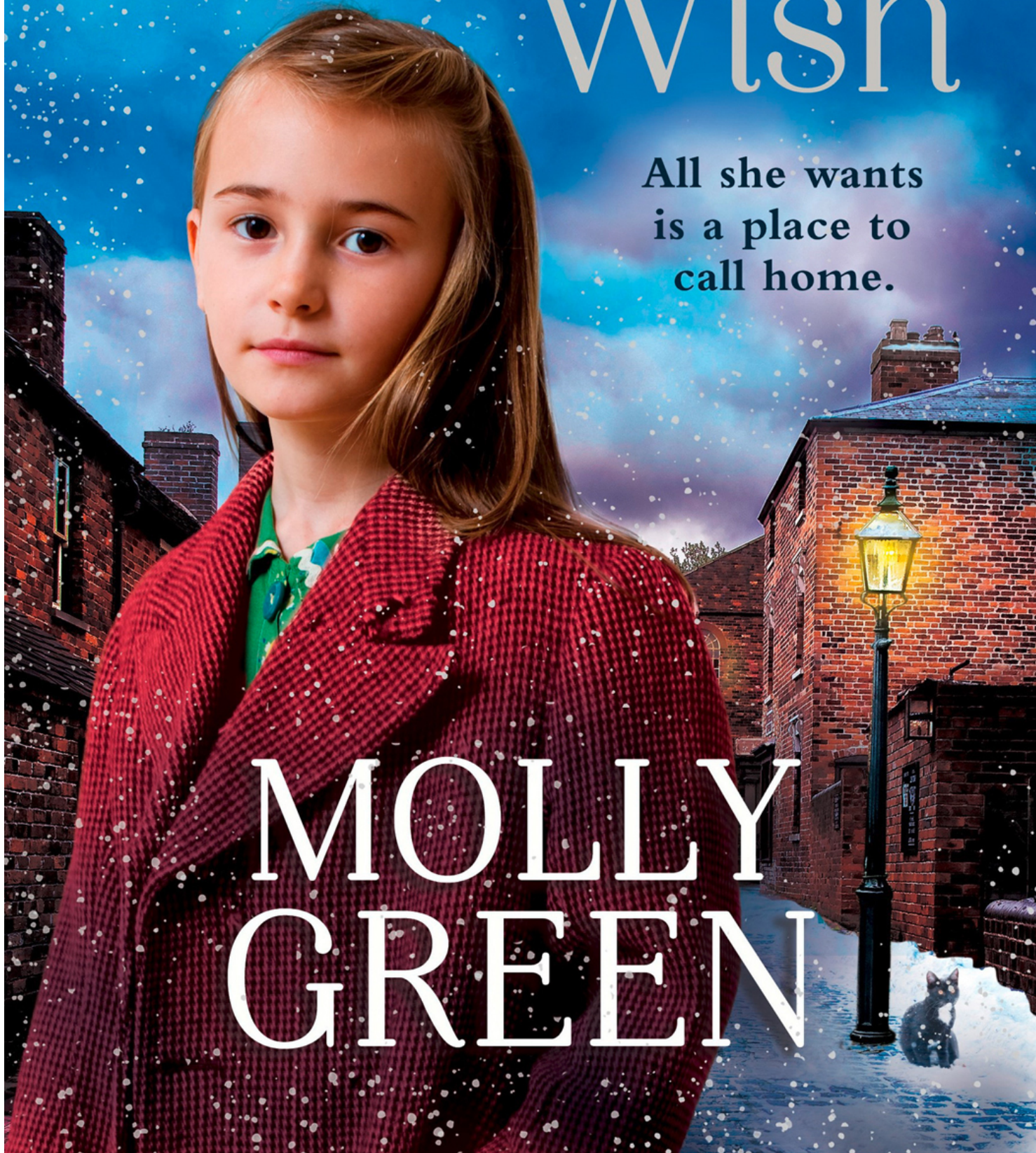


An Orphan's Wish

All she wants
is a place to
call home.

MOLLY
GREEN



Molly Green

**An Orphan's Wish: The new,
most heartwarming of christmas
novels you will read in 2018**

«HarperCollins»

Green M.

