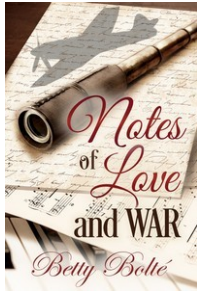


Excerpt from
Notes of Love and War



Baltimore, Maryland

September 1942

Love exploded to the rapid fire beat of a ragtime tune, a subdued yet desperate mating dance before soldiers and sailors shipped out to face the enemy. Audrey Harper hovered at the edge of the mob of soldiers, sailors, and young women in colorful dresses stepping and twirling to the beat. She mopped her forehead with a wilted handkerchief. The hardwood floor pressed through the thin soles of her rationed shoes to make her feet ache. Another pair of stompers gone. But she accepted every offer from the homesick and lonely men who relied on the USO. She could do that much to support the war effort.

Her sister appeared in a rush of perfume and taffeta, fanning herself with her dance card. “Whew. What a night.”

Rae’s vivacious grin belied her claim to being tired. Even more popular than Audrey had been over the last few hours, her younger sister’s heart-shaped face glowed with life and excitement. She moved with the grace of a musician, moving to an inner beat with each footfall. Stella Rae’s beauty was eclipsed by her talent. She’d been accepted to the best music school in the city and was using the USO dance as a celebration. Soon she’d start lessons with several of the country’s best violin instructors. For the moment, she delighted in rapid dances and friendly soldiers. Spending a Friday evening dancing with so many handsome young men most definitely boosted her ego. Despite her objections, Audrey insisted on keeping a watchful eye over her little sister.

“Tired?”

“I’m fine.” Rae tapped the corner of her dance card on Audrey’s upper arm. “Why aren’t you dancing?”

“I needed a minute to catch my breath.” Smiling couples jitterbugged past, a blur of color. “Why aren’t you?”

“I saw you standing here looking lost so I wanted to check in, see how you’re doing.”

“Another hour before they’ll shut the dance down.” Audrey shoved her handkerchief into her skirt pocket. “Time for several more dances.”

“It’s why we’re here.” Stella dragged a palm across her forehead. “I’ll be glad to get outside where it’s cooler.”

“Soon enough. I think your next dance is coming to find you.” The marine weaved around the dancers on the floor as he approached. “Go have fun.”

“It’s what we do.” Rae smiled at the man as he held out his hand, waiting for her to accept his offer. She gave him her hand and he led her away to join the whirling dancers.

Rae’s words echoed in Audrey’s mind as she waited for the next invitation to dance. She enjoyed dancing, helping the men in uniform have some relaxation and respite from the war. But she wanted to be more than a pretty face in dancing shoes. She’d studied hard to earn her combined music appreciation and journalism degree and somehow she’d find a way to put it to use. Despite her father’s intent of merely ensuring she would be an educated wife for a deserving husband, she hoped to find gainful employment of some interesting kind.

She’d seen the advertisements for women to support the men called up to fight over there by filling in at their jobs on the home front. “Women, Take War Work!” “Women Needed Now! Join the WAVES!” The war had brought new prospects for women to join the workforce, to do their patriotic duty by working the men’s jobs to free them up to go fight.

A patriotic thing to do, but one her father would resist. Her brother, Gilbert, itched for his number to be called so he could serve. He had carefully floated the idea of enlisting but Mama convinced him to wait. Hoping he wouldn’t need to go. If he did, Audrey would have no choice but to do her duty and follow his example, yet again. Taking on a paying job, rather than volunteering her time as she’d been doing all her life. Secretly, the idea appealed to her. She rubbed the porcelain pansy pendant hanging around her neck, its smooth pink petals soothing. Gil gave it to her on her sixteenth birthday and she never took it off. A tribute to her older, beloved brother. Following his lead meant she’d have some spending money, and could even contribute to the household finances. Maybe eventually earn enough to even move out of her parents’ home.

Deciding on what kind of work to do was the holdup. The idea of working in a factory did not appeal. Necessary and vital work to be sure. Just not for her. She’d much rather be up and about than stuck in an assembly line or other mindless work.

