

# Chapter 1: The Letter

*It takes two to write a letter.*

—Elizabeth Drew

## Seattle, Washington: November 1941

A bone-chilling rain soaked western Washington—normal weather for late November. Gray clouds hung low over the newly snow-blanketed Wenatchee Mountains to the east while rain pelted the city of Seattle. Before leaving for Bellwood International Import/Export Ltd., cryptologist Elizabeth Ames had resisted the urge to call in sick. It would have been the perfect morning to slip into a pair of flannel pajamas and snuggle down in front of a crackling fire with a bowl of Golden Delicious apples and a good Agatha Christie novel. However, she knew as head operator of the company's ship-to-shore communications department that her skills would be needed to guide one or more of her father's merchant ships safely to shore.

*Always responsible, that's me.* Elizabeth gazed into the foggy grayness beyond the icy raindrops pelting the radio-room window. Behind her, the steady *clickity-clack* of shortwave chatter supplied a backdrop of normalcy to the chaotic discord churning through her brain. Idly she brushed aside from her left cheek a lock of her Rita Hayworth red curls, which frizzed more than usual in the damp weather. A light sprinkle of freckles bridged her nose, standing out in soft contrast to her pale, porcelain skin.

Liz watched but didn't see the parade of semitrucks lumbering across

the wooden docks below the window, spraying muddy water onto the dockworkers in their rubberized gear. The intricate choreography performed by the longshoremen and their giant cranes as they lifted, towed, and shifted massive wooden crates from exotic ports of call onto boxcars going only God and the dock foreman knew where, usually fascinated her. But not today—not when her world threatened to shatter into a heap of finely cut crystal.

Despite Hitler's troops surging across Europe and the Tiger of Malaya's invasion of Malaya and Singapore, the United States shipping industry boomed. The Great Depression was fading into a painful memory as money had begun to flow once again, causing Americans to clamor for foreign-made goods. Through diplomacy and subterfuge, the United States had maintained a distance from what political pundits were calling World War II. Yet Europe's unrest made thinking Americans wonder how long President Roosevelt could hold out against the Axis threat spreading around the world.

As inevitable as the country's involvement in these international conflicts appeared to be, Liz had her own personal battle to fight. The glass in the window reflected a seething bitterness in her steel-gray eyes; less obvious was the pent-up anger seething in her heart. She swiped away an uninvited tear sliding down her cheek and gritted her teeth against a sudden wave of nausea. Steam wafted up from the mug of hot tea she gripped with her left hand. The aroma of cinnamon and nutmeg did nothing to cheer her spirits. The reason for her discontent was the unopened onionskin airmail envelope clutched in her right hand addressed to *Elizabeth Ames, Bellwood International Import/Export Ltd., Seattle, Washington*.

*Leave it to Alan to make his first communication since he joined the army as impersonal as possible*, she thought. The carefully formed address denied her the basic respect of addressing her as Mrs. Elizabeth Ames, the woman he had vowed to love “till death do us part.”

This wasn't the way Liz had planned her life. Whenever she played with her favorite paper dolls as a child, her boy and girl dolls would meet, fall in love, marry, and have three babies and would always live happily ever after. But since meeting the silent, mysterious engineer Alan Ames, Elizabeth had begun to wonder if “happily ever after” could ever really happen.

The young couple had waltzed through the first three steps of her fantasy—meet, fall in love, marry. *What happened to the fourth and the fifth steps? Where does love go, she wondered, when it abandons the human heart? Is it incinerated in the searing heat of angry words; does it wither away to dust from neglect; or does it freeze into an icy block of unspoken accusations?* Despite the warmth of her avocado-green sweater, she hugged herself against a shiver that skittered the length of her spine.

Instinctively, the woman glanced over her shoulder at the row of clocks mounted on the wall above the ship-to-shore communication station and set for each of the planet's different time zones. It was 10:48 A.M. Pacific Time. She'd spent half of her morning break clutching the unopened envelope and looking but not seeing the dreary world beyond the office window. Sooner or later she'd have to read the dreaded letter. Sooner or later she'd have to discover what Alan had written.