An Orphan's Wish: The new, most heartwarming of christmas novels you will read in 2018 / M. Green — «HarperCollins»,

War rages, but the women and children of Liverpool's Dr Barnardo's Home cannot give up hope. What more could you wish for than a poignant, heart-warming saga to read this Christmas? LIVERPOOL, 1943 Yorkshire is the place Lana has always called home, but it's now filled with painful memories of her fiancé, Dickie, who was killed at sea. When she accepts the challenging position of headmistress at a school in Liverpool, she hopes a new beginning will help to mend her broken heart. A BATTLE TO FIGHT Not everyone at Bingham School is happy about her arrival but Lana throws herself into the role, teaching children from the local village and the nearby Dr Barnardo's orphanage. She thrives in her work, but soon finds herself falling for a man who she would once have considered the enemy – and is torn between what she knows is right, and taking a risk that might see her lose everything. THE STRENGTH TO HOPE There are children that desperately need her help, and Lana must fight for everyone's happiness, as well as her own. But one young girl in particular shows her that there is a way through the darkness – because even when all seems lost, there is always a glimmer of hope to be found...

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An Orphan's Wish

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Published by Avon an imprint of
HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd
1 London Bridge Street,
London, SE1 9GF
www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by HarperCollinsPublishers 2018

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Source ISBN: 9780008239008

Ebook Edition © November 2018 ISBN: 9780008239015

Version: 2018-10-23

Dedication

For the original Lana Ashwin, a glamorous dark-haired actress and one of my mother's close friends who rented a flat in the same building in Kensington. She and her husband, actor Michael Ashwin, endured the London Blitz along with Mum and Dad.

To all Dr Barnardo's children during the Second World War who were the inspiration for this series.

Lastly, to all the animals who were used in the war – they had no choice. If you haven't been, do go and see the monument, Animals in War, on the edge of Hyde Park, London. It's a powerful and moving tribute to the thousands of animals who suffered and died in service.

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Before ...
Mellanby, North Yorkshire

Lana read Dickie's letter for the umpteenth time. It was dated 23rd August 1941.

My darling dearest girl,

I hated leaving you for yet another tour but I'll be home before you know it. I can't wait to see your lovely face again, to bury myself in that wonderful hair of yours, but all I have at the moment is your photograph. I'm gazing at it now as I write this.

I miss you so much, Lana. When I get my next shore leave we'll go on long walks, hand in hand.

Keep safe for me, darling. I long to hold you in my arms again. I love knowing my grandmother's ring is nestling between your breasts, but it's hidden, and I want to put it on your finger to let the whole world know we're engaged to be married – the sooner the better. I know you prefer to wait so we can tell your parents together, but it's so frustrating with this damned war.

Give my love to them, and if you get time, I know mine would love you to call in at number 10. You're always welcome – you know that. If you let them know ahead, Mum will make your favourite liver & bacon dish.

Will close now and try to get a couple of hours' kip before the next shift. Will write again soon.

I love you so much.

Dickie xxx

Lana blinked back the tears. Her dearest love. He'd worked in their special code – created by them because of the severe censoring of all letters between members of the armed forces and their parents, wives and girlfriends. She loathed liver, but it meant he'd be docking at Liverpool, and his parents' address at number 10 meant he'd be home in the tenth month – October. She couldn't help smiling as his parents' number had changed more than once to suit his homecoming date.

Her hand automatically touched the ring – Dickie's ring that she'd put on a fine gold chain and worn around her neck ever since he proposed to her on her birthday, 6th August. Today was 4th October, the month he said he'd be home. As usual, the letter had taken several weeks to arrive. This was October, yes, but the year was now 1942. Fourteen months since his proposal, she calculated, and the diamond and ruby ring was still around her neck.

Chapter One

February 1943

'Is there something wrong, dear?' her mother said, her voice anxious.

'The ATS won't accept me for driving,' Lana said dully, as she slid the sheet of paper back into the envelope.

Her mother's eyes widened. 'Why not? An intelligent young woman – healthy—'

'Seems I'm not.'

'What—?'

