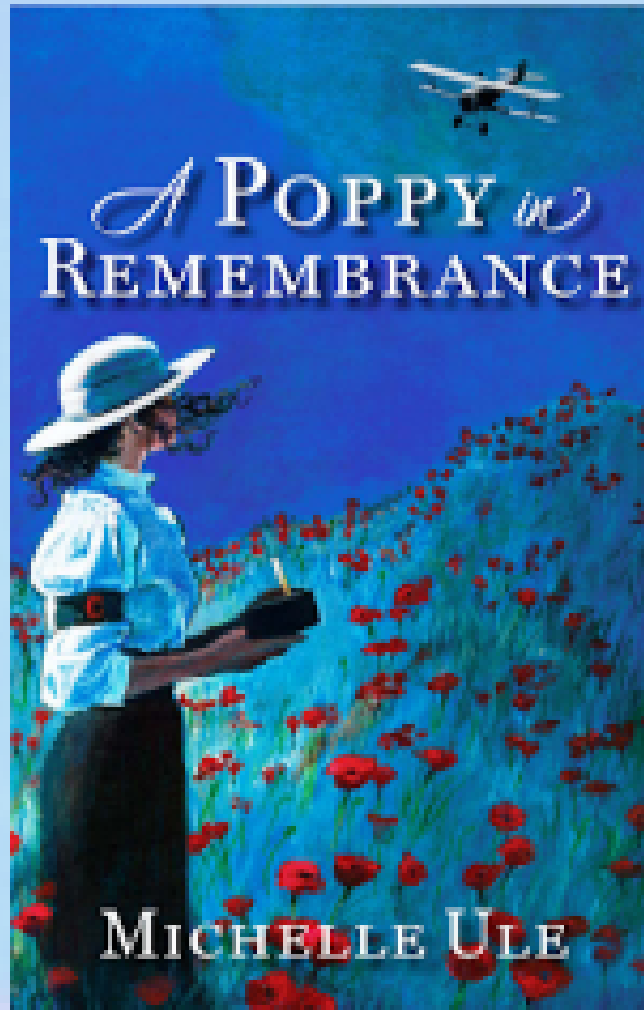


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**The First Three Chapters**



**Spanning three countries and the four years of World War I, *A Poppy in Remembrance* is the epic story of an American woman's struggle to become a journalist in a man's world.**

**As she searches for where she belongs—spiritually, professionally, and emotionally, Claire Meacham discovers God and love through her relationships with Oswald and Bidy Chambers, an earnest YMCA worker and a dashing New Zealand soldier, all the while seeking that elusive byline.**



# Chapter One

*London, August 5, 1914*

Claire Meacham opened the door over her mother's "Wait!" and exited before the chauffeur brought the motorcar to a halt. She had to find Peter before he made a decision they'd all regret.

She squeezed into the throng, her trusty leather satchel banging at her side. How would she find him in this mob?

"Don't push, miss," growled a Cockney voice.

She yanked in her elbows with murmured apologies. Before her stretched an ocean of men wearing hats: bowlers, straw, flat caps, and even a top hat worn by a dandy in a disheveled tuxedo. "Peter!" She hoped her voice would carry. "Peter!"

The warm morning air reeked from the sweat of work and the tang of alcohol. A place so far removed from Radcliffe's organized, hushed library would be hard to find. And yet there Claire stood, surprisingly tall among the British men, looking, hoping, and begging whatever God might be watching to find an earnest twenty-two-year-old with curling sandy hair, gray eyes, and rosy cheeks.

"Any sign of him?" Claire's mother caught up with her as the multitude parted with a polite doffing of headgear. Anne Meacham's refined dignity, along with her shining white-blonde hair under a proper hat, always brought out the best in people, no matter their station in life.

"He had a head start." Claire took her mother's arm as they shuffled toward the looming brick building two blocks ahead. She thought of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. They never worried about getting into Scotland Yard.

But then, they hadn't tried to visit on August 5, 1914. The front page of the Times proclaimed the problem in three bold words: BRITAIN AT WAR.

Newsboys held the paper aloft and shouted the latest information. Whenever Claire caught sight of the headline, her stomach flipped and she shuddered. How could the Meacham family have left sane, orderly Boston in time for a war? What was her father thinking?

No need to ask: the latest news and his empty bank account always commanded his attention.

That morning, however, Jock Meacham wanted his only living male relative yanked from the line before he did something foolish. Claire craned her neck. A six-footer like Peter should stand out in this crowd.

“Can I help you, miss?” A British bobby in a rumpled blue uniform appeared before her.

“We’re looking for my cousin but so many people—”

“Men started lining up as soon as the king announced war.” He rubbed the nape of his neck. “I’ve been here since midnight. Hundred have come through, thousands. They’re keen to fight the Germans and kick the Kaiser back to Berlin.”

A nearby military band struck up “Rule Britannia,” and two sailors moved through the male sea bellowing: “Interested in the navy? Hove to the right!”

“We’ve the finest ships on the ocean!”

More roars and raised fists shook in the humid air.

Anne pointed after a handful of men drifting to starboard. “Peter’s an excellent sailor; maybe we should try the Admiralty?”

Claire secured her spectacles and shook her head. “He adores biplanes now; he wouldn’t join the navy.” She put the ball of her French-heeled shoe onto a lamp post base, lifted her ankle-length skirt and hoisted herself up.

An approving male chorus eddied around her knees.

“What are you doing?” Anne grabbed at her hem.

