

LOVE ALONG THE WIRES • 1

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear:
but now mine eye seeth thee.

—Job 42:5



CHAPTER

One

London, England
Early March, 1880

Alice McNeil looked up at the London boardinghouse that had been her home for over a year. It was a lumbering pile of brown bricks that, to Alice, always gave the appearance of frowning. It was a humble place, no doubt about it, but it was reasonably clean and housed friendly boarders. The landlady who presided over them all was kind enough, if overly vigilant. Mrs. Reston kept watch over her brood of young ladies like a mother hen.

Alice knew she was lucky to have a good job and a place to live, but she was ready for a change. Unlike most of the women at this boardinghouse, she wasn't here as a stopgap before finding a man who would marry and support her. Alice had no desire for any of that nonsense; she wanted an opportunity to set up on her own. She wanted to make her own rules about when she could come and go and what she could do. This was no mere dream, for big changes were coming if—no, *when*—she got the job at Henley and Company, a firm that specialized in imports of wheat and cotton.

Alice had spent the past seven years as a first-class operator at London's Central Telegraph Office. The job was challenging and

rewarding in its own way, but she was just one among hundreds of men and women who worked there like bees in a hive. Every aspect of their work, right down to the breaks, was strictly regimented. So was the pay. The telegraph service was a government entity, overseen by the postmaster general. While Alice enjoyed the work, she found the working conditions too stifling. She'd begun to look for positions at private companies that were large enough to rent their own private telegraph lines. They needed skilled operators, and the rumor was that most paid better wages than the government did.

Henley and Company had its own private telegraph line that was directly connected with its office in Liverpool. It also had a line to the Central Telegraph Office for reaching the wider world. They were looking to hire a new telegraph operator, and Alice knew she was perfect for the job. Her personal interview with Mr. Henley last week had gone quite well, she thought. He'd at least been willing to interview a woman for the position, which showed great acuity on his part. A few other places she'd applied to had declined to even speak with her. The interview had included sending a telegram on their wires to their Liverpool office—a test she'd passed with flying colors. At this point, all she could do was wait to hear back from them after they finished interviewing all the prospective candidates.

The door to the boardinghouse opened, and Mrs. Reston frowned at Alice from the doorway. "Tut-tut, girl, why are you lollygagging outside? The wind will blow you away if you're not careful!"

Yes, exactly like a mother hen, Alice thought, chafing a little. But she gave Mrs. Reston a smile and hurried up the steps.

She might be tired of this living arrangement, but Alice was heartily glad to be back in London. She'd spent the past few days at home in Lincolnshire, and it had worn her patience thin as paper. Alice always had mixed feelings about her family. She loved them all, but they exhausted her, too. They were all certain of the paths they'd taken in life, with no doubts as to whether another way

might be better. Her three brothers all worked in the local village; two were married and had young children. Her only sister had just turned eighteen, and as of yesterday, she, too, was married. Alice was happy for them all, of course, yet she never quite felt in step with them.

She shrugged off these thoughts as she made her way upstairs, planning to unpack and rest before teatime. Opening the door to her room, she was surprised to see someone inside. It was Emma, the newest and youngest of the girls who boarded there.

Emma turned from where she was standing at the window, a small watering can in her hand. “Oh! You’re back already. We weren’t expecting you until after seven.” She was a slight, quiet girl with a beauty many might describe as ethereal. Despite a hard upbringing, she was one of the sweetest and gentlest people Alice knew.

“I took an earlier train.” Alice set down her bag. “What are you doing?”

It wasn’t an accusation, for she knew Emma well enough to have no fears the girl was there out of mischief. She could easily guess the answer, though. It would have something to do with plants. Having grown up in the Kentish countryside, Emma was a natural-born gardener. Although she now lived in the city, she had done her best to bring a bit of the country with her. Her room was filled with plants of all kinds, and she’d even managed to coax a few flowers and shrubs to grow in the tiny patch of garden behind the boardinghouse.