'They say I've got flat feet. I'd never be able to march. They might be able to find me a job in an office as a *civilian* – well, they can forget that.' She rounded on her mother, the gold in her hazel eyes flashing. 'The woman who interviewed me more or less said they'd welcome me with open arms as an experienced driver. Some welcome.'

'Well, at least you haven't got anything serious,' her mother said calmly. 'You had me worried for a moment.'

'You don't understand, Mum. Joining up was going to change my life. Pay back those bloody Germans for killing Dickie.' She absentmindedly fiddled with her engagement ring, now on the third finger of her left hand.

'Don't swear, dear,' her mother said mildly. 'I know how you must feel but if I may say so ... and don't get cross with me, but that isn't quite the right spirit. You want revenge for Dickie's death but that's going to keep you bitter. Not all Germans are Nazis. I'm sure many of them don't want to fight any more than our boys. I *do* understand your feelings but—'

'I'm sorry, Mum, but you don't understand at all,' Lana said, her voice rising as she sprang to her feet. 'I'll never forgive them – never!'

Knowing she was behaving badly but not being able to stop herself, she rushed from the room.

'You shouldn't take it personally, Lana,' her father said when she'd calmed down a little and stepped into her parents' grocery shop a quarter of an hour later. 'They haven't rejected *you* – it's just one of those things.'

It was pointless to argue with her father. She knew he was right anyway. But it didn't make it any less hurtful.

'Your mother and I have been talking. The last thing we want is to keep you at home now Mum's getting better. Working in the shop is not for you – it would be a waste of all your training. Now Marjorie has left to join up, I've put an advertisement in the paper for a replacement assistant.' He glanced at her, and she saw the love and concern reflected in his eyes. 'You have to decide now what you want to do. Personally, I think you should go back to teaching. Your mum says the same.'

'You sound like Dickie,' Lana said, more than a little annoyed.

'I'm not surprised. Dickie was right. We all know how the children loved you. I reckon they thought you were a little eccentric – different from any of their other teachers – but that was why they adored you.' His eyes twinkled with humour and she couldn't help giving him a small smile in return. 'I think that's where you're needed. Not fighting Jerry.'

She couldn't think of a reply so she busied herself undoing a box of tinned sardines that had just been delivered.

'Any eggs this week?' she asked, more for something to say, as there wasn't much hope of any.

'We're expecting our allowance tomorrow,' her father said.

'Well, at least that will stop Mrs Mason from her perpetual moaning.'

Her parents' words tumbled over in her mind the rest of the morning. Maybe they were right. Maybe her strength lay in teaching. And if she was honest she'd missed it terribly these last few

months when she'd come home to look after her mother. A severe case of influenza had turned into pneumonia. Lana closed her eyes for a moment. It had been touch and go. At one stage she'd thought she was going to lose her mother as well as her fiancé. Now her mother was finally regaining her strength, Lana had some thinking to do. She was uncertain as to whether the headmaster would give her back her old job, even though they knew her slightly unconventional ways and couldn't deny how much the children responded to her.

She remembered standing in the headmaster's office when she'd asked him if he could hold her position by having a temporary teacher for the time it took her mother to recover. He couldn't guarantee it, he'd said. It depended upon who came in her place. What their situation might be. He wouldn't look her in the eye. At that moment in his office she'd made up her mind never to go back to that school, whatever the circumstances.

'Even if he offered it to me it would be going backwards,' she said aloud as she checked the list of items they were waiting to be delivered. She'd always taken pride in trying something new if things didn't turn out as expected or if she was unhappy. Begging for her old job would be admitting failure.

When Marjorie Drake had suddenly announced to Lana's father that she was joining the Women's Auxiliary Air Force and would be leaving in a week's time, Lana had felt a spurt of envy. She'd decided then and there to join the Auxiliary Territorial Service. To fight Jerry. For Dickie's sake. But now that had been cut from under her.

'The library was shut today,' Lana grumbled to her father after supper a few days later when her mother had retired early. 'Staff shortage, I suppose. It's so annoying. I've finished my book and I've got nothing else to read.'

'Try these.' Her father put down his newspaper and tossed a couple of magazines over to her. 'Mrs Randall-Smith dropped them in this afternoon when she came to see your mother. You might find something of interest.'