At eleven o’clock last night when King George V declared war, the family had toasted each other with solemn faces. After Peter gulped down three glasses of champagne in short order, Claire tucked a red rose into her cousin’s lapel as a civilized touch before the horror began. Then he and his childhood friend Edward left and did not return.

Amid the swell of dark coats, she hoped to spy the crimson flower.

“Do you see him?” Anne tried to shield Claire’s legs. “Climb down.”

“Peter!” She shouted again, and dozens of male voices took up the call, some in falsetto: “Peter! Oh, Peter!”

Claire slipped to the sidewalk and her hair toppled around her shoulders. “No sign of him.” She rifled through her satchel—aha—then twisted the thick ebony curls into a knot and jabbed a yellow shorthand pencil through to anchor them.

A whistle caught her attention. Men turned and she glimpsed limp red petals. Claire stumbled through the crowd to a familiar face.

Peter glared at her. “You don’t belong here. Do you see any other women?”

“Papa says it’s too soon. There’s no hurry and plenty to accomplish beforehand; you need to plan your actions strategically.”

“Hey, Claire, they’re not taking women yet!” Edward, her cousin Sylvia’s beau, lifted a magnum of champagne to salute her. With tie askew and bloodshot eyes, his ruddy face nearly matched his hair color. He slung an arm across Peter’s shoulder. “We’re going together.”

“Peter cannot enlist. His mother needs him.” The line retreated at Anne’s commanding voice. Several guffaws and a murmured “Mama’s boy” made for a scoffing audience.

Claire didn’t know much about men but understood her mother’s scolding wouldn’t work. “You have responsibilities. Your father’s estate will be settled in another month or so and then you can enlist. The war only started last night. You have plenty of time.”

“We’ll beat the Boche by Christmas,” Edward declared. “If we don’t enlist now, we’ll miss the whole thing.”

She eyed him, appalled at his ignorance. An Oxford graduate should have known better.

“Uncle Jock sent you, didn’t he? He couldn’t be bothered to come himself but sent you two to find me?” Peter’s nostrils flared in his mottled face and spittle flew from his mouth.

“That’s uncalled for!” Anne cried.

Claire frowned. “Papa’s reporting on the war.”

“Aye, the war, a story, something else always needs attending to by Uncle Jock, nothing personal.”

A heavy paw clenched Claire’s arm. “Let the boy go. He don’t need womenfolk dragging him back to the nursery.”

“Take your hands off her!” Peter clenched his fists.

Claire wrenched her arm away. “I’m not saying he shouldn’t defend his country. He just needs to put his affairs in order before he joins the army.”

Peter looked back and forth between exuberant Edward and the working-class men surrounding them.

Claire held her breath as he weighed his options. A resplendent Union Jack sagged in the hot sun beside the arched doorway. Men in sharp new uniforms gestured to the crowd, beckoning them forward.

“Even if you don’t come with me, Peter, I’m joining up. I’d never be able to face my father otherwise.” Edward hiccupped.

Anne touched Peter's shoulder. "He's not your concern. Your mother needs you."

Peter crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. "I need to go with my mate."

Claire's heart hammered so hard her chest ached. "Edward doesn't fly."

A murmur rose around them—"flyer."

"Them biplanes is dangerous," a burly man said with admiration. "Made of paper, they are."

Peter examined the overcast sky as if seeking an answer from his late father, then groaned and reached for Edward's hand. "I'm sorry, old boy, but not today. Claire's right, I need to resolve my responsibilities before I enlist. I'll be a few weeks behind you but I'm coming. What shall I tell Sylvia?"

The good cheer vanished from Edward's face. His chin trembled. "Tell her she'll be an officer's wife before Christmas."

"Good luck." He stepped out of line and took Anne's arm with a sigh. "How did you get here?"

"Mr. Able is waiting in the motorcar." Claire directed them to Whitehall Avenue, stumbling in relief. They walked several blocks in silence.

"You made the right choice. Your mother is distraught," Anne murmured as they settled into the soft leather back seat. It smelled of wealth. "I had no idea you were learning to fly."

Claire glanced at Peter. Her mother never missed anything.

"I didn't want to upset Mummy."

Anne stared at him.

"Home, sir?" the chauffeur asked from behind the steering wheel.

"No. Take us to the Boston News Syndicate offices. It's time for me to deal with my uncle man to man."

Anne clutched his arm. "I don't believe that's a good idea. We never bother Jock at the office and certainly not on the day a war starts."

"The news is always king with Uncle Jock," Peter said. "Right, Claire? Isn't that why you're aching to become a newspaper reporter yourself? You're as bad as he is, always pushing your nose into other people's business to find out what's happening."

Claire gasped at his betrayal. She'd been waiting for the right moment to reveal her dream to her parents.

All her stenography training, history lessons, and language practice had one goal: preparation for becoming a foreign correspondent. But her mother wouldn't approve and Jock, Claire shuddered, would dismiss her goal as the fanciful dreams of a child.

"Really?" Anne leaned back into the seat. "We haven't known many respectable female reporters. We intend for you to be a history teacher. Why else did we spend all that money sending you to college?"

Claire looked out the window at suffragettes in Trafalgar Square exhorting men to enlist, and her confidence slipped away. Her parents kept no secrets from one another. If her father ridiculed her hopes, Claire's soul would shatter, just like her lost senior year of college. No home, no Radcliffe, no future; her shoulders slumped.

Peter shifted beside her and cleared his throat. She shook her head.

The motorcar crept past St. Martin's in the Field church, and Claire rallied to devise an answer as they headed east toward Fleet Street and Jock Meacham.

