

The logo consists of the lowercase letters 'aeb' in a white, elegant, cursive script, positioned centrally within a solid black rectangular background. A thin white horizontal line is drawn beneath the letters.

aeb

A Respectable Woman

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Chapter One

Annerby, Lancashire, February 1922

‘Bye-bye, chick. Be a good boy for Nanny.’ Nell dropped on one knee in her mother-in-law’s gloomy hallway and Alf’s arms snaked round her neck as he put his heart and soul into hugging her. He was a loving child, just like her mock-wrestling, back-slapping brothers had been.

‘You’ll mek a mother’s boy out of that one, if you don’t watch out.’

Nell looked over the top of Alf’s sandy head at Mrs Hibbert’s raised eyebrows and downturned mouth. She didn’t want to turn her son into a milksop, but how could she resist wallowing in his boundless affection? Was she foolish to want to ward off the time, perhaps when he started school, when her snuggly embraces might no longer be welcome? If only he had his four strapping uncles to drop comradely hands on his shoulder, to tousle his hair, and teach him by example that physical contact wasn’t sissy.

‘Don’t say you haven’t been warned,’ said Mrs Hibbert.

No, indeed, that was something Nell could never say. Not about cuddling Alf, or about teaching him his ABC too young, or reading him a bedtime story instead of sending him straight to sleep. Or about wasting her time sticking her nose in a library book or wasting her money taking her knives to the knife-grinder just because he was an old soldier, instead of investing in her own knife-sharpener.

At what point had they gone from, ‘Can I give you a spot of advice, love?’ to ‘Don’t say you haven’t been warned?’

She was flaming sick of being warned.

She disentangled herself from Alf, catching his hands and pretending to gobble them up before rising to her feet. Her heart turned over as she looked at him. In his knitted pullover and grey shorts and socks, he was so appealing she could have gobbled him up for real.

Mrs Hibbert already had the front door open. ‘You’re letting the warm out, Nell.’

She gritted her teeth. ‘Shut the door, then. I needn’t go yet.’

‘You don’t want to be late.’

‘You say that every morning and I never am.’

‘Exactly.’

Nell gave up. With a last smile for Alf, she went to the door, with him pattering beside her to wave from the step. She walked a few paces, then turned to wave. She would have preferred to wave from the corner, but she had to get her wave in quickly before Mrs Hibbert could shut the door.

How had she ever imagined this old bag might take Mum’s place? Old sorrow washed through her, piercing her with sudden freshness. How could it still do that after six years? Six years, for pity’s sake. 1916 – the year her world ended. Dad was already dead; he died in the autumn of ’14, believing it would all be over in weeks and the boys would be home for Christmas. But they never came home. Nell liked to think they had all died together, the four of them, Doug, Tom, Eric and Harold, but there was no knowing, and it was probably just her being stupid.

Then Vi died. Nell had never shaken off the astonishment of Vi’s death. She was an ambulance-driver. An ambulance-driver! Stretcher-bearers and ambulance-drivers weren’t supposed to die.

All Vi had wanted was to go on the stage and dance in the chorus at the music hall.

That was the end for Mum. Nell hadn't seen it at the time, but now she knew Mum had died inside. She died for real three months later; of a broken heart, everyone said. She died even though Nell had barely left her side, even though Nell loved her and needed her and always would, even though Nell was only sixteen and not old enough to live on her own. It was hard knowing you weren't reason enough for your mum to stay alive.

Kind neighbours took her in and she handed over her meagre wages for her board. It had been a strange existence, her whole family wiped out and her dumped in this new life that didn't feel like anything to do with her. A new family moved into the Pringles' house and that was hard to watch.

Then along came Stan, a good-looking soldier with his arm in a sling, who liked the look of her and persevered. Gradually, she turned to him. The neighbours encouraged it. Not that they wanted to get rid of her, but they encouraged it.

The thing about good-looking soldiers with their arms in slings was that their injuries healed and the slings came off and it was only a matter of time before they went back to France. It added a feeling of urgency.

'Don't let him slip through your fingers,' warned the neighbours.

Stan was keen. Would she write? Would she be his girl? Would she meet his mother?