They were sitting in opposite easy chairs in the parlour, which they used more these days since her mother had been ill. Lana had lit a fire but the room was still chilly even though the ugly blackout curtains were disguised by a second thick pair of richly flowered ones. Lana shivered. All the curtains did was give the impression the room was cosier than it felt.

Lana flipped through one of *The Lady* magazines her mother's friend had left, then looked up. 'No response yet for an assistant?'

'Not yet. Everyone seems to have joined up.' He looked suddenly contrite. 'Sorry, love. That was a bit tactless of me.'

Lana gave a rueful smile. 'Don't worry, Dad. I'm all growed up now.'

Her father's face broke into a grin. 'You certainly are, Topsy. I'm hoping it won't be long before we have some replies – then you'll be free to continue your own life.'

It was her father's old nickname for her when she was still a child. Impulsively, she sprang to her feet and kissed her father's cheek. 'You're the best father in the world,' she said, 'but you're encouraging me to be the most selfish daughter.'

'Not at all,' he said, giving her an affectionate kiss back. 'You haven't had an easy time with this war and—'

'No different from thousands of others,' Lana interrupted, her expression grim. 'I so badly want to get back at the Germans for what they took away from me, Dad, but Mum thinks I'll end up a bitter and twisted old maid.'

'Did she actually say that?' Her father looked at her in surprise. 'Doesn't sound like your mother.'

'Not exactly those words but that's what she meant,' Lana grimaced. She went back to her chair and picked up the magazine again, but she couldn't concentrate. She sat thinking while her father quietly read his paper, until he folded it and yawned.

'I think I'll turn in,' he announced.

He'd been a handsome man, she thought, as she watched him struggle to his feet, but the strain of another war – the first one where he'd lost a brother, and now two sons away at sea – had begun to tell on his features. His mouth had lost some of its fullness and his cheeks were a little sunken, but his eyes still held their teasing sparkle. A lump came to her throat.

'G'night, love.'

'Night, Dad. Sleep tight.'

'And don't let the bed bugs bite,' he finished, smiling.

It was how they'd always finished saying goodnight when she was a little girl.

She grinned back.

In bed, she opened the magazine and read a couple of articles, wrinkling her nose at the 'Let's Make Do & Mend' article. If this war went on much longer she'd need to improve what little sewing skills she had. Idly, she turned to the 'Situations Vacant' pages and her eye roved down the columns. Her attention was caught by one, enclosed in a box.

Urgently seeking temporary headmistress for village school in Bingham, nr Liverpool. Must be an experienced teacher and willing to supervise small team while headmaster is abroad fighting. Pls reply to Mr G. Shepherd, Box 3032 at The Lady.

Lana's heart turned over. Dickie's home port had been Liverpool. She'd been there once to see him off and had been horrified at the devastation in the city. It had looked every bit as bad as London, having only just suffered its own blitz. Beautiful buildings turned into heaps of rubble and debris, people picking their way through it, children playing games amongst it, and what had been people's pets looking dazed by the way their world had changed in an instant, ribs sticking through their unkempt coats, foraging for scraps.

Lana shuddered, remembering how every bombed building, every church destroyed, every ship struck, had all brought home to her the danger Dickie faced every day. She'd caught the train home on the same day, not only sad at parting from Dickie but also frightened on his behalf, and thoroughly depressed about the ruined areas of the city that he and his friends seemed almost to accept as part of war.

Safe in what had been her old bed at home, she pulled the blanket up further so she could tuck the ends around her shoulders. The room was so cold it was difficult to think straight, but she knew that was true for most of the nation. She wondered how far Bingham was from Liverpool and for the children's sake she hoped this place was miles out in the sticks.

She shook herself. Why did it matter how far the village was from the city? She wouldn't dream of applying. A headmistress was different altogether from a teacher. It would be far too big a leap and she wasn't going to put herself through more humiliation by being rejected – this time for not being experienced enough. A pity, really. If they'd been advertising for a teacher she might well have been tempted to apply.

A few days later *The Yorkshire Post* forwarded two letters to her parents for the part-time assistant vacancy.

