when the committee met at your house. But I'm not much of a judge of women's styles. So I hadn't remembered about them. What I did remember was your cartooning. You made cartoons of all of us, and they were the real McCoy. I thought that would be your line."

"Oh, I just do that for fun. I can always make pictures that bring laughs, but that's not what I want for a career. I'm shooting higher than that. I'll succeed, I *know* I will!"

"So do I. You usually get what you set out for, don't you?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"I worked on your committee once. Remember?"

"Let's not talk about my stubbornness," she said uncomfortably. "You do the talking for awhile. Tell me about your life in the service. Do you like it?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "So-so. If I could be a flyer it might be fun. It would at least be thrilling and worthwhile. But my eyes aren't up to that. I'm just a file clerk, typist, chore boy, janitor and what-have-you, for a chaplain. It's a good life in a way, and I've got the best chaplain there is. But I'll be glad when I've served my time. It's too lonely."

"Aren't there any good fellows for friends?"

"Sure. A lot of them. But it's the girls we miss. Guys our age get lonesome without girls."

"Why don't you go to church, get in with a crowd like ours here at home? There must be lots of churches near you."

"There are. And good people in them. But we fellows are poison to most of them. Oh, they like for us to come to the services. They even invite us for dinner occasionally. But let one of us ask a girl for a date, and we get this!" He drew his finger graphically across his throat.

"That's rotten! I'm going to report it to the Defense Department."

"Go ahead. And to the church boards and to the PTA. All the good it will go. You can't make the mamas think their girls are safe with us. Because *some* of us are no good they forget that the rest of us are just homesick. We're still poison to them, so if we want to stay decent we stay lonesome."

"Well, I can do this much to help. I can round up the gang and give you one swell time while you're here. How long can you stay?"

"Three days."

"Oh, no! Why so short?"

"Emergency leave for this shindig. That's all the time I have coming to me. Or rather, all I wanted to waste on G. Frayne."

"That means you will have to leave Monday."

"Yep."

"No time to do anything except take care of this wedding, go to church on Sunday, and—I don't know what we can do on Monday. All the kids will be busy at work or at school. And then you have to leave."

"Tell you what I will do. I'll get my mother to stake me for a plane ticket if I can get a reservation for Tuesday. That will get me in on time."

"Good! Monday night we will have a party at the Hallett house. And I'll round up so many girls to write to you when you go back, that you'll never be lonesome again."

"Bring them on. It would be wonderful to get mail from someone besides Mother and the pastor. Now I think it's time for school kids to be at home. I don't want your father out here checking on us. Thanks for saving my life tonight. After the show is over tomorrow night we will have us a time!"

Chapter Two

IN THE CANDLELIGHTED CHURCH the wedding vows sounded solemn and impressive.

"I, Kathleen, take thee, Gerald . . . so long as we both shall live."

Mary Jo, from her place as the last and the least of the bridesmaids, looked across to Jack at the end of the long line of ushers. He gave her a faint smile, but she knew that he, too, was feeling the solemnity of the hour. All the merry-making of the night before was absent. Kathleen's voice was shaky, and the bridegroom was pale.

A few minutes later, however, as they turned to go back down the aisle as man and wife the radiance of their faces told their joy. The other couples followed, and Mary Jo and Jack fell in at the rear. Her hand on his arm was shaking, and he put his own over it.

"Brace up, partner," he whispered. "It's almost over."

She gave him a watery smile. It had been an emotional experience for her as well as for Kathleen. She thought, wonderingly, that she had grown up in that short half hour. Even the tedious ordeal of the reception line did not dim the wonder, nor did the pinch of her high-heeled shoes take her mind off it. She would never be the same! She knew it!

At last they were free to leave. Together she and Jack slipped quietly from the parlors, not caring to join the noisy group now preparing to escort the newlyweds to wherever they intended to go. Somehow such hilarity seemed out of place after those solemn moments when the preacher's prayer had asked God's blessing on the young couple. She did not want to dull that memory with laughter and

joking. She wanted to remember it as it was in the quiet sanctuary of the church.

The vestibule was so crowded with groups of talking people that they despaired of getting out in that direction. A distant door looked as if it might lead to another exit so they hurried toward it. In the darkness of the foyer in which they found themselves, there was a hurried movement. The headlights of a car rounding the corner of the street revealed the matron of honor and the best man in close embrace. Then it was dark again. They found the door and the way into the March night. The door safely closed behind them, Mary Jo spoke in bewilderment.

"That was Nina and Bill Bowen. Why they've been married almost a year, and there's talk that they're separating. Now they're kissing in the dark!"

Jack laughed. "Guess the atmosphere softened them a bit. Maybe they will forget whatever they were peeved about."

"Yes, *maybe*. For another week or so," she said sarcastically.