The morning was overcast and spitefully cold. Other folk might hunch inside their coats, with their hats pulled low over their ears, but not Nell. Wrapped inside Mum's faithful cavalry-tweed overcoat, which she had let down as much as she could but still wasn't long enough, she held herself tall and proud as she walked through the cobbled streets. She would pull her teeth out with the pliers sooner than let anyone see how shrivelled-up her job made her feel. Turning

the corner, she walked towards the Royal Oak. It sounded grand, but it was just a backstreet pub on the corner of Starling Street and Hawk Street. The front door was on Starling Street, giving it a Starling Street address. Hawk Street would have been better, as in Hawking and Spitting Street.

She pushed open the door, bracing herself for the men's lavs. Some blokes had revolting habits. It didn't matter how coarse you were, everyone knew better than to pee on the floor. And it wasn't just pee either. Her stomach curled up just thinking of it.

'Morning, Mr Page.'

He grunted a reply. She turned to shut the door, snatching a final breath of air before she had to inhale the stench of stale beer and tobacco. It wasn't just the smell. It was the feeling that it was creeping under her skin, into her hair, soiling her clothes.

Lifting the bar-flap, she walked through into the Pages' living quarters to hang her coat and hat on the peg inside the broom cupboard. She rolled up her sleeves, put on her wrap-around pinny and tied a scarf round her hair. She called herself a cleaner, but she looked like a charwoman, and maybe she was one. How many cleaners had to scrub stinking urinals?

She returned to the bar. Tables first. The Pages didn't even clear away the glasses before shutting up for the night. Honestly, there were times when she felt like chucking the dirty glasses at Mr Page's head. Mrs Page was seldom in evidence at this time of the morning, or indeed at any time of the morning. Landladies didn't soil their hands with cleaning, so she said. Lazy cat.

Onto the bar went handfuls of glasses. Washing them was Mr Page's job, but he never did it until Nell put them on the bar. She emptied the ashtrays, swept the floor and gave the tables a wipe to get rid of the rings, then set about polishing them. When she went through to the back for her mop and bucket, she took a moment to apply hand cream.

‘Always look after your hands, our Nell,’ said Vi’s voice in her head. ‘And don’t forget to cream your elbows. To go on the stage, you need nice arms as well as smooth hands.’

Nell smiled. Recalling things the others used to say kept them alive in her heart. She must have been eight when Vi dispensed this advice and, as she wasn’t stage-struck like their Vi, it hadn’t mattered; but it mattered now. Not her elbows, but her hands and face, especially her face. She had good skin and intended to keep it that way. She made her own lotion from quince blossom and cucumber. She dreaded being old before her time, the curse of the backstreet housewife.

Not that she minded working. She came from a long line of grafters and would cheerfully have scrubbed out urinals – well, not cheerfully, but she would have done it, if it had made a difference. A proper, worthwhile difference; a new shoes and best end of meat difference; a day trip to Morecambe difference; but all her cleaning achieved was to keep their heads above water.

That was why she had her rainy-day fund. Mostly it was money from her knitting. Mrs Dillon in Pigeon Street had a front-room shop and sold Nell’s garments for tuppence in the shilling commission. Nell put some of the money into the household coffers so Stan wouldn’t suspect, but the rest she stashed in an old tea caddy at the back of the pantry. Quite why she hid it she wasn’t sure. It wasn’t as though Stan raided the housekeeping jar. No, he just didn’t hand it over in the first place. He gave her enough to get by on if she was careful – and the rest he drank. He ought to be a right fat-gut, but he wasn’t. Not that that was any consolation to Nell when she was robbing Peter to pay Paul and performing miracles with scrag-end.

‘Obviously you can’t be trusted with money,’ was Mrs Hibbert’s opinion. ‘Some women are feckless.’

‘I’m not,’ Nell retorted. Mum had never had so much as a farthing’s worth of tick at the corner shop and neither had she.

‘Then why won’t my Stan trust you with money? It’s normal for a man to drink. Nowt wrong with that.’

‘But all the money he gets through—’

‘If you made his home a happier place, he wouldn’t need to go out, would he?’