"Grandfather always said I was a born reporter," Claire finally said. "You know I'm a good writer."

"You are a good writer," Anne agreed, "but your grandfather's poor judgment is the reason we're living in England on my sister's charity while we pray your father doesn't lose his job."

Claire had no answer to the truth.

Peter waved his hands. "No charity, Aunt Anne, we're thankful you're here. My mother's spirits are much improved since you arrived. I'm sorry I spoke. I didn't mean to cause trouble."

Anne arched a brow. "So, what are you doing now?"

He swallowed. "Setting things straight with Uncle Jock. He needs to understand I'm not a child. I'm a man."

Mr. Able stopped the motorcar before a gray stone building flying flags from several nations, including the United States. Peter opened the door and stepped out with Claire right behind him carrying her satchel. "Aunt Anne?" he stretched his hand to her.

She stared straight ahead. "Jock won't tolerate domestic issues in the office. If you're determined to confront him in the newsroom, I'll remain with Mr. Able. This has been an illuminating outing and I have much to consider. We will wait."

Claire and Peter entered a foyer of black and white marble tiles. Claire's head swerved as she took it all in. She'd not visited yet and longed to examine the newsroom where her father worked as a journalist and editor—assuming he didn't throw them out first.

"I say, Claire, I'm sorry. I thought you'd have told them by now."

She stopped at the lift gate. "I didn't know your flying lessons were a secret."

"You know Mummy." He squared his shoulders. "We'll face your father together. It can't be worse than the time we ran his sailboat aground."

Claire adjusted her satchel and blew out her breath at his usual optimism. If they didn't handle Jock correctly, this could go much worse.

Two years older, Peter had always been her hero. He'd taken responsibilities seriously those family summers in Newport, Rhode Island, teaching her to sail and warning her to ignore his sister's bossy ways. Her solitary childhood would have been much lonelier without those summers and Peter's letters from across the Atlantic.

Now she wasn't so sure about his judgment.

They rode the creaking lift to the third floor and exited into a hallway facing frosted glass doors marked with white letters: Boston Newspaper Syndicate. Peter blanched at the bold label. "A mate of mine from Oxford works here, Nigel Bentley-Smith, a copyboy. You'd like him; he studied history."

The rickety staccato of typewriters echoed from the office, and an echoing excitement welled in Claire. She ached to see her byline in a newspaper, particularly The Boston Daily owned by the BNS, and yearned to hear today's latest news. While she'd hoped to prepare a little longer before broaching her writing aspirations with her father, if she acted decisively, she might be able to lay the groundwork for an opportunity.

It was a long shot, but she'd fulfilled her father's order and deterred Peter from enlisting in the British Expeditionary Force. Surely, he'd see her as responsible and competent, even resourceful like a good reporter.

Peter straightened his shoulders like a soldier, strode to the doors, and pushed them open with a bang.



## Chapter Two

Few men noticed them over the typewriter din as they marched into the office, the air smoky blue from tobacco. A slight man with a tiny moustache over a frown stalked across the newsroom from a glassed-in office opposite the doors. He wore rumpled black trousers and a white shirt with sleeves held in place by black garters. “May I help you?”

“We’re here to see Jock Meacham,” Peter said. “It’s a personal matter.”

“Are you Mr. Conroy—the city editor?” Claire asked. “I’m Jock’s daughter.”

He sniffed. “Surely you know we’re covering a war and families are not welcome in the newsroom, particularly on personal business. Is this an emergency?”

“Yes,” Peter said, even as Claire answered, “No.”

Conroy scowled. “Take a seat. He’s watching the wire news. I’ll see if he can be bothered.”

They sat in straight-backed chairs along a wall lined with dusty bookshelves in the high-ceilinged room. Wood paneling, clusters of desks, candlestick phones, the smell of ink and newsprint were all familiar to Claire. She’d called upon her father in newspaper offices since birth—but always at his invitation.

Glass doors lined the south wall, the home of the clattering telegraph service. “Managing Editor” was painted in gold across the window of the southeast corner office overlooking Fleet Street. Empty teacups littered the busy journalists’ desks, the only British distinction she observed.

The reporters ranged from squeaking callow youths to gravel-voiced men, all wearing a variety of facial hair and clothing similar to Conroy’s. Four of the most youthful—copyboys—sat in the southwestern corner along with an unoccupied desk covered in papers. In most newsrooms they typed, handled wire copy, and served as general assistants.

Cub reporters often started as copyboys, and that’s where Claire wanted to be—in the thick of the newsroom and under her father’s tutelage. A hum of joy pushed a smile across her face, even as her stomach roiled in anticipation.

Only then did she notice the absence of women.

Peter indicated an athletic man with high cheekbones in the far corner. “Nigel. I’ll introduce you when we get a chance.” He put up his hand.

His friend jerked his chin in response but kept typing.

Nigel had tied his bowtie at a natty angle and slicked back his fair hair. His long fingers stilled the flapping yellow paper in his typewriter automatically. His manner—confident, controlled, and focused—pricked her interest. “How well do you know him?” she whispered.

“Well enough. You interested? He grew up in New Zealand, a colonist like you.”

Claire shook her head at the old family joke, but needed to concentrate on thwarting this potential disaster, not on a handsome man. She removed her glasses to polish with her handkerchief and to think.

The door opened behind Nigel and an auburn-haired young man with broad shoulders carried in a wire report. This would be fresh news, possibly from the continent. Claire replaced her glasses and edged forward in her chair.