Sure enough, Emma stepped away from the window, revealing four small potted plants arranged along the sill. “I hope you don’t mind. These will thrive in the light you get from this window. Plus, it makes the room ever so much cozier, don’t you think?”

Each of the plants had soft, lovely blooms. Their color even complemented the counterpane on Alice’s bed. Even so, Alice gave her friend a mock frown. “Do you really want to keep them here? You know I am death to plants.” It wasn’t as though she held any malice toward growing things. It was just that she had no knack

for tending to them. Even the hardiest of plants never survived her forgetful oversight.

“I’ll care for them. You needn’t do anything but enjoy them. It seemed the least I could do, given all the ways you’ve helped me.” Emma had recently graduated from the telegraphy school run by the postal service. Learning Morse code had been a challenge for her, but Alice had provided extra tutoring in the evenings to help her succeed.

There was a quick tap on the door, and Rose, one of the other boarders, came into the room. “Alice! So glad you’re back. I’ve missed you, my girl.”

“Have you?” Alice said with a teasing grin. Rose was among the least sentimental women Alice had ever met.

“Positively pining away,” Rose insisted. “Primarily because that overbearing Miss Reed monopolizes the dinner conversation when you’re not around.”

“She does have a *lot* of interesting opinions,” Alice agreed.

Rose scrunched her nose. “Interesting if you’re a small-minded individual who cares only for fashions and gossip.” She eyed the plants in the window. “Emma, I see you’ve been spreading your verdant joy to Alice’s room.”

“Yes, and you’re next,” Emma threatened with a smile.

“Fine by me. Just don’t ask me to water them. I’d likely drown the poor things.”

“I don’t know why you two are so incorrigible about plant care. They add so much to a home. One day when I have a little cottage of my own, I’ll fill it with plants and design the most wonderful garden.”

Rose and Alice exchanged a look. Emma was always daydreaming about getting married and returning to the country. She was certainly beautiful enough to capture the heart of any man, but whether her life afterward would live up to her dreams was more doubtful.

“Yes, well, in the meantime, how are you getting along at work?” Alice asked. She knew Emma’s first few weeks as a full-time telegraph operator had been difficult for her to adjust to.

Emma made a face. “I can’t sleep at night. I keep hearing dots and dashes in my dreams.”

“You’ll get over that in time,” Rose said. “That happened to me, too, in the beginning. But now I don’t think a thing about it.”

“Let’s not talk about work right now,” Emma said, turning to Alice. “I want to hear all about your sister’s wedding!” Her face lit up at the thought of this happier subject. “Were there a lot of people? Was Annie’s gown beautiful? Where did they serve the wedding breakfast? Where are they going on their honeymoon trip?”

Rose rolled her eyes. “I shouldn’t be surprised that a wedding is uppermost in your mind.”

“I love weddings,” Emma said without apology. “They’re always filled with so much joy and promise.”

“Unfortunately, they’re not always followed by the ‘happily ever after’ that’s described in storybooks.” Rose perhaps intended to tease Emma, but her voice held a note of pain that was evidence of her personal knowledge of the subject.

“I know there can be hardships,” Emma replied, sounding chastened as she gave Rose a sympathetic look.

Alice and Emma didn’t know all the details, but they were aware that life had not been kind to Rose. Although just thirty years old, Rose was a widow. Alice glanced at the mourning ring on Rose’s left hand. Six seed pearls encircled a tiny diamond, all set on a black background. The delicate gold band was inlaid with black enamel, on which was inscribed *In Memory Of*. Their landlady, who had a better knowledge of Rose’s past, had once whispered to Alice that the truth was Rose’s husband had not been a good man, and few people lamented his early demise. Rose’s general attitude toward men seemed to support that claim. And yet she wore the ring. Alice hoped that one day Rose might tell her why.