In silence they walked to the car, but when they were in it Jack did not start the engine at once. Diffidently he spoke.

"About having a party and getting all those other girls—well, let's not. You see I—I— well I want to ask a favor of you. I'd rather not see so many kids. I have such a short time. Will you be my steady for those few days? Give me your evenings. There'll only be two more, and Monday after school if you have time. We could have some fun together."

Something in his voice set her heart to beating so loudly that she thought he surely must hear it, but she managed to say coolly,

"As a patriotic service?"

"As just a big gift to a fellow that's going back to two more years of boredom. It's a lot to ask, but we *could* have fun. I wouldn't want to tie a nice kid like you down for that long—I mean all the months before I could come back—but for these two days you could be my girl. Is it a deal?"

"It's a deal," she said softly. Then, before she realized what his intentions were, his arms were around her.

"You get to kiss a steady," he said, and she did not dispute his claim.

Morning brought a diminution of the glow. She wondered if Jack had wakened, as she had, with a feeling of deflation, a sort of punctured-balloon feeling. The wedding was over and the young couple had gone. When she saw them again, if she ever did, they would be just Kathleen and Gerald, Kathleen who had grown so snobbish that she was friendly only when she had a need; Gerald who, in spite of his good looks and his father's money—maybe because of them—had a reputation which was not creditable. The whole big splurge was over. The sunlight of a new day had swept away the giddy feeling that had come during the ceremony. She had an idea that maybe Kathleen and Gerald themselves might be feeling a bit letdown by this time. As for that episode in the car and Jack's request—well, he'd probably be embarrassed when he remembered it in the light of day. She was sorry for him, for she could not believe that any fellow as desirable as Jack Freeman could be really interested in Mary Jo Hallett who had never had a date. If he could be, it was a sign that he was *really* lonesome. How should she greet him when she saw him? Would he be at church? If so, she would be very casual and show him that she did not intend to presume on the happenings of the night before. The "atmosphere" probably had affected him as well as Bill Bowen, and she would just forget it.

Today was another day. On the other side of the big bed DeeDee was sleeping soundly and would have to be pulled out by force when Mother came in to call them. In the kitchen, the Sunday morning muffins would be in the pans ready to pop into the oven when the time came. Earl was whistling in the bathroom, and in the living room Dad would be putting the finishing touches to his lesson for the class of boys, his pride and problem. Everything was just as it always had been. She was still Mary Jo Hallett, nobody special in any way. The charm and mystery of the night before had vanished in the sunlight of the new day. She felt sad as if something big and beautiful had been almost

within her grasp and she had been unable to hold it. It was all as if it had never been. She got out of bed and pulled the blankets from DeeDee. The confusion that was unavoidable with five people trying to get ready to leave at one time was so familiar and reassuring that any other thoughts were driven from her mind.

But when she reached the church Jack was waiting for her and asked anxiously, "I can sit with you, can't I? It's lonesome around here too, if I always have to be alone."

"You don't have to be alone. You can come in our class. We're a bit younger than your group, but we have the same teacher you used to have and he will be glad to see you."

"The fellows I used to know must all be in service or at home in bed. I haven't seen one of them. If you will hold my hand I'll try not to be afraid."

"No hand holding. You have to learn to be a big, brave boy if you are going to be of any value to Uncle Sam's Air Force."

She was glad that he did not appear to observe the curious glances that came their way. For herself, she enjoyed them. She had often envied the more popular girls who always seemed to have escorts even to class sessions and church services. Now she was one of them! None of the escorts was better looking than Jack. She glanced at him and felt proud of his clean, well-groomed appearance. The boys themselves made a pretense of hating those uniforms, but the girls admired them. And today, if never again, the trimmest, smartest-looking fellow in the room was her escort. As if he felt her eyes upon him, he turned to smile at her. Flushing she gave her attention to the lesson, but her heart was thumping. Jack acted as if he remembered last night and intended to hold her to her promise!

Later, during the sermon, she found her mind wandering to the ceremony she had seen performed in that other church. She recalled the look on Kathleen's face and the unshed tears that had made her eyes glisten as she turned to take Gerald's arm. And only a terrific jolt could make Gerald Frayne's face turn pale. Then, Nina and Bill Bowen

kissing in the dark like a pair of lovers, when their quarrels were the talk of the town! It was all beyond her, but it must be something pretty powerful.

She gave a guilty start and brought her mind back to the sermon. It was worth her best attention and she hoped that Jack was hearing it and not letting his mind wander like hers seemed determined to do. She remembered that when he was attending all the time he had seemed to care only for the Youth Group and the social affairs. The lonely time he had had must have changed him, for he now seemed to be listening intently. She had better do likewise and try not to let it be so evident that she was thrilled to be with such a fine, manly fellow. He wasn't a boy any more. Maybe the folks who were watching them would realize that she too had grown up!