She heard Jock Meacham’s distinctive Boston accent barking orders and asking questions. He strode through the doorway, a pencil stuck behind his ear and papers in hand. His handmade leather shoes squeaked on the wooden floor as he halted in the middle of the newsroom like a circus ringmaster, a handful of reporters jumping up to perform.

Seeing her tall father in his element—blue-black hair gleaming, tailored trousers fitting perfectly, ever-present pipe punctuating his words—thrilled Claire. Jock Meacham commanded every room with his vigor and personality while his dashing features—sky-blue eyes against swarthy skin—could not be ignored.

He fixed his piercing eyes on each writer as he outlined the latest information. He pointed at stories he wanted, waved off those unneeded for the five o’clock news cable to Boston, and snapped his fingers for the wire report. The auburn-haired man spoke in a flat American accent.

Jock’s gaze raked the audience until he saw Claire and his black-winged eyebrows shot up. He handed off his papers and crossed the room in five broad steps. Claire and Peter stood.

He scrutinized his nephew, but spoke to Claire. “Where did you find him?”

“Scotland Yard recruiting office.”

“You should not have sent Claire—” Peter began.

“It was mobbed,” Claire said.

Jock faced her. “What do you mean?”

“The bobby told me men began lining up as soon as the king declared war. He’d been there since midnight trying to keep order.”

Jock raised his voice. “We need this story. Any copyboy handy with a pencil and paper? Hodges?”

Claire pulled her pad from the satchel and released the pencil from her hair. "I'm ready."

"It's Hodges's job."

"I'll write down what I saw. It will save time."

"Uncle Jock." Peter began again. "If you wanted me, you should have come yourself."

Jock ignored him. "No need, Claire. Hodges will take down the information."

"I've got it right here." Claire scribbled as she spoke. This might be her only chance. "The sun beat down, the men stood in a line more than a mile long stretching to Trafalgar Square and blocking traffic. The honking of horns, cheering of men, and playing of the Royal Navy Band made for a raucous clamor."

"Good." Jock fumbled his pipe into the pocket of his fine jacket and rubbed his chin. "Are you getting this down, Hodges?"

"Not quite, sir," the American said.

"I've got it." Claire jotted as fast as she could, confident she'd stay ahead of him.

"What else do you know?"

"Mr. Meacham, women do not work as reporters at the Boston News Syndicate," Mr. Conroy said. "If you want a story on the recruitment drive, we'll send a reporter."

"No need if Claire has the information," Jock said. "Ready, Hodges?"

Hodges nodded.

Claire had already written several paragraphs, sticking to facts and the details she'd deliberately noticed, just as Grandfather had taught her. "Why don't you use my notes? I can type them up myself." She flipped over the first page and scrawled more lines and curving notation.

The copyboy cleared his throat and she looked up. Deep brown eyes watched from a round, pale face as Hodges tried not to smile. "She appears faster than me, Mr. Meacham. She's already filled more than a page."

She heard Peter's exhale of irritation behind her, but catching her father's attention with news usually deflected his anger. She'd used the technique for years.

Jock thrust his hands into his pockets and jingled coins. "Okay, how many men?" He nodded to Hodges. "Take this down."

Claire wrote the answer on her pad. "The bobby said hundreds, maybe even thousands, enlisted this morning in both the British Expeditionary Forces and the Royal Navy. Featuring men from every walk of British life, many had been up all night celebrating the declaration of war. Some carried the effects of a night spent drinking, while others were sober and quiet at the enormity of their action."

"Stick to facts," Jock growled.

"Suffragettes manned tables at the base of Lord Nelson's column in Trafalgar Square. Transport crowded the streets as men answered their king's call to enlist in the BEF."

"By Jove, the young woman's a reporter," said a journalist seated not far away.

"She's learned from the best," Peter muttered.

"Here's the final question," her father said. "What happens inside Scotland Yard when a man enlists?"

Claire's mouth dropped open. She'd not thought of the question and certainly wouldn't have been allowed into Scotland Yard to find out. "He's examined by physicians," she said slowly.

Jock crossed his arms. "Hard to get the full story when you're not the right type of reporter, isn't it?"

She blinked rapidly, not sure where to look.

"The enlistee has to be at least five foot, three inches tall and between the ages of eighteen and thirty-eight," Peter said. "He's asked to sign up for a specific time period and often joins with his mates. Edward Henley and I went to enlist this morning. We wanted to serve together. Thanks to you that won't be possible."

The two men glared at each other. "Give Hodges your notes, Claire. He'll finish the job you started."

"But I've written it in shorthand," Claire said. "I should do this myself."

"You can read Pittman shorthand, can't you Hodges?" Jock asked. "Take Miss Meacham's notes and type them up."

Claire tore out the pages with a savage rip and thrust them at Hodges.

"Thank you," he said. "Will you review them so I can be sure I understand your hand?"

Hope flared and Claire lifted her head high.

"Quickly, Claire. Hodges has a job to do. Join us in the hall." Jock propelled Peter out the door.

Smelling of sweat and typewriter ribbon, Hodges had ink-stained square fingers. "I've been here all night," he apologized. "I'll be more confident of my accuracy if we go over your notes first."

He made several notations as she read. "You're very fast. Did you work as a stenographer in America?"

Claire shook her head. "I took down lectures in college. Writing notes verbatim helped me learn better."

"So I've heard. Were you at a women's college?"

"Radcliffe for three years, up until June." Disappointment at not finishing jabbed Claire yet again.