Seeing she had cast a pall on the room, Rose said, with what Alice suspected was forced cheerfulness, “You’re right, though. Weddings can be marvelously fun. Come on then, Alice, tell us all about it.” She took a seat in the room’s only armchair. “What a

wonder your sister was able to marry without your parents forcing you to marry someone first, like in *The Taming of the Shrew*.”

“It’s a modern miracle,” Alice agreed with a smile. “Although I hope you are not comparing me to the tart-tongued Katherina.”

Rose winked. “There are some similarities.”

Alice made a pretend swipe at her before settling on the end of the bed. “Fortunately for me, in this day and age, it’s not a requirement that the eldest marry first.” Certainly not in her father’s enlightened point of view. Alice was thankful for that. “It was a lovely wedding, despite the wind that threatened to blow off every man’s hat as we walked to the church. March is not ideal for a wedding, but the lovebirds refused to wait even one month longer.”

Emma sat beside her, all eagerness to hear more. Alice related as many pretty details as she could remember. It wasn’t difficult to speak of the wedding in glowing terms. The bride and groom were very much in love, and everyone in the village had approved of the match. Even Rose looked misty-eyed as Alice described the heartfelt speech her father had given at the wedding breakfast.

Alice knew she was wiser in these matters than her friends, although she held nothing against them. She was not hardened and bitter about love, as Rose was, but neither was she naïve, like Emma, who dreamed of weddings and happily-ever-afters. No, she had found the better path, though she knew everyone had to make their own decisions in these things. One of her oldest friends, Lucy Bennington, had gotten married and done well enough, as those things went. Lucy was happy, or at least she thought she was, and Alice supposed that was more or less the same thing. Lucy shook her head over Alice from time to time, but no whisper of doubt ever settled in Alice’s ears. Or her heart.

Long ago, Miss Templeton, the proprietor of Miss Templeton’s School for Young Ladies, had shown Alice a better way. To make one’s own way and live independently—Miss Templeton had relished that. Alice had seen that quality in her and admired it greatly, even as a young pupil. Miss Templeton had singled out Alice early on, inviting her to tea one afternoon in her chambers

and sharing a thrilling vision for Alice's life that had permanently captured her dreams.

"My job is to polish up young ladies so they will be a fine catch for a gentleman," Miss Templeton had told her. "I am an expert at carrying out my duties, which is why this school has such a lauded reputation. However, I also keep my eye out for the truly extraordinary girl. One who is meant for better things."

Twelve-year-old Alice had looked at her with wide eyes. "Am I such a girl, Miss Templeton?"

"Indeed you are. You are clever and smart as a whip, and you prefer to work out your maths problems rather than pay one of the older girls to do it for you."

Alice's mouth dropped open in surprise.

"Don't think I don't know this," Miss Templeton said with a smile. "But I let them keep their little secrets while I look for the girl with pencil shavings on her frock and graphite smudges on her fingers."

Thus had begun Alice's apprenticeship with Miss Templeton, who had worked to get her accepted to the telegraph school and sent her off to London with the expectation of accomplishing many great things. The dream had begun with Miss Templeton, but Alice had fully embraced it. Her parents had been less sure. Alice had won over her father first. That hadn't been too difficult, given that he, too, was a telegrapher and treated her no differently than his three sons. Ultimately he'd helped her mother become accustomed to the outlandish idea. Alice's happiness was their primary aim, after all. As for a loving, homekeeping daughter who would care for them in their old age, her little sister was stepping into that role perfectly. With a stable home and a good husband, Annie could help her parents with whatever needs might arise.

In so many ways, her sister's marriage was a relief to both Alice and the rest of her family. Her new husband, Roger, was an earnest and hardworking man. He would love Annie and take good care of her. That was all Annie cared about. She wanted someone to admire and depend on.

Alice was made of different stuff. She relished the opportunity to strike out on her own, to prove her worth and value. She was glad the field of telegraphy was open to women. Most ladies only kept the job until they were married, but Alice intended to be one of the smaller number who made a career of it. What could be better than filling one's days with interesting and rewarding work, and to spend the evenings and weekends reading or walking in the park? She might even take up the new fad of bicycling. That would ensure she remained a spinster forever!