Nell lugged her bucket into the bar. Mopping the floor was the finishing touch. If this was all she had to do each morning, she would be happy to come to work. She might even be proud of it.

She could already taste the bitter tang in her throat.

Mrs Stanley Hibbert, urinal scrubber.

Who was that knocking at dinner time? If it was one of those door-to-door salesmen, she would give him a piece of her mind. Nell removed the pan from the heat and took Alf to the door. The chilly morning had turned to sleet. One of the district nurses stood outside. She wore a dark-grey cloak over a grey dress with white collar and cuffs and she carried a large satchel. Her bicycle was propped up against the lamp post.

‘Mrs Hibbert?’ She smiled. She had a round face that was built to look cheerful. ‘I’ve come to see the baby.’

‘You what?’

‘The baby. I’m Nurse Beddow from the district.’

It wasn’t sleet in the air. It was little darts of surprise. ‘You’re six months early.’

Nurse Beddow looked at her blankly. ‘You’re Mrs Hibbert, aren’t you? Mrs Stanley Hibbert of . . .’ She pulled a sheet out of her satchel. ‘. . . of . . . oh, lumme.’

‘5 Lark Street. What’s the matter?’

The nurse laughed, an awkward sound. ‘Nothing. Um – nothing. Sorry, love, my mistake.’

‘Why am I on your list if—?’

She was talking to thin air. With a flash of leg and sturdy garter, the nurse flung herself onto her old boneshaker and pedalled furiously down the road, the bicycle bouncing on the cobbles.

‘Who was that, Mummy?’

‘That lady was a nurse.’

‘Am I poorly?’

‘Well, I don’t know, but poorly boys can’t manage toad-in-the-hole.’

‘I can eat toad-in-the-hole,’ cried Alf, darting down the hall to the kitchen.

Nell followed, smiling at his eagerness. Her Alf would walk on hot coals for a sausage. As he washed his hands in the scullery, she looked out of the window. The cat was there again. It was getting bolder. No, that wasn’t the right word. Hopeful – it was getting more hopeful. Poor cat. It would be pretty if it weren’t so scrawny. It was black, with eyes like gooseberries, and its coat was fuzzy, as if it had fluffed it up to keep warm. It gazed at her from the top of the coal bunker. She should never have started feeding it; but how could she have ignored it?

Soon Alf was at the table, face screwed up in concentration as he manipulated the child-sized knife and fork she insisted he hold correctly, even though Stan said it didn’t matter. She ate her bread and dripping slowly to fool her stomach into thinking it was more than it was. She would have her own toad-in-the-hole this evening with Stan, though her portion wouldn’t be much bigger than Alf’s.

‘What do mermaids eat, Mummy?’

While part of her brain wrestled with Alf’s question, another part dwelt on Nurse Beddow’s mistake. For someone at the district nurses’ station to draw up a journey list including a check on a baby that hadn’t been born yet was inept, to say the least; but in this case, it wasn’t inept so much as clairvoyant, because, after what happened last time, she hadn’t as yet told a living soul she was pregnant.

* * *

Nell wrapped her arms round her body, hugging herself in delight. It was time to tell Stan he was going to be a father again and she knew just how to do it. First she would puzzle him with the tale of Nurse Beddow, then say, 'But someone down at that nurses' place must have a crystal ball, because Nurse Beddow was right. It was just the date she got wrong.'

Her arms tightened: soon it would be Stan's arms round her.

Thank you, Nurse Beddow.

There was no time to tell Stan when he came in from work. He chomped his way through his toad-in-the-hole and winter greens, practically inhaled the spotted dick and custard, downed a mug of sweet tea and headed out again.

'It's not opening time yet,' she protested.

'It will be by the time I get there.'

No, it wouldn't. Was she now to have the shame of a husband who queued up outside the pub, champing at the bit for the doors to be unbolted? The front door slammed and he was gone. Nell sewed tassels onto a scarf she had knitted for Alf, then picked up her library book, but she couldn't concentrate. A moth blundered around the lamp – the same as her thoughts, fixed on one important thing, unable to settle elsewhere.