"War has a way of changing everyone's plans," Hodges said. "Thanks for your help."

Claire stepped toward the exit.

"Let me open the door for you," said a clear tenor voice with a different accent. "Nigel Bentley-Smith. I knew Peter at Oxford."

"So he said." Claire had to look up to him. "You're a copyboy?"

"At the present. Tell Peter I'll call at Belgravia soon. Magnificent trick with your hair and note taking. Very impressive." He opened the office door with a flourish.

Claire nodded at the handsome man with turquoise eyes and slipped out, mystified at his attention.

In the hallway, Jock lectured Peter. "An adult doesn't abandon his widowed mother and debutante sister without having a plan in place."

"I want to serve with Edward."

"If Henley is such a good friend, he can wait for you. The first men who enlist end up in the meat grinder. Take your time. If you're so keen on flying, get more training. The Germans aren't playing; they're shooting real weapons and many soldiers will die."

"You're an American, you can't understand."

"I grew up hearing my father's stories of the War Between the States. I covered the Spanish-American War. I know what happens when weapons are used. It's not pretty and this war isn't going to be over soon. You've plenty of time to get yourself killed; make sure your mother and sister are taken care of before you do so."

Claire stomped up to them. "How can you be so cruel?"

“You studied history; you know what’s happened in Europe. Do you believe this war will be concluded quickly?”

“No.”

“And what was that stunt in the office?” Jock demanded. “I sent you to find Peter, not interview people on the street.”

Claire couldn’t meet his eyes.

Jock’s voice softened. “Thank you for your observations. We’ll use them, but the newsroom is no place for a refined young woman.” He touched her fallen hair. “Especially one as pretty as you. I can’t have you distracting my copyboys.”

“I meant to help, Papa.”

Jock lifted her chin. “You did. Boston needs the news and I need to get it to them. See you at the house.”

The door slammed shut behind him.

“That wasn’t nearly as bad as running the boat aground,” Peter said.

Claire pushed the elevator call button. Maybe not for Peter, but Jock had squelched her hopes.

Except, she thought as the lift eased up, she had plenty of time. The war had only just started.

# Chapter Three

**August 1914**

Uncle Henry had left behind a muddle of business affairs and complex banking arrangements when he'd drowned last January. Starting August 6, Peter applied himself to the complicated task of winding up his father's estate. Every morning he packed up a briefcase, put on a bowler hat and strode out the door determined to resolve matters with the barristers as quickly as possible.

His mother, Anne's older sister, Sarah, thanked Jock for taking Peter in hand.

He lit his pipe. "Young people need a purpose. Peter simply needed to be redirected."

Why didn't her father think the same thing about Claire's empty days? When she volunteered to take notes at Peter's appointments, she'd been dismissed with an indulgent pat on the head like a pet dog.

"What's my purpose, then?" she asked. "What am I doing here?"

Jock laughed. "Why would a history major in London need to ask that question? If nothing else, get a reading card to the British Library. I'm sure your mother can come up with ways to fill your time." He banged out the door.

Claire grit her teeth.

A month after arriving in London, the Meacham women were still trying to find their role in Aunt Sarah's snowy-white three-story mansion facing Belgravia Square. With a bevy of servants awaiting orders, Anne and Claire had few responsibilities in the polished marble house filled with thick Turkish rugs, heavy velvet curtains, and the hush of loss.

Anne spent most days closeted with her only sibling, who mourned her husband with Victorian severity. Aunt Sarah's dayroom was a shrine of photographs, heavily scented flowers, and baskets of handwork. Sarah knit, wrote letters, and listened to her sister read aloud—when Anne wasn't urging her to get out and reclaim her life.

Claire sought refuge in Uncle Henry's library, still smelling of his cigars and brandy, the glassed-in shelves stuffed with leather volumes. His grand desk sat unused, the globe unspun, but the welcoming sofa and excellent lighting invited diligence. Claire practiced her shorthand, wrote up her diary, and read every newspaper and periodical that entered the house.

The rest of the time left Claire with her cousin Sylvia, a pert twenty-one-year-old debutante with precise diction and fashionable clothing. Oblivious to the war and busy arranging social events, Sylvia zeroed in on Claire's twenty-year-old flaws immediately.

"I know you've spent most of your life in dreary libraries," Sylvia murmured one morning at breakfast, "but my dressmakers can take you in hand. Clothing is more elegant in Britain; your Boston togs simply won't do."

Claire seldom felt comfortable in posh clothes requiring geometric precision to close properly. She preferred simple garments that didn't hamper her long limbs.

"Thank you for your suggestions," Anne broke in before Sylvia listed Claire's social failings yet again, "but we need to see how the war proceeds before we purchase new clothing."

Sylvia's delicate eyebrows contracted. "Indeed."

She shared Anne and Sarah's golden hair and liked to open her sapphire eyes wide in feigned innocence. Always garbed in finery designed to emphasize her long neck and slim figure, Sylvia sauntered through life in a cloud of French perfume.

Claire spent a lot of time at her side failing to be a good sport.

As the second week of war ended, Aunt Sarah was presiding over the lavish breakfast table when Jock hurried in to grab a meal. He'd been reporting nearly round the clock for a fortnight; dark circles bagged under his eyes. "I need to leave, Anne."

His wife insisted on a full breakfast but understood him well. "Claire, hand your father what he craves."

Claire provided the morning's papers. She rose early to read and mark the most significant news in red ink before a housemaid ironed the pages flat.