She wondered at herself sometimes, that such thoughts the world found peculiar seemed natural to her. But every time she sounded the depths of her feelings, the answer was no different. Her life had its unique rewards, and they were enough for her.

It was only after Emma and Rose had left her room so Alice could freshen up before tea that she noticed a letter sitting on her dresser—from Henley and Company! It must have arrived while she was out of town. She tore open the envelope and pulled out the letter.

She read it through at least three full times. Then, with a deep sigh, she sank into the chair Rose had recently vacated. She leaned back, her eyes closed, allowing her mind to fill with visions of all the things she would do in the days ahead. Everything in her life was unfurling just as Miss Templeton had said it would.

She had gotten the job.



Douglas Shaw sat opposite the desk of Mr. Pickens, a senior partner in one of the largest cotton brokerage firms in Atlanta. He leaned back confidently in his chair, waiting patiently while Pickens read through the details of the contract proposal Douglas had just handed him.

“To load at Savannah, Charleston, or Port Royal . . .” Pickens murmured aloud as he read, nodding in approval. “Discharge at Liverpool or Bristol channel port, as directed at the time of the signing of the bill of lading. . . .”

Douglas was confident Pickens would find nothing amiss. After four weeks of working with his company's business partners in New York and Charleston, Douglas knew the details of these contracts down to the last comma. Pickens's firm was a new client for Henley and Company, but Douglas had researched them thoroughly enough to know they were eager to improve their British trade.

Pickens finished the last page, took off his reading spectacles, and looked up at Douglas. "We may need to adjust these sailing dates. I'll confer with my manager about that. I'll also have to get his agreement to the terms for demurrage. Sometimes the trains can be delayed getting the cargo to port, which means it takes longer than anticipated to load the ship. We want to ensure any extra fees for this are reasonable."

"I feel confident we can work out the details to everyone's satisfaction."

"Yes, so do I." Pickens stood and offered Douglas his hand. "Congratulations, Mr. Shaw. We look forward to doing business with Henley and Company."

An hour later, Douglas walked the busy streets of Atlanta on the way back to his hotel, feeling quite proud and satisfied. He'd obtained a new and lucrative trading partner for his company. Tomorrow he'd be on a train to California to talk to grain merchants and build on his successes.

Seeing a telegraph office, he decided to go in and send a message back to his employer. Mr. Henley would be glad to hear the results of today's meeting as soon as possible. Douglas wouldn't be able to send confidential details over the public wire, but he could at least send the good news of this new deal.

After filling out the telegram form, Douglas waited in line for the clerk. He liked telegraph offices. The ones in America, especially in a big city like Atlanta, always seemed to be thrumming with activity. This one had four telegraph machines, all manned by operators who were busy sending and receiving the endless transactions that kept commerce moving. As a trained operator

himself, Douglas could make out snippets of the messages coming over the wires among the cacophony of dots and dashes as the machines clicked away.

“Repeat that back to me, please,” Douglas said, handing the form to the clerk when it was his turn.

The clerk looked it over to ensure the form was correctly filled out, then read the body of the message aloud. ““Meeting a success. Mystery sulfur minor tempest. Letter to follow.”” He gave Douglas a knowing grin. A less experienced clerk might have wondered at the string of seemingly random words in the middle, but this one had recognized right away that it was code. Every word in that odd sentence represented a whole phrase.

“Include the extra fee for return confirmation,” Douglas instructed. “I’ll wait while you send it.”

“Yes, sir.” The operator looked to be about twenty years older than Douglas. Perhaps he was content to remain a telegraph operator, but Douglas had always known he was destined for bigger things.

He’d come a long way since his days as a telegraph operator in Glasgow. An even longer way from his miserable upbringing in the poorest parts of that city. Yet today felt like just the beginning, for surely even greater things were to come.