There was so much Liz didn't know about her husband of four years. In Alan's absence, Elizabeth had begun to wonder if she'd ever really known him. She knew his favorite color was green; he preferred Duke Ellington to Bing Crosby; apple pie to lemon meringue—all superficial trivia. But she wondered what went on inside his head. What was truly important to him? It hurt to realize she hadn't a clue. *Does anyone intimately know the real Alan Ames?* she asked herself during the seven months since he had enlisted in the military. Worse yet, she hadn't a clue where he might have gone. She glanced down at the envelope. Neither the postmark nor the series of military codes and numbers in the return address space revealed his whereabouts.

It had been the evening of her parents' thirtieth wedding anniversary party that Alan, a licensed architect and civil engineer, announced his intention to join the United States Army Corps of Engineers. He didn't try to make his action sound noble or patriotic, merely matter-of-fact. What he didn't mention to her or to their family and friends was that he'd resigned from his job with Washington State's highway department that afternoon and intended to leave for basic training the same evening.

The word *stunned* didn't adequately describe Liz's reaction. His abrupt pronouncement silenced the celebration. Confused, she shot a quick glance toward Alan's equally startled mother. His parents, who'd driven north from Portland for her parents' party, appeared as confused as she. Without further explanation, Alan grabbed his trench coat and headed for

their Hudson coupe, leaving Liz behind to sputter an awkward apology to her parents and their guests and run to catch up with him. Silently, she climbed into the passenger side of the car and closed the door.

“Alan?” She studied Alan’s profile as he put the car into reverse and backed out of the driveway. From the set of his jaw, she knew he had no intention of explaining himself. The short ride home from the hotel ballroom to their two-bedroom Craftsman-style bungalow overlooking Puget Sound seemed interminable.

Alan parked the coupe in the driveway and strode into the house, leaving a bewildered Liz to open her own car door. She followed him inside the house. In the hallway, she tossed her purse onto the antique, hand-carved, mahogany console table beside the front door—the first piece of furniture they’d purchased as husband and wife. As she did, she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the wood-framed mirror above the console. Fear darkened her face; fury welled up in her eyes. She clutched her shaking hands to her stomach to stay the inner volcano threatening to erupt. Liz knew how much Alan hated when she “ranted,” as he called her emotional outbursts. Determined this was one fight he couldn’t avoid, Liz slammed the front door behind her with more force than she’d intended. The leaded glass in the door rattled.

“Alan, talk to me. What is going on? What have I ever done to deserve such public humiliation? I am your wife, or at least I was the last time I read our marriage license.” Liz winced at the unexpected shrillness of her voice. She paused. *Now is the time to be rational.* She took a deep breath. *Rational? How can I be rational at such a time? Surely if there ever were a time for tears . . .*

Alan paused for an instant, his left hand poised on the knob of the bathroom door. He shook his head and heaved a heavy sigh. As the air escaped his lungs, his shoulders sagged and his resolve appeared to waver. As he turned toward her, the expression in his brown eyes was unfathomable. He opened his mouth to retaliate, and then clamped it shut and entered the green-and-white tiled bathroom.

Before he could close the door, she stopped it with her left arm. The door banged against the wall. Without glancing her way, he removed his brown canvas travel bag from the closet beside the medicine chest. Slowly, item by item, he dropped his toothbrush, a can of tooth powder, and his shaving equipment into the bag. Careful not to touch her, he wordlessly

pushed past and crossed the hallway to their bedroom.

Frozen with disbelief, Liz watched him jam several changes of skivvies and T-shirts into the bag, and then, without a glance her way, stride out the front door to a taxi parked by the curb in front of their house. It was the first she'd noticed the taxi. *Was it there when we got home from the party?* She didn't think so. She realized he must have called the taxi from the hotel before making his announcement. That he would have called for a taxi before he told her he was leaving stabbed her to the quick.

"Alan! Help me understand what you're doing! Just once, can't we talk this out?" She shouted from the porch as he climbed into the cab. Like an errant child caught stealing candy from the neighborhood grocer, the cab leaped forward and bounded down the sleepy, suburban street.