Jock chuckled. "I love a woman who understands what's important." He winked at Anne and opened the Times as he tucked into breakfast—two fried eggs, salted kippers, a baked tomato, and buttered toast.

Sylvia tapped the top of her hard-boiled egg with a sterling spoon while Anne poured tea from a Wedgwood teapot. The butler and a maid came with hot crumpets, the mail, and impeccable service, and then left.

"How is life at the office, Papa?" Claire sipped tea fortified the English way with milk.

"Madcap, the copyboys run all day long. I'm down to two and Hodges hurt his right hand."

Hope soared in a flurry, but she kept her voice casual. "Do you need help?"

He stopped chewing. Her parents studied each other a moment too long. Jock shook his head; Anne raised her eyebrows. He sighed. "How fast do you take shorthand, Claire?"

Her heart leapt. "One hundred seventy-five words a minute."

"So fast?"

Jock drummed the white damask tablecloth with his fingers. "Conroy will oppose your presence, but I don't see how else to get the cable out to Boston on time. I've lost reporters too. All I can offer is a front-row seat on history in the making and hours of dictation and typing."

"I'd love to."



"I don't know, Jock," Anne said. "Is the newsroom a proper place for your daughter?"

"I've been in newsrooms lots of times," Claire protested.

Jock snorted. "She'll be working for me, not hunting a husband." He turned to his sister-in-law. "I've lost half my copyboys to the army. How will society treat Claire if she joins me in the newsroom?"

Aunt Sarah pursed her lips. "This would help the war effort?"

"You're not a suffragette, are you?" Sylvia sneered.

Claire's mind whirled as she tried to devise the best answer for the most people sitting at the table. "I could free a man to fight."

"She'll be safe with Jock," Aunt Sarah said, "but could you manage without her, Anne?"

Anne picked up her teacup. "You run your home so beautifully; I believe Claire will be more useful helping Jock, as long as she's discreet."

Jock pointed at the clock. "We're leaving in ten minutes, Claire. Put on a plain garment—your female presence will be distraction enough without frivolous clothing."

Claire ran.

An indignant and overruled Mr. Conroy assigned Claire the desk between Nigel and Jim Hodges. "If you have questions, ask them. For the record, no flirting will be tolerated in this office. You serve your father, no one else, and I don't think you belong here." He stalked away.

"A princess joins the peasants." Nigel leaned back in his chair.

Claire smoothed down her shirtwaist's long white sleeves. "Hardly."

"I'm glad you're here," Jim said. "We need help. Do you type?"

The boxy black Underwood sat square in the middle of the oak desk, a basket of fresh paper beside it. Claire set her leather satchel in the bottom drawer. "Yes, though I'm better at shorthand."

"Good. Your father talks fast and he has a thick accent," Nigel said.

"We don't have an accent."

A cheeky grin. "Guess again, Yank. Jim is just as bad."

Jock called her into his office, closed the door, and indicated a straight-backed chair. "Take this down."

Jock described a meeting the night before with the First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill. Claire easily kept up. When he pulled out scribbled notes from his pocket, she snickered. "You expect me to read this?"

He sighed. "I obviously need help. It's helpful to have an American who understands Boston's culture and interests."

Claire grinned.

Jock smiled back. "But don't forget, Conroy's watching. You don't want to cross him."

Claire avoided the city editor as much as possible as the days passed, and she took dictation, transcribed notes, argued with Jock's theories, and typed. She focused on her yellow pencil and tried not to picture the scenes as her father crafted his stories. Soldiers wearing spiked helmets marched into villages and billeted in civilian homes. As the guns roared across fields ripe for harvest, birds vanished and the smell of hot bullets singed the air. Casualties mounted in appalling numbers.

Her stomach knotted as she sharpened her pencils with her late Grandfather's silver pen knife. Sometimes the inky scent of the silk typewriter ribbon provoked nausea.

Jim Hodges stopped beside her one afternoon. "Are you feeling okay, Miss Meacham?"

"I tell myself to act like a machine, not a person. If I don't picture what the words describe, I can do my job." Her hands trembled.

"Perhaps the mechanics of it," he said. "But I pray you never lose your heart or your desire to know the truth."

"Is that possible?" Claire snapped the knife shut and dropped it into her bag. "The facts are repellant."

"But they're part of the job." Nigel lit a cigarette and blew out pungent smoke. "People need to know the truth about what's happening on the battlefield."

Jim crossed his arms. "Whatever things are true, whatever things are honest, whatever things are just, think on these things."

"How do you do that in a war?" Nigel muttered.

Claire tried to remember where she'd heard Jim's quote. "That sounds like a journalist's creed, hunting for the story."

"It serves the purpose." Jim restacked the papers on his desk.

"Such an interesting question." Nigel rolled a fresh piece of paper into the typewriter. "What is truth?"

"Pilate's question was cynical," Jim said. "He didn't want to know the truth."

Nigel raised an eyebrow. "Pilate preferred propaganda. Like the Huns."

Claire watched their verbal sparring with interest. The term copyboys did not describe Jim and Nigel. Unlike the teenagers who worked at the Boston BNS offices, they were mature men in their twenties battling issues and vocabulary between each other. She relished their arguments, thankful to be discussing meaningful events with knowledgeable men, rather than enduring Sylvia's endless chatter about haute couture.

"You must have reporter instincts in your blood," Nigel said. "What was it like to grow up with such a father?"

“Never a dull moment!” Claire laughed. “I’ve learned many tricks from Jock Meacham.”