Her excitement at telling Stan had evaporated. Would it return when he came home? It was gone eleven when the front door opened. She snatched up some stray wool and started winding.

'Who did you drink with?'

'The usual fellows. Bed?'

At the foot of the stairs, he unlaced his ankle boots, placing them on the corner of the third stair up. Pairs on the stairs, a Pringle tradition. With eight people crammed into their house, every bit of space had to be made use of, and shoes were either on your feet or on the stairs. Nell, as youngest, had had the bottom stair, the position

currently occupied by Alf in the Hibbert household; but soon he would move up one, as he should have done a couple of years ago, only Nell had suffered a miscarriage.

That was why it had felt important to keep this new pregnancy to herself. Last time, she had told Stan and Mrs Hibbert early on and had lost the baby a fortnight later, by which time Mrs Hibbert had already informed the world and his wife, and for weeks afterwards all kinds of women were stopping Nell in the street to ask how she was and when her happy event was expected. Even now the memory of stammering to women she knew only by sight, ‘Oh . . . I . . .’ set her heart pumping and sliding.

This time she had vowed to keep quiet until the third month was behind her. The three months weren’t up yet, but today provided the perfect opportunity to deliver her news. Was she taking a chance by telling Stan sooner than she had intended? She hoped not. He had been so upset by the miscarriage that she had felt impelled to put on a good show and had crawled out of bed and donkey-stoned her front step.

‘Poor Stan has took it bad,’ said Mrs Hibbert.

‘So have I,’ cried Nell.

‘Oh, you. Nowt much wrong with you. You was doing your step the next day.’

She would have to warn Stan not to tell his mother.

She popped her shoes onto the second step, with a telltale crackle of the newspaper that lined them. Stan’s boots were silent. The man of the house, the breadwinner, must be properly shod; and so must Alf. Plenty of kids went barefoot or shared shoes, but not her son, not while there was breath in her body, a stash of coins in the old tea caddy and Cherry Blossom in the boot-box.

She changed into her nightie, turned down the bed and picked up her hairbrush. Her hair was the colour of a moth’s wings: so Stan had said when she first knew him and she had felt startled to

hear something about herself that was nothing to do with loss and bereavement, something that meant life was still there, waiting for her.

She hung up Stan's shirt and slid beneath the bedclothes. The mattress dipped as Stan plonked down on the edge to peel off his socks and pull his pyjama jacket over his vest, his shoulder muscles rippling before disappearing beneath the blue-and-white stripes. He had been thin when they met. Strong, though, in a wiry way. He had filled out since.

'Alf been good?' His back was to her as he did up his buttons.

'He helped me clean out the ash pan. He looked like a chimney sweep when he'd finished.' She smiled: it was time. 'Something funny happened.'

'Oh aye?'

'The district nurse turned up, asking to see the baby, and she had my name.'

Stan looked down, checking his buttons. She waited for his reaction.

'Just a mistake, love. A daft mistake. You'd expect better of them nurses.'

Only he didn't look round as he said it. Nell's skin tingled. To look round, to frown, to laugh – that would have been natural. He hadn't even answered immediately, which you would expect him to do if he was surprised.

She stared at his blue-and-white-clad back.

Stan knew. Something was going on and Stan *knew*.

Nell dropped Alf off with Mrs Hibbert, then went to the Royal Oak, where she made her excuses: she needed to see the doctor. Mr Page wasn't pleased, but she was adamant. She set off at a brisk pace. What was she was doing? She didn't know. And why was she doing it? Same answer. Don't know and don't know. All she knew for certain was that she was boiling with determination as she marched across town to the district nurses' building, known for some reason as their station,

which made them sound like railway porters. When she got there, she would . . . well, she would see about that when the time came.

The nurses' station didn't look all that big from the front, but it must stretch out at the back, because the nurses lived there as well. Poor creatures. Not much chance of meeting a fellow and settling down if you had to shin down a drainpipe to do your courting. Mind you, there was a shortage of men since the war, so maybe these lasses had done well for themselves, having bed and board provided. And no husband meant no one to drink the wages.

