

Excerpt from *Charity's Code*
Book 3 in the Virtues and Valor series
By Hallee Bridgeman

London, England: 1940

DOROTHY stood on the platform at the train station as close as she could to her husband who looked like a recruiting poster in his RAF Officer's uniform. He easily pulled her out of the way to avoid an unintended jostling by a group of soldiers running to hop aboard a departing train. His touch, as always, felt astonishingly gentle for a man of his enormous size as he guided her to safety.

Feet back on the ground and needing to do something with her hands, she straightened Tom's tie and swallowed, trying to disguise her distress and trying very hard not to cry. She was determined that his last memory of her before he left would not be of womanly tears. "There you go, Captain Ewing. I believe you'll be the most handsome pilot in the RAF, though I confess I am still a bit astounded they make aircraft large enough to lift you from the earth."

He cupped her cheek and brushed a thick thumb beneath her eye, capturing the moisture threatening to fall down her cheeks. "Only in your eyes, love. But I shall certainly be the most courageous. That I vow. I will protect you and our children with every shred of courage my heart and body can muster." He kissed her so softly that the breath hitched in the back of her throat.

Their lips parted and his deep voice echoed in her chest as he said, "You mind after the *bairns*. Remind Tommy he's the man of the house now and must help you with his sisters."

"I think the lad understands," she said with a smile. "Even at eight, he grasps the enormity of our present circumstances."

"He's brilliant, that laddie ... Just like his *màthair*." Tom's occasional Gaelic brogue never failed to turn her knees to water.

"And stout and clever just like his da'," she responded.

Suddenly his arms went around her, strong and tight, comforting her as only he could. "You'll stay in my heart and in my prayers, *bhean chéile*. Pray for me, my darling, my bonnie Dotty."

"I never stop, *mo ghraigh*." Their lips met as naturally and as comfortably as taking the next step when walking or the next breath when breathing. They came together in a kiss exactly as they had perhaps tens of thousands of times before over the course of their courtship and marriage. His hands rested on her hips. Her fingers caressed his smoothly shaved cheeks as his waxed mustache tips tickled the backs of her hands.

She kissed him soundly. But despite the triviality of its beginnings, this kiss felt somehow important. It felt bittersweet and frighteningly final. Her heart thundered in her ears and she suddenly wanted to just kiss him and kiss him and kiss him... and never stop. She desperately wanted all the clocks to stop ticking. She wanted all the trains to rust onto their tracks and stop moving. She urgently wanted this wretched war to end in the very next second so that she could just kiss her husband and pour every ounce of love she kept in her heart into him.

A shrieking train whistle startled her back to the present moment in which clocks still ticked, trains still rolled, and soldiers still made their way to the front lines. She opened her eyes as their lips parted and beheld the present reality, a reality in which wives still remained behind minding children, keeping busy, staying useful, and fearing every moment that the last time they had seen their husbands alive would be the very last time.

After seconds that passed like hours, her heartbeat faded to distant thunder in her ears instead of deafening nearby cannon fire. Knowing one of them had to be the first to break away, she stepped back, slipped her gloves back on, then brushed a hand down her wool coat. "Go on, then. Don't miss your train. I imagine even kind old King George would frown on tardiness as a result of dallying with your wife on the platform."

"Well, his majesty has never met *my* wife. Had he done, I'd wager he might understand." His eyes looked down into hers, dark with passion and promise. She realized in that heartbeat that this image of him would be the one she carried with her in her mind's eye throughout the coming days and carried to sleep with her each night.

"Oh, Thomas, you are quite the charmer. Always have done."

He hopped up onto the step of the train, surprisingly agile as always, and turned to blow her a kiss. "I love you, Mrs. Ewing, with all my heart."

"And I, you, Captain Ewing."

A hand slapped Tom's shoulder from behind, almost knocking him off of the step. "Let's go, old boy. Off to see the elephant and whatnot," Sir Percy announced. He glanced over Tom's shoulder. "Send me some of those wonderful biscuits in the post when little Tommy isn't looking, Dorothy."

She laughed and waved as the train's whistle blew again. When she knew they could hear her again, she said, "Assuming I can get sugar rations, I'll send just as many cookies as they'll allow. But you must promise me to watch out for my husband, Sir Percy."

"Madam, Captain Ewing just shot to the very tip-top of my priority list," he promised with a wink.

Dorothy did not chase the train. The platform was far too crowded and she chose not to make a spectacle of herself or her husband. Instead, she waved, and Tom waved back until she simply could not see him anymore.

Her gloved fingers brushed her swollen lips where she still tasted him. Her lips tingled, still feeling his lingering kiss as if feeling the sensation of an amputated limb. Dejected, she turned and walked away slowly, completely alone, back down the platform, back to their old car, so that she could collect her children from her neighbor Beatrice in time to prepare dinner. She tried very, very hard not to burst into tears.