“Too right?” Nigel’s New Zealand drawl teased. “Can you pull a rabbit out of your hat?”

She’d never received much attention from young men and certainly not from one as dashing as Nigel. Claire gave a brief thought to how Sylvia would respond.

It didn’t matter. She wasn’t allowed to flirt, even if she’d known how.

Mr. Conroy’s eyebrows came together as he looked in her direction.

“You’re not answering,” Nigel said. “Do you need a hat?”

She picked up her pencil as an answer popped into her mind. “It’s one of the oldest reporter tricks. You remain silent and wait for your interviewee to blurt out information. Thanks for providing a demonstration.”

“Touché.” Nigel stubbed out his cigarette and resumed typing; the key’s rat-a-tat beat a healthy rhythm broken only by the mechanical zip of the paper carriage.

“Hodges and Claire, come in here,” Jock shouted from his office door. Claire grabbed her notepad and pencil. She noticed Jim’s untucked shirttail as they entered the office.

“Were you here all night, Hodges?” Jock asked.

“Yes.”

“You’ve been working hard and the news should be quiet for a few hours.” He held out a thick envelope. I want you to take this to Lord Northcliffe at the Times, his eyes only.”

He’d been complaining about the British news censors all week.

“What are you up to?” Claire asked.

“We need to band together and figure out how to get meaningful information,” Jock said.

He eyed Hodges. “After you’re done there, take a couple hours off for a break. I’m sending Claire with you so she’ll get some fresh air. I’m headed to Whitehall to meet with officials.”

“But—” Claire sputtered.

“Conroy won’t tolerate you in the office without me. I’ll need you when I return from this appointment.”

Claire leaned close to whisper. “Don’t you know what this looks like?”

Jock crossed his arms. “Perhaps you’d rather sit alone in the tearoom at the Savoy Hotel?”

She touched her throat as she tried to fathom the social impropriety.

“Hodges, can I trust you to escort my daughter without any designs?”

Heat coursed through Claire. “But—”

“My intentions are always good, sir,” Jim replied. “Perhaps we can tour the National Gallery of Art afterwards? We could inquire about their plans for the war.”

“Fine, but no questions. You’re not reporters. That good enough for you, Claire?”

“Miss Meacham can ignore me if she prefers.” Jim’s dark eyes crinkled at the corners.

This was getting worse.

She’d noticed Jim’s helpful attitude in the newsroom. While Nigel teased her for not knowing how to replace a messy typewriter ribbon, Jim did it without a word. Maybe he’d regard this as another such task. “I’ll go.”

“Good. Get some air and see some art.” Jock checked his newest prize, a watch strapped to his wrist. “Be back by three o’clock. The censors aren’t going to pass us anything before then. They take a long lunch at their clubs.”

“I’ll get my coat.” Jim left the office.

“I don’t trust that Nigel—he watches you too much—but Hodges is harmless.” Jock pulled a gold sovereign from his pocket. “Take a cab to the museum. That’ll put Hodges in his place.”

Claire accepted the heavy coin and collected her satchel and hat.

The late summer sun beat down when they exited onto Fleet Street and the city smells of oil and horse droppings assaulted the nose. Honking taxis and rumbling horse-drawn transport rattled past while Londoners filled the sidewalk. Three young men in new uniforms strutted before them, bragging in cracking voices of their plans for the German army.

“Everyone wants to go to war.” Claire clasped her straw hat to her head as a breeze threatened to steal it. “How about you?”

“This isn’t my war.”

“Do you plan to enlist?”

Jim helped a woman’s perambulator over a rut in the pavement. “No.”

“What if America joined the fighting?”

“No.”

They reached the Times building a dozen doors down the street and were ushered directly into Lord Northcliffe’s office. The elder statesman of British journalism scowled. “Why didn’t Meacham come himself if this was so important? Why send a chit of a girl and a grubby—what are you? A copyboy? And Americans both? Aren’t British men good enough for the Boston News Syndicate?”

“They all joined the BEF. I’m taking a spot so a man can fight,” Claire stuttered.

“A woman in the newsroom?” Northcliffe grabbed the envelope, scanned the note, and shook his head. “This doesn’t even justify a formal response. Inform Meacham we trust the generals; they’ll tell us what we need to know.”

“Are they giving you the full story?” Claire asked. “Reporters need at least two sources.”

He looked down his aristocratic nose at her. “We are in a battle for our lives, miss. I don’t need an American girl telling me how to report our war. Improper information can be deadly.”

“But if other countries think you’re distorting the truth, they might question what else you’re not reporting correctly. You could undermine the whole effort if you limit information.” Claire couldn’t believe she had to remind him of basic journalism ethics.

Northcliffe turned red and blustered, “You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Jim spoke calmly. “I believe Miss Meacham is appealing to your sense of honor, sir.”

“Both of you, get out of here. I could shut down the BNS for such an effrontery.”

Jim tugged her away as the secretary slammed the door in her face

“This is not responsible journalism.” Claire clutched her fists and stared at the door.

“I didn’t realize you were a reporter,” Jim said.

“Not yet, but my grandfather once owned the BNS and I’ve heard stories from him and my father. The British government’s censorship is wrong.”

“Perhaps they don’t have a choice. England is not a democracy.” Sweat beaded Jim’s brow. “The press may not be so free.”

Claire’s mind whirled as she replayed the conversation. That fat old man wasn’t a journalist; he’d become an army stooge. She touched her lips. She hadn’t said that, had she? What would Jock say?

And what about Mr. Conroy?