'Trouble is, we can't pay much,' Lana's father said as he came through the shop to the kitchen for lunch. 'But I'd still have thought there'd be at least a half a dozen replies from married women who only want part-time.' He held out the two opened letters for her.

'I'll have a look at these after supper tonight,' she said, then hesitated. Should she say anything? She knew her father wouldn't let it go further if she asked him not to. 'Dad, in one of those magazines Mrs Randall-Smith left for Mum there was quite an interesting advert.'

'Oh, what was that?'

She felt her father's eyes studying her closely.

'They want a headmistress for a school. Apparently, the headmaster has joined up and gone abroad. It's obviously only for the duration of the war.'

'Have you applied?' her father asked casually as he picked up the tray with a bowl of lentil soup and bread and margarine, ready to take to his wife.

Lana shook her head.

'What are you waiting for? It sounds right up your street.'

'Because I don't have any experience of being a headmistress.'

'You could do it standing on your head.'

She grinned at him. 'You've always had such faith in me, Dad. But it would be too terrifying.'

'Nonsense. Can I see the advert?'

'Let me take Mum's tray.' She took it from her father's hands. 'She's probably got it.'

She was back in moments and handed her father the magazine.

'Hmm.' Her father looked up. 'It only says an experienced *teacher*. It doesn't mention anything about being an experienced headmistress.'

'I know, but *I* wouldn't feel confident organising the other teachers – telling them what they have to do.'

'Darling, you've been in teaching long enough to know how it all works – the duties of the headmaster. And you'd be releasing a man to fight for his country.'

'He's already gone,' Lana said.

'There you are, then. Why don't you apply and see what happens?'

'It's too far away. Near Liverpool.'

'Straight through on the train,' her father said. 'Mind you, you'd certainly see some action there, if that's what you're looking for.' He spooned up the last of his soup. 'If you *do* decide, for heaven's sake don't let Mum know how bad it is. Jerry regularly bombs the docks, from what I read in the paper.'

'It's not in Liverpool itself – it's in a village called Bingham. I'm not sure how far away it is from the city ... but I shan't apply.'

'Her father gave her a sharp look. 'Because the docks are so near?'

'No, not that at all,' Lana said quickly. 'It's because I'm needed in the shop.'

'Not true.' Her father set the tray down on the kitchen table again. 'Both women who applied for the job sounded nice, so we're bound to pick one of them.' He looked at her, his eyes smiling. 'Your country needs you more than we do, Lana.'

'But the ATS won't accept me—'

Her father ignored her. Instead, he said gently, 'That goes for the school kids as well.'

'Did you reply to that advert in *The Lady*?' her mother said unexpectedly one afternoon when she was reading her book in the front room. Lana had just brought her a cup of tea and a digestive biscuit.

'Dad shouldn't have mentioned it.'

'Well, he did. He thinks you ought to at least apply. I agree.'

'Even though it's in Liverpool?'

'Yes. Being a headmistress would give you a sense of purpose, which is exactly what you need.' She looked up at Lana and smiled gently. 'I know Dickie would approve.' From the bowl she scooped a tip end of sugar and stirred it into her tea. 'Except for the rationing we've had very little to put up with, except the time when that little row of cottages was struck and that whole family was killed.' She shook her head. 'That was terrible.' She took a sip of tea. 'Sometimes I think we should be doing more for the war effort.'

'Don't tell the villagers that, Mum. They wouldn't know what to do without you and Dad for their food supplies.' She looked at her mother's pale face. 'You need to eat more. You've lost quite a lot of weight since you've been ill.'

'You're changing the subject, dear. We were talking about the headmistress job. It would be a marvellous opportunity for you.'

'I'll think about it.'

'If you don't answer soon you'll be too late. Mrs R-S gives me *The Lady* after her daughter's read it.'

'I'm sure it won't have gone,' Lana said. 'Most people seem to be doing proper war work.'

Her mother gave her a sharp look. 'Lana, get it out of your head that you wouldn't be doing proper war work, as you call it, if you went back to teaching. All right, you wouldn't be in the military, but your job with children would be just as important. Imagine how they must feel – terrified most of the time, I should think. You'd be bringing some fun into their lives, and some stability as they won't have their fathers coming home every night. And some of them, poor little kids, will lose their fathers forever.'