"Alan, don't run away! Please, say something. Scream at me! Shout! Let's have an old fashioned, top-of-the lungs battle royal." Liz collapsed onto the porch floor and buried her face in her knees. She thought as she had so many times before, *If only once we could fight and then passionately make up like other married couples.* As she sank back onto her haunches, Liz knew that would never happen—not with Alan. Alan never let go of his self-control—in front of her or in front of anyone, for that matter. Yet even as the yellow vehicle disappeared from view, her husband's ever-present censure following the death of their infant son, Lanny, silently screamed at her. Her fault! With Alan, everything was always her fault.

"If you'd been at home caring for our son instead of leaving him with a babysitter while you trotted off to work for your father . . . If you had quit your job when Lanny was born and cared for him as a mother should . . ." Although Alan never completed his accusations, she knew what he was saying. "Our son would be alive today."

*And maybe he's right,* she'd thought so many times since that fateful afternoon when the telephone call from the babysitter caught her leaving the office. That their only son had died for no apparent reason flashed through her brain for the hundred-thousandth-millionth time as Liz stared at the unopened envelope. "Oh, dear God! I can't do this. Please, I can't do this."

Liz wasn't a woman who'd ever felt the need to pray to a God she couldn't see, touch, or hear. Even after her son's death, the grieving mother left the praying to her maternal grandmother, Grandma Keating.

The address on the hated envelope swam before her eyes. She ignored

the steady tap of Brad Lucas, her communications assistant, sending and receiving Morse code from a cargo ship approaching the Port of Seattle.

*I can't cry! I can't cry!* Liz swiped at a tear sliding down the side of her nose. She took a ragged breath and exhaled slowly. *Look on the bright side,* she told herself. *Despite the loneliness you've endured, the subsequent months without conflict since Alan left have been a blessing in an odd sort of way.* She had begun to heal—at least that's what she told herself while seated in front of the fireplace, wrapped in the quilt Grandma Keating had given as a wedding gift. Yet, despite the cozy warmth of the fire, a block of ice had surrounded her tortured heart and refused to melt.

It wasn't that her family were not there for her. They were. On weekends Liz's well-meaning mother orchestrated a variety of family activities to keep her grieving daughter from becoming a recluse. Despite her mother's most heroic resocialization attempts for her elder daughter, Liz preferred her evenings of solitude overlooking the Sound from the porch of her tiny Craftsman cottage.

As time passed, Liz had begun to laugh again at the silly jokes her co-worker Brad cracked and his weirdly accurate imitations of famous people such as President Roosevelt, Cary Grant, Mae West, and England's Winston Churchill. When she realized it had been at least two weeks since she'd awakened from the debilitating nightmare of running toward but not being able to reach her crying son, Liz actually breathed an awkward prayer of thanksgiving. *Yes,* she decided. *I've definitely begun to heal, in spite of your silence, Alan Randolph Ames!*

And almost a year after the fateful day her son had died, Liz vowed to never again become the whimpering, tearful person she'd been in the days and weeks following the graveside funeral. She would put her loss of Lanny and of Alan behind her; she would move on! In her heart she knew she'd done everything she could to properly care for her son. *Mrs. Lake was a responsible babysitter,* Liz reminded herself. *Lanny died while sleeping in his crib. Sometimes that happens to infants no matter what adult is caring for them,* she again reminded herself. She took a sip of hot tea from the mug cozied in her hands.

"Hey, what's wrong? Bad news?" Brad flicked the switch to broadcast the incoming Morse code throughout the state-of-the-art maritime radio room. "Is the letter from that husband of yours?" The slight young man, barely out of trade school, had a sympathetic heart and wisdom beyond

his years. That helped to offset his tendency to be more than a little nosy. While she never discussed Alan's departure with Brad or with any other employee at her father's firm, she knew how fast gossip spread throughout the tight-knit company.

"Looks like it." Liz stuffed the envelope into the pocket of her green-and-brown-plaid wool skirt and idly ran one hand along the wide box pleats as if to smooth out the pesky wrinkle the letter had added to her day.

