

In this excerpt from the novel "News on the Home Front," Carole is recovering from a nasty fall she had taken while horseback riding. Her fiancé, Philip, a pilot in the Army Air Corps, comes to see her on his last night before shipping out.

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She opened her eyes in the darkness of the room, not knowing how long she had been asleep. She raised her head only to lower it suddenly; the intense pain thumping a dull pang in her head. Slowly, she remembered where she was and sighed at her helplessness. She changed her gaze. Her field of vision now included the dying embers of the fire. It explained the chill in the room. She could remain in the bed, cold, and wait for someone to come and stoke the fire; or, she could lift her weary body from the bed to phone for someone to come up. Neither choice pleased her. She chose to stay in the bed and rest forever her tired body.

As she leaned back into the softness of the pillow, the bedroom door opened slowly. A sliver of light shot into the darkness of the room. She heard the sound of knuckles rapping lightly against the door.

"Carole?" A man's voice called to her.

She recognized the voice. Her body wanted to leap from the bed, run to him, hold him. But fear of the pain, and utter exhaustion of her body, forced her to combine all the emotion in one word.

"Philip!"

Philip walked slowly into the room, his eyes adjusting to the darkness. He walked first to the fire, tossed a few logs onto it, then moved to the edge of her bed.

"Carole. How are you?"

"Fine. How was your trip?"

"It went well, but I didn't come here to discuss the vagaries of war. I came to bring good health to you. I saved some of last night's dinner for you, for us. When you feel up to it, we'll have our own little holiday celebration."

"If I had the strength. My brain is willing, but my body is against it."

"If only you had been a better rider, none of this would have happened," he joked.

"To hell with you, Philip!" Carole shouted, propping her body up to defend against this attack, indifferent to the pain.

Alarmed, he reached for her arm. "Calm down. I was only teasing. Don't carry on."

"Well don't," she said, lowering her body, and her throbbing head.

"I'm sorry."

"You had better be. It is still possible for me to withdraw my consent to marry you."

"You would never."

She eyed him with disdain. "Would you care to call me on that?"

He thought. Finally, he said: "No. I had better not. I have no idea how you would respond."

She smiled, closing her eyes. "Wise choice."

Like this, they sat. The fire grew stronger. After a moment, the entire room was ablaze with motion as the light from the flames danced about the room. Slowly, gently, Philip leaned his trim, uniformed body down against the supine figure in the bed. For the briefest moment, his lips touched hers.

As he pulled from her, she startled him with: "You call that a kiss?"

He laughed. "For now. Do you feel hungry? Mrs. Kennison said -- "

"And what has she been telling you? That I haven't eaten? What?"

"Yes. She said your breakfast was left to get cold, untouched. That you refused to allow her to bring up your lunch tray. What's wrong? You need to eat to regain your strength."

"At the time, doctor," she paused to draw emphasis to the sarcasm, "I felt unable to eat. Now, however, I am famished."

"Shall I get you something?"

She thought. "If you help me," she said calmly. "I think I can go downstairs. We'll eat there."

"No. You stay here. I'll -- "

"Philip," she said, forcing her shoulders up from the bed. "I need to get around, to walk. I'm sick of this room. I'll be all right if you help me." She glared deeply into his eyes. It was a dare to argue with her.

He acquiesced. "Fine. What do I do?"

Slowly, one motion at a time, Carole instructed Philip to help her move first her upper body, then each arm, then her legs from the bed. She stood, wobbly. After each movement she paused, insuring her strength. To her surprise, she stood well enough to not need Philip's strength. But it would be a different matter as she challenged the stairs.

She walked, unassisted, to the door and out onto the landing. Philip moved into place and, draping her arm around his shoulders, helped her take the first step down the stairs. One by one, the steps disappeared behind them. She managed them all in short order. Into the living room she walked, by herself. But, her strength ebbed. Knowing she could not finish the journey, she decided they would dine on the living room sofa. "Ask cook to bring some fruit and cheese into the living room. We'll eat here." She shifted her body to the back of the sofa, reclining to one side.