'Oh, I don't know, Mum.' Lana looked across the room at her mother, a sob catching in the back of her throat. 'I don't know anything any more.'

'Believe me, love, life's too precious to waste. This war is taking far too many of our young people.' Her mother blinked rapidly. 'I think about your Dickie every day.'

Even at this distance Lana could see her mother's eyes fill with tears and she knew she was also worrying desperately about her sons, Geoff and Nick, Lana's beloved brothers, so far out at sea, not knowing from one day to the next if they were safe. She went and knelt by her mother's chair.

'Write the letter this evening,' her mother said, stroking Lana's head. 'Will you promise?'

Lana nodded. 'All right, Mum, if it makes you happy.'

The reply came through swiftly. The position had already gone, Mr Shepherd informed her. *Thank you for your interest and I wish you good luck in seeking a suitable alternative position*, he finished.

Her hands made fists. Another rejection. She knew it wasn't personal – for heaven's sake. The man didn't know her – had never heard of her. But it felt like another slap in the face. She tore up the letter and threw the pieces onto the fire, enjoying the flames rising as the strips flared, then burned into ashes. It was meant to be that she didn't go to Liverpool. Mr Shepherd and the successful applicant had made the decision for her. What a relief!

Chapter Two

She'd left it too late by dithering. As each day passed Lana became more annoyed with herself for not taking action. It would have been a marvellous opportunity to gain experience as a headmistress, albeit temporarily. Nothing was permanent in wartime anyway, but it would have looked good on her work record. At least she now knew what she wanted to do. She'd thought she'd wanted to join the ATS, that was true, but teaching was in her blood, and as soon as her parents employed an assistant for the shop she'd start applying to other schools.

Another week passed and Lana was kept busy with deliveries and serving in the shop while her mother built up her strength and carried on doing the bookkeeping. There were times in the evening, though, when Lana just longed to go out with a friend to the pictures – anything to relieve the relentless tedium. But most of her friends had joined up if they hadn't already been conscripted. She would have been pleased to take her mother so she could escape to a world that didn't consist of the constant round of cooking, cleaning, washing and all the other domestic chores on top of the accounts for the shop. But her mother always shook her head, her chin quivering with fright at the thought of venturing into the outside world. Lana gave a sigh of frustration.

The only bright spot was that the nights were drawing out and it was already March. The month when spring began. When the primroses showed their yellow faces along the verges. She'd already spotted snowdrops three weeks ago when she'd gone for a walk up the lane. Her heart lifted for a few moments and then the memory of Dickie's face blocked out everything else, and an overwhelming sadness filled every part of her body. Her love had been extinguished by some nasty little Austrian's megalomania, and his hatred of anyone who didn't fit his bill of a perfect blond-haired, blue-eyed German. If Hitler had those physical traits it would be slightly more understandable, but he was the very opposite of what he ranted on about; yet no high-ranking German, from the little they were told, seemed to mock it, or even question it.

Dickie had only been the second serious boyfriend in her life. She'd never told her parents or they would have been shocked but she'd lived with the first one, Keith Travers, for two and a half years. She'd been twenty-five and old enough to know better but had been totally infatuated. He was every girl's dream – handsome, intelligent, fun, successful at his job as a property developer ... she could go on listing the things that had appealed. But he'd invested in the wrong company who'd done the dirty on him and he'd lost almost all his money. He'd changed overnight, becoming morose, angry, argumentative, even lazy about his appearance ... No matter how she'd tried to help him and encourage him, he'd turned her away, shouting at her that she didn't understand what a failure he felt.

Something flickered at the corner of her mind. Wasn't that how she was feeling right this minute? She'd accused Keith of having no backbone, but wasn't she acting exactly the same? Giving up, instead of gritting her teeth and getting on with it. It was over a year now since that terrible day when she'd had the telegram confirming Dickie's death and most of her friends thought it was high time she pulled herself together and got on with her life. She wasn't the only woman who'd lost her fiancé in the war, they reminded her. She'd immediately felt guilty, as two of them had lost their husbands, leaving little children without their fathers.