"Could we go driving this afternoon?" Jack asked anxiously as they moved slowly down the aisle after the service. "I can get the car again and I thought maybe we could drive up the North Shore. Maybe have supper up there."

"I'd love to go. But I can't stay out so late. I'm leading the meeting tonight at 6:30. Can't you come back to our house for supper?"

"I was hoping you'd say that. It would have had to be a hamburger anyway. I was just holding it out to you as bait."

He called for her at two o'clock and they had three hours together—not very long as a lifetime is counted, but long enough to change a casual acquaintance into a friendship precious to both. The day had turned unseasonably warm, the smell of damp earth and a breeze that hinted of budding trees seemed to call them away from the busy thoroughfare that lay along the lake. Jack turned the car into little-traveled byways and they loitered along the gravel roads, stopping occasionally to take note of an interesting vista through the trees or to sit dreamily, he with one arm across her shoulder, his other hand holding hers. She felt uncomfortable, as if it were not quite right. She was sure Mother would not like it, but it wasn't really wrong. If

it were one of the fellows who had a reputation of undue familiarity with the girls, it would be different. But it was Jack Freeman who was always bashful and reserved, and she only wanted to cheer his loneliness. It couldn't be wrong!

They talked softly as if this place were as holy as the church had seemed last night. They told of hopes and aspirations that had never been put into words before. Sometimes they just sat in silence which did its part in cementing the friendship. No matter what happened she would never forget this time.

Even if Jack went back and she never saw him again it would be one of the milestones of her life. Out there it was just like wide doors had been opened and she had a glimpse into LIFE!

At last Jack looked at his watch and spoke regretfully. "I'd much rather stay here with you than go anyplace, even to eat. But we promised to be back by five-thirty, so we'd better start."

He leaned over and kissed her, holding her close and lingering on the kiss longer than he had done last night. Then he withdrew his arm and started the engine.

"Thanks for a perfect afternoon. You're sweet!"

Home for supper with the "do-it-yourself" system that prevailed at the Hallett home on Sunday evenings. They made peanut butter sandwiches, foraged in the refrigerator for left-over salad and some milk, and found half of a pie which they shared with DeeDee. It was a comfortable, homey experience to sit across from Jack at the kitchen table and to watch his evident enjoyment of the plain meal. She avoided his eyes lest he see the self-conscious happiness in hers, and shortened the time by reminding them that they must get to the church a bit ahead of the opening service. In the car, while they waited for DeeDee to go back for a songbook she had forgotten there was just time for another quick hug and Jack's whisper.

"I didn't expect anything like this when I came home. It's been a swell time."

Walking into the meeting and knowing that the other

girls were noticing and secretly envying her was a heady feeling. How often she had felt that same envy and thought that such an experience would never come to her! In every crowd there always seemed to be more girls than boys, and she had never been one of the more popular ones. She had always thought to herself that, given a chance, she could be more interesting to a fellow than a lot of the girls. But her mother's training had not been conducive to development of the kind of aggression that draws boys like "bees around a honey-pot," whatever that meant.

Now, without even trying, she had, for a few days at least, the best-looking fellow in the crowd for her steady. She would enjoy it to the full for it would soon end. Tonight and tomorrow were hers, no matter what the future held. If only she could skip school next day and they could spend the time together! That was out of the question, of course, but she still had the rest of this evening, and tomorrow was coming!

When she came out of school the next afternoon, Jack was waiting and her cup of joy was full. Now she belonged, for the moment at least, to that group which was the envy of the less fortunate, the girls who had fellows to walk them home after school. To have the fellow be a good-looking airman in an attractive uniform—well, it was almost more than she could bear. Did life ever hold more happiness? Tomorrow she would be back in class trying to seem interested in such things as English literature and government. But today was hers! She meant to wring out of it every thrill possible.

Then it was all over—the dinner with her family, the evening together in the living room (what a swell family she had, to give it over to them!), the long good-by at the door, and her promise to write *very* frequently to help banish the loneliness which would, he assured her, be much worse than it had been before he had come home and found Mary Jo Hallett grown up. She watched until he had turned the corner, then climbed the stairs and tiptoed into the dark room where DeeDee lay sleeping. She

prepared for bed in the light that came from the street lamp, moving quietly lest she waken DeeDee and have to answer a barrage of sisterly questions. She did not want to talk. She wanted only to lie here and hug to herself the memory of that last kiss. Mother and Daddy wouldn't understand, she knew, but there had been nothing wrong about it. It had been just sweet and precious. To discuss the experience would seem like desecration. She was almost eighteen now, and the law acknowledged that as womanhood. Jack would be back for two weeks in June. They would get even better acquainted then, and maybe—maybe—next year—