"Anything else? The duck perhaps?"

Carole smiled. "Of course. And anything else left from last night's dinner. Especially some of the peach cobbler." The thought of all that food revolted her. She knew, however, such an order would please Philip and thrill Mrs. Kennison. After a few minutes, Philip returned, both hands laden with trays of food for their cold supper. He set the trays onto the large, flat table in front of the sofa. He moved to the fire, added a few logs. Carole watched his lean figure cross the room toward the wall of tall windows. With a flick of one hand, he sent the curtains flying open, to either side of the doors, exposing the terrace, covered in snow and bathed with the light of a waxing moon. As he returned to the sofa, he clicked off the two lamps, creating a breathtaking setting for their meal.

"Now," he said, his voice almost cryptic. "Let's celebrate the Christmas you missed." He moved closer to her and touched his lips to hers. She responded by moving closer to him, reaching for his warm mouth, his sweet kiss. They remained in

this embrace for a long moment, neither wanting to pull away, neither wanting the moment to end.

Philip pulled back his head. Carole's eyes sought out his, pleading for more. Philip smiled. His hand reached into his uniform jacket, pulling out a small black box; the moonlight catching the gold-edged tips of the box, making it come alive. "To my wife to be," he said and handed the box to her. Carole's hand clasped it.

With great wonder she opened it slowly, to make this moment last. Inside, a star glowed into life; a bright burst came from within the box. She looked closer and saw a brilliant diamond surrounded by a handful of smaller diamonds, rubies, sapphires, emeralds; all combined to make a star and its rays. Nothing Carole had ever seen was more brilliant than this star. She removed the ring, and handed it to Philip. "Put it on me."

He gently placed the ring on her hand, and brought her hand to him, turning it over, palm up, and kissing her palm, gently, lingeringly. He looked up to her, still holding her hand. "I shall love you as long as the diamond on this ring exists in this world. Wherever I am, I shall always have you by my side. For as long as I live, you will live within me. Until the sun itself turns cold, I shall love you and then, even longer."

The moonlight from the terrace caught the ring, each movement creating a starburst. Carole could not hold back the tears welling in her eyes. For her part, she was willing to give the rest of her life to this man; willing to live the rest of her life trying to earn the right to wear the ring she now wore.

Philip spoke. "Carole."

"Yes?"

"I must --" he stopped.

She reached her hand to wipe away the single tear which flowed down his cheek. As it lowered, he grabbed it, kissed it again. Held it.

"I must go," he blurted out.

"I know."

"I have been ordered to report tomorrow to the airport. I leave for England in the morning."

She nodded her head.

"They need me, Carole. I must go."

"I understand," she said.

There was much more he wanted to say to her. Much more that needed to be said. Carole's eyes told him no explanation was needed. "Listen to me. I understand and I am proud of you. I love you for the fact you can go over there and fight for our country. If I could, I would stand with you, over there, fighting by your side, because I love you and nothing could ever make me feel otherwise. Wherever you are, for however long you must be away from me, I shall hold you within my heart. Nothing can ever come between us: no distance, no length of time. When this war is over, when this damned war is finally over, you will return to me, and I shall be waiting for you, to become your wife. We will live our lives together. Each star I see in the sky will remind me of this ring and I shall tell each and every star how much I love you, every night, for as long as you are away, for as long as it takes you to come back. Now go, go as you have come: quietly. Leave me as you found me: alone, wanting you, waiting for you." She turned and looked out onto the terrace.

Philip rose from the sofa. He walked through the living room, through the foyer, up to the front door. He stood watching the silhouetted figure of the woman he would always love. He watched her, then turned and walked through the door. Refusing to look back. Carole sat on the sofa. She waited until long after the sound of the door closing. Hours passed and she sat there, staring out onto the terrace, her robe wet with tears. Finally, exhausted from crying, she fell into a deep sleep, her hand with the ring clenched into a strong fist, buried deep under her robe, held near to her heart.