She wanted to do something that would enable her to interact with others, and which would use her creativity and education combined. The Help Wanted ads all seemed to be for manufacturing and machine work. Telegraph and telephone operators. Receptionists and secretaries. Tied to a machine or a desk all day. She shuddered at the thought. Surely she could find something more interesting to do.

Watching the mass of men in uniform with their dance partners, she pondered the many families left behind in towns and cities across the country, hoping for their safety. The nation had been at war nearly a year and showed no signs of ending. Her family had been fortunate to remain out of the fighting. The draft hadn't called her father's or her brother's number. The longer it dragged on, though, the higher the chance they'd be called up. She worried most about her only brother, truth be told. His creative, easy-going nature seemed ill-suited for hand-to-hand fighting or shooting anyone. Being forced to do so would affect his very soul. His dreams of building things—homes, businesses, bridges—may never be realized. If he were hurt he might not be able to create.

A flashy couple, he in navy uniform, she in a light green dress, swirled past Audrey. She stepped back from the edge of the floor to give the girl's skirt space to twirl as they danced gracefully around the room. Chinese lanterns hung from the rafters of the ballroom, candles glowing softly inside. The tune segued into a slow dance. The couples drew closer, the men's hands holding the ladies', one hand at the small of the back. She sensed some of the pairs had grown close quickly but it was wartime. People met, fell in love, married in weeks. Fear of the unknown—whether they would come home—made for many hasty marriages. Concessions had to be made.

She worried about her father, too, but on a different level from her robust brother. Daddy was the family's patriarch, brought home the money that kept the family in comfort. As much as was possible under the rationing restrictions. If he were called up, her mother would have to cope without him. True, Audrey and Stella would help her, but having a husband involved in the deadly conflict couldn't be easy. Going about the day without knowing whether he was injured or dead. Fearing the arrival of a telegram. Letters took a long time to arrive at homes across the country. Then again, the mail censors blacked out anything even hinting at forbidden information to write home so the news that people shared often became stilted. Especially knowing strangers read and evaluated every word sent to loved ones.

"You look too serious for this shindig." A soldier aimed a shy grin at her. "Dance?"

She blinked away the depressing, worrisome thoughts. "I'd love to." She took his hand and followed him onto the dance floor and into the fluid steps of a two-step. Tonight she'd dance and smile. Tomorrow was soon enough to think about all the rest. After all, she had plenty of time.

Three little words changed everything.

"I've signed up."

The determination in her brother's expression rattled Audrey's sense of well-being as his words sunk in. His set jaw and eyes glittering like balls of steel. A slight crease over Gilbert's brows. Powerful shoulders forced back, bracing for the family's reaction. All jovial banter and good-natured teasing had ended in sudden silence.

“What did you say?” Her father, Ernest, contemplated Gil with furrowed brows.

Gil’s bombshell landed in the center of the dining room table, ticking away the seconds. What had been a normal family dinner changed into a tense tableau. The glasses sparkled, the dishes held half-eaten steaming spaghetti and meatballs. Frisk, Audrey’s blue merle collie, raised his head from where he lay at the doorway, sensing the change in the atmosphere.

“I signed the papers.” Gil returned the steady look, a slight tic in his right jaw.

“Oh, Gil.” Her brother chose to risk his life for the good of the country. Pride and fear battled in her chest. Everyone sat dumbstruck, looking at him as if they didn’t expect the inevitable. Or had tried to ignore the likelihood. Like her. “I don’t know what to say.”

With only a handful of words, he’d managed to change the Second World War from a matter of inconvenience to one of personal involvement and all of the terror and dread that accompanied such a decision. Until that moment, fighting had been left to other men. Other families hung a blue star in their front window.

Not theirs.

She’d seen the news reels at the picture show depicting the battle ravaged landscape and the injured and bloody men fighting over there. She’d suspected her brother would do something rather than wait as his impatience continued to escalate at not being drafted.

A gasp forced Audrey’s attention to her mother and the anguish etched onto her face. A knot clogged Audrey’s throat, one she couldn’t dislodge for the threat of waterworks pricking her eyes.

“No, you can’t go.” Her mother, Opal, clutched a worn linen napkin in vise-like fingers as tears hovered in the corners of her wide eyes.

“Mama, you knew I would go. I told you.” Gil studied Mama across the table. “It’s done.”