"Aren't you going to read it?" Brad raked his fingers through his sandy blond hair and stretched. "Go ahead. Take a longer break if you need to, or better yet, go home. You could be coming down with the flu or something. I'll be OK for another half hour or so. Robert should be here by then." Robert Gross had taken and passed his advance radio license and was waiting for the actual notification to arrive in the mail from D.C.

"Thanks, but I'm doing fine." She braved a strained smile. "You know Rob can't go on-air until his license arrives from the FCC." She glanced down at her pocket. "Don't worry. I'll be fine. I will read the letter eventually."

Brad shrugged, clamped a yellow #2 pencil, cigarlike, between his teeth, and quipped in his best W. C. Fields imitation, "There's no time like the present, my little chickadee."

One corner of Liz's mouth lifted into a grin, but her heart remained heavy. Brad continued with his impersonation. "They say married people live longer. Personally, I think it just seems longer . . ."

"SOS! SOS!" A sudden flurry of Morse code interrupted Brad's banter. "CQD VNL. CALLING ALL STATIONS. DANGER." VNL were the call letters for the *Vancouver Lady*, one of Liz's father's larger merchant marine ships. "R—JAPANESE SUB APPROACHING STARBOARD. GIVE COURSE OF ACTION—SK."

Brad keyed in a quick "R," signaling to Sammy Chan that he'd received the operator's transmission. Immediately, the unsettling message took priority over Alan's unopened letter in both of the radio operators' minds. From the rhythm of Sammy Chan's excited "fist," Liz could tell the young mariner, whom she'd trained for the job, was nervous. The woman's ability to recognize each of her father's radio operators' identities as well as mood from the first dots or dashes transmitted almost superseded her exceptional speed at keying. To accurately copy and send fifty

words per minute outranked most of her peers by several words—an invaluable skill when faced with a ship-to-shore emergency. And this appeared to be an emergency.

Throughout the summer months of 1941, Japanese submarines harassed privately owned merchant ships crossing the Pacific. Cargo ships flying the flags of European countries had been torpedoed. Up to this point, flying the neutral flag of the United States had protected the Bellwood's mariners from being hijacked or sunk, but no one knew when the tide would change. As the ship operator's coding ended, Liz immediately transmitted, "R—THIS IS K7UV, GIVE LOCATION—SK."

"R—K7UV—LATITUDE 46 DEGREES, 54 MINUTES NORTH; LONGITUDE 126 DEGREES, 42 MINUTES WEST—SK."

She shot a quick glance at the floor-to-ceiling world map on the wall behind her station. "R—YOU'RE ON COURSE, VNL. ANY RADIO CONTACT WITH SUB?—SK."

"R—TRIED, BUT NO REPLY—SK."

"R—CAN YOU IDENTIFY SUB?—SK."

"R—NEGATIVE. CAN ONLY SEE RED DOT PAINTED ON SIDE OF CRAFT—SK."

A third signal interrupted their transmissions. "BK—BREAK! BREAK! THIS IS COAST GUARD CUTTER 117, MONITORING VNL'S TRAFFIC. WE'RE FIVE NAUTICAL MILES FROM VNL, AND ON OUR WAY. WILL CONTINUE TO MONITOR TRAFFIC—SK."

"R—VNL, DID YOU RECEIVE TRANSMISSION?—SK," Liz tapped to the operator on the *Vancouver Lady*.

"R," was his reply.

Liz heaved a relieved sigh and coded back, "R—TELL CAPTAIN GRAYSON TO HOLD A STEADY COURSE. HELP IS ON THE WAY, SAMMY—SK." After coding a quick thanks to the Coast Guard cutter, Liz cranked her neck from side to side to unseat a painful crick in her neck.

Static electricity crackled throughout the radio room as Liz and Brad silently stared at the radio, deciphering the series of dots and dashes transmitting between the Coast Guard cutter and the *Vancouver Lady*. That the cutter's radio operator couldn't establish radio contact with the Japanese submarine made the threat of the enemy submarine more ominous. "R—CAPTAIN OF THE UNIDENTIFIED JAPANESE SUBMARINE,



WE KNOW YOU COPY. BACK OFF!—SK,” the cutter operator tapped. “THE *VANCOUVER LADY* SAILS UNDER THE FLAG OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA—SK.”