Claire’s stomach clenched. She had been rude and should have just delivered the message. But Northcliffe was wrong in choosing to side with the government. Her mother would have expected her to be more judicious when addressing a lord. Claire bit her lip. “Don’t tell Mr. Conroy what I said.”

“Certainly not. Shall we go on?”

Claire stopped at the street corner and pulled a London map from her bag.

Jim peered over her shoulder. “A clever way to learn the city.”

“The only way, so far. I’ve money; my father said to call a cab.”

He scrutinized her, then stepped to the street and raised his hand. She couldn’t meet his eye, at the slight. Her stomach would not stop churning

The National Gallery of Art shimmered like a palace in the sunlight, but Claire remained distracted. They silently climbed the stairs through Corinthian columns guarding the entrance.

Jim's steps quickened. "Look who's here."

They met a welcoming couple at the entry. The youthful woman of medium height had merry blue eyes and wore her soft brown hair brushed into wings over her ears. "We missed you this morning, Jim."

"I spent the night with the telegraph. I've been given a reprieve for a few hours. May I introduce my colleague?"

Claire stood taller at his description and held her chin higher.

"This is Miss Claire Meacham. Claire, may I present Biddy Chambers and her husband, Reverend Oswald Chambers."

Claire shook the pretty woman's hand and tried to be polite as she turned to the tall, lanky man beside her. First a run-in with an officious lord and now a clergyman. Could the day get any worse?

Reverend Chambers wore a white clergyman's collar against his black suit, a genial smile crossing his thin face. Fawn-colored hair waved back from his high forehead, but what she noticed most were his deep-set marine-blue eyes. Amusement enlivened his features and he stretched out his hand. "Are you the new American with the excellent stenography skills?" His voice carried a lilt of Scotland.

"How do you know who I am?" Claire asked.

Jim colored. "Oswald is the principal of the college I attend. I told them how well you take dictation since Biddy is also a stenographer. She's faster than you."

Biddy laughed.

Claire didn't believe him. "How fast do you take down, Mrs. Chambers?"

"Fast enough."

"Two hundred fifty words a minute," Jim said.

Claire stared. "Faster than people speak?"

"And sometimes necessary for me if I start to ramble," Reverend Chambers said. "We're here to tour the gallery, would you care to join us?"

"May we?" Jim asked. "I know you're familiar with the paintings."

Claire sighed. She knew few clergymen besides the ones she'd heard preach in Boston and at glorious St. Paul's Cathedral in London. An Anglican like most of her set with only a perfunctory knowledge of the Bible, she couldn't imagine how a clergyman would react to art. "We don't want to bother you."

"We're here to see our favorites in case the gallery closes again with the war," Reverend Chambers said. "Join us. We'll start with this one."

Exactly as Claire expected, *The Mystic Nativity* by Sandro Botticelli featured Mary and Joseph, Jesus, and barnyard animals. A myriad of angels—several on the crèche’s roof—cluttered the painting.

Reverend Chambers laughed, “This was one of John Ruskin’s favorites. The name comes from his comment about its mystic symbolism.”

“You’ve read Ruskin?” Surprised by the clergyman’s reference to an art critic and not the Bible, Claire instinctively reached for her notebook and pencil.

“Go ahead,” Jim whispered. “Oswald’s a teacher.”

Reverend Chambers described the history of the painting and the religious issues in Italy at the time. She’d only vaguely heard of Savonarola and jotted down the name for further investigation.

“Some of these concepts might be new to you,” Oswald said. “I find it helps to brood on the unknown and let it sit in your soul. It’s particularly helpful for me when I struggle with Bible passages.”

How novel, Claire thought, a clergyman who admits he doesn’t always understand the Bible. She followed him with surprising interest as he moved to the next painting.

Claire recognized specific details when he explained them and pretended she understood their importance. After a half-dozen, she could contain her question no longer. “How do you know all this?”

“I trained at London’s Royal Academy before sensing God’s direction to be an ambassador for Christ. I like to sketch. And you?”

“I’m not artistic, though I’ve played the piano.”

“I play the organ. It’s wonderful to praise our creator with our artistic abilities, don’t you think?”

Claire squirmed. “I’ve never considered it. What about you, Mrs. Chambers?”

“Call me Bidy. I leave the art to Oswald. I wanted to be secretary to the prime minister of England. That’s why I studied shorthand.”

Claire stared at her. The woman smiled and raised an eyebrow. “You?”

“To help me with my work,” she said slowly.

“That’s exactly what Bidy does,” Reverend Chambers said. “We’re a team. She takes down my words, runs the college and prays. We’d accomplish nothing without her.”

“We all know prayer is the greater work,” Bidy said and nudged her husband toward the next gallery.

They continued through the galleries, chatting easily. Oswald wasn’t necessarily drawn to religious art, though Jim gazed for a long time at a painting of Pilate confronting Jesus.

Caught up in the insightful explanations, Claire lost track of time. When an ornate clock chimed three, she gasped. “We’re late!” They scurried to catch a cab to the office.

“You’re late,” Jock growled at their return, “but so are the censors. Why are your cheeks red, Claire?”  
He glared at Jim.

With her mind energized by Reverend Chambers’ descriptions, Claire struggled to put into words what she’d learned. “We met a man who taught me to look at the world differently.”

“The world or paintings?” Jock lit his pipe.

“Does it matter?”

He puffed several times, watching her. “It very well could.”



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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle Ule is the author of *Mrs. Oswald Chambers: The Woman Behind the World's Bestselling Devotional*

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