As she went in, the smell of disinfectant swarmed up her nose. There was a long corridor, its doors closed, except for one. Nell glanced in: an office, with a woman standing behind a desk, shuffling through a stack of papers. She wore a brown costume that was lifted out of the ordinary by gold buttons and braid, and shiny brown beads, a long set that almost reached her waist. Fancy wearing beads to work!

The woman looked at her in an equally assessing way but without the admiration. 'Can I help you?'

Nell lifted her chin. She wouldn't get a second chance at this. 'One of the nurses came out to me yesterday, but there was a mix-up over the address. Please could you—'

'Your name?'

'Hibbert, Mrs Stanley.'

'One moment.' The woman flicked through the pages in a large notebook. 'Hibbert . . . Hibbert. Nurse Beddow was down to see a Mrs Hibbert of 14 Vicarage Lane.'

Nell's innards froze. 'Mrs Stanley Hibbert?'

'Mrs Stanley Hibbert of 14 Vicarage Lane. Is that incorrect?'

She cast an impatient glance at Nell. It pierced Nell's natural respect for authority and made her feel impatient too.

'I'll let you know.'

A big bass drum boomed inside her chest.

14 Vicarage Lane.

Her feet took her through the market square and over the bridge. Courtesy of the dye-works, the river was running blue today, not a natural water-blue, but the colour of peacock feathers. Right colour, wrong shade. Like yesterday with Nurse Beddow. Right name, wrong address.

14 Vicarage Lane.

‘Oh, lumme,’ said Nurse Beddow’s voice in her head.

Vicarage Lane. It conjured up a picture of a winding path and butterflies dancing among the cow parsley, windows thrown open to the sunshine beneath a row of thatched roofs. Mind you, anyone might think the same of Lark Street. Vicarage Lane was pretty much like Lark Street, two long rows of old terraces, though the Vicarage Lane dwellings, being nearer the bottom of the hill, were older and smaller. Lower ceilings.

She ground to a halt at the corner. She wanted to dash home and hide. She wanted to march up Vicarage Lane and demand to know what the ruddy hallelujah was going on. She wanted to pretend Nurse Beddow had never come round, her and her ‘Oh, lumme’. She wanted to confront Stan, because he knew. Whatever it was, he *knew*. She wanted it to go away. She wanted it never to have happened.

Anything she wanted had flown out the window when Stan didn’t turn and look at her last night.

She forced her feet to take her to number 14.

Except for the number, it might have been her own front door. The same dark green. Someone walked over her grave. Even now it wasn’t too late to run away. Yes, it was. The moment Stan didn’t turn and look her in the eye last night, it was too late. She rapped hard on the door. A sound on the other side sent a sheen of fear blooming across her skin. The door swished open and there was an answering swish in her stomach.

She looked down at a fair-haired young woman. That was nothing new: she had been looking down at the other girls all her life. This

stranger had the soft-edged plumpness that said a baby had recently been born. The tiredness in the face said the same thing, a blissful tiredness that hadn't yet reached the exhausted stage.

Nell peeled her tongue off the roof of her mouth. 'Mrs Hibbert?'
'Who wants to know?'

'Are you married to . . . ?' Her voice failed her.

'To Stan.'

Stan. Nell went trembly all over, as if she was about to crumple on the step.

The other Mrs Hibbert's eyes widened. 'There's never been an accident at the works, has there?'

'No, no.' Was she actually reassuring this woman? 'Does he work at the furniture factory?'

'Aye, he's an upholsterer.'

'Do you work there too?'

'Nay, I've not worked since we moved in here.' She laughed. 'Well, I say I haven't, but running round after a two-year-old is harder than working on the factory line any day.'

A two-year-old? A two-year-old!

'Who are you?' asked Stan's other wife. 'Why are you asking after my husband?'

He's not your husband. He's my husband. Go on, say it. But she couldn't. Didn't want it said out loud, because that would make this situation real. And then it became more real than she could ever have imagined. A small child trotted down the hall to cling to his mummy's skirt, thumb plugged into his mouth. A two-year-old with sandy hair and blue eyes like Stan.

Sandy hair and blue eyes like Alf.