To the merchant ship’s operator, the Coast Guard added, “HOLD FAST—VL WE WILL MAKE EYEBALL CONTACT WITH YOU IN 5 MINUTES—SK.”

An immediate reply from the threatened vessel followed. “R—THE SUB IS PREPARING TO DIVE. I REPEAT—THE JAPANESE SUB IS PREPARING TO DIVE!—SK.”

The relief evident in Sammy Chan’s “fist” brought satisfied grins to Liz and Brad’s faces.

“Hot-doggie!” Brad leaped from his chair, swept a startled Liz into his arms, and broke into an impromptu tango. In the middle of a dip, the door to the radio room flew open. Richard Bellwood’s six-foot-five-inch frame filled the entryway. By the scowl on his face, Liz knew her father had jumped to an entirely wrong conclusion.

“Sir!” Brad froze. Liz, still trapped in the dip, grasped Brad’s biceps to keep from falling to the floor.

The young radioman stumbled through an explanation as he righted the owner’s daughter to her feet. “Did you hear? We just defended the *Vancouver Lady*’s honor, sir.” Instantly, Brad realized his words had come out wrong. “I mean, sir, the Coast Guard scared off a Japanese submarine harassing the *Vancouver Lady*.”

Richard Bellwood’s bushy red eyebrows narrowed into a tight crease. “I know what you mean, young man. However, I would appreciate it if you would unhand my daughter—my married daughter, I might add!”

“Yes, er, yes, of course, sir.” The flustered young man returned Liz to her feet, released her waist, and snapped to attention. Bristling at the unspoken implications in her father’s voice, Liz shot an angry glare at her father, silently daring him to pursue the subject further. “Was there something you wanted, Dad?”

Taken aback by his elder daughter’s brisk tone, Richard sputtered, “Yes, er, Lizzie, your mother insists you come to dinner tonight. Your sister Anne and her fiancé will be there, as will Grandma Keating.”

Liz tilted her chin defiantly, sending a sidelong grin at the pale-faced young man quivering by her side. “Brad could use a good home-cooked

meal. Couldn't you, Brad? Do you think Mom would mind if I bring a guest?"

Both the company owner and the short, wiry, radio operator stared at her as if she were a cockroach crawling out from under an icebox at mid-day. Brad nervously pushed his wire-rimmed glasses higher on the bridge of his nose. "No! No! Thanks anyway. Uh, I, uh, I've got, uh, plans to-night. Maybe another time."

A self-satisfied smile crept across Liz's face. She hadn't really imagined Brad would accept her dinner invitation, but she knew the idea of her asking the young man to dinner had irked her father.

"Oh, that's too bad," she cooed. "Grandma Keating would love your W. C. Fields imitation, as well as your impersonations of *The Shadow* and of *The Lone Ranger*. Those are Grandma Keating's favorite radio shows. But maybe you can come to visit another time."

Imitating the sweeping glamour and grace of the radiant Hollywood starlet Loretta Young, Liz tilted her chin upward, flipped her cascade of titian curls away from her neck, and breezed out of the radio room. Once she knew she was beyond the two men's vision, she took a deep breath and rushed down the corridor to what she jokingly called her "inner sanctum."

Since her father didn't employ many women beyond the necessary secretarial staff, the pink-and-white-tiled ladies' room had always afforded her a modicum of privacy. Whenever tempers flared or egos clashed in the radio room, which sometimes happened, she would wait out the storm in what she thought of as her porcelain retreat.

As a teenager, working summers for her father, she'd once camped out in the ladies' room for thirty minutes to avoid the unwanted attentions of a love-struck college radio apprentice. It was here where she'd retreated following her first kiss; where she'd wept before leaving home for college; where she'd contemplated Alan's marriage proposal; and where she had released pent-up tears after losing her son. But on this soggy November morning in 1941, it was here she finally generated the courage to read Alan's letter and when, after reading it, her heart seemed to stop beating.