She swallowed hard as her thoughts rolled back to Keith again. To when she'd finally made a decision to be responsible for her own life.

An only child, his parents doted on him and she'd simply carried on doing everything for him. But one evening when he'd flounced out and, she presumed, gone to the pub, which he did most nights, she packed her clothes and her few small valuables, and left him a brief note on his pillow. Her friend, Belinda, had mentioned a spare room in a house she shared with two others if Lana should ever need it. But Keith hadn't accepted it was the end of their relationship. He asked her to go back and after a solid month of begging, she'd given in. It had been a disaster and six weeks later she'd left for good.

Biting her lip she flinched at the memory and her own foolishness, but one good thing had come from the failed relationship: Keith owned a car. It was the one thing he'd managed to hold on to. Although her brothers had taught her to drive in their old Austin 7, it was Keith who showed her how to change a tyre and check the oil and water, and do basic maintenance work.

When she looked back she realised she couldn't have truly cared because she'd got over him quickly. Dickie was different. She'd known he was special straightaway – and they'd hit it off as true friends. It had been a slow lead-up to love, but when the spark had burst into flames she knew she was happier than she'd ever been in her life. Now he'd been taken from her. By the bloody Germans. She swallowed but she couldn't stop the tears flowing.

This morning the customers were even more demanding than usual. She was tired of reminding them that there was a war on.

'Make us a cup of tea, love,' her father said at ten past ten. 'I'm that thirsty I can't wait until eleven.'

She gave him a fond look. His eyes were drooping, not masking the lines of strain around them.

'All right, Dad. I could do with one myself.' She nodded over to the two boxes of biscuits that had just been delivered. 'I'll sort them out when I come back. There might be a few broken ones that we couldn't possibly sell to our customers.' She grinned. 'Not to the adults, anyway.'

Her father chuckled and carried on stacking the shelf with the dozen tins of soup. No doubt they'd all have disappeared by the end of the morning, Lana thought, and who knew when there'd be another delivery.

She picked up an envelope her mother had left for her on the kitchen table and studied the handwriting. She could hear Mum upstairs and smiled. It was changing-the-beds day and nothing would alter her routine even though Lana had told her not to do it by herself. That she'd be there in a few minutes to help. Sliding the blade of a knife underneath the flap she pulled out a typed sheet of paper and glanced at the signature at the bottom. *G. Shepherd*. Curious. Her eyes lifted to the beginning.

18th March 1943

Dear Miss Ashwin,

I'm writing to you to inform you the situation has changed regarding the position for a temporary headmistress. Therefore, if you are still interested I would be very pleased to arrange for you to come for an interview as soon as possible.

I look forward to hearing from you shortly.

Respectfully yours,

G. Shepherd

Lana read the letter through twice to be sure she'd understood it correctly. Reading between the lines Mr Shepherd sounded worried. It was obvious the other person hadn't turned out as he'd hoped. She laid the sheet of paper on the table while she filled the kettle and prepared the tea tray, her head spinning. What should she do? She wasn't ever going to pass her medical for one of the services, so that was out. There was no doubt about it – she'd loved every moment of teaching before she'd come home to give her parents a hand. It was just that joining one of the forces had seemed the only way to fight Dickie's murderers and keep faithful to his memory.

She took her mother's cup into the front room and read Mr Shepherd's letter out.

'There you are, love,' her mother smiled. 'I told you something would turn up. You just need patience.' She looked at her daughter. 'I hope you'll write back straightaway and fix a time to see him.'

'I think I will,' Lana said slowly as she folded the letter and tucked it back into the envelope. 'Yes, I will.'

Chapter Three

Five days later Lana was on the train to Liverpool.

It had been a long journey with a delay of over an hour when they were close to Liverpool. A siren had shrilled and the train had immediately stopped. Most people in the carriage carried on reading or chatting as though this was a normal daily routine, but Lana's heart thundered hard in her chest. She flinched at the half-dozen explosions, even though they were muffled, but the train shook with the vibrations, causing her glasses to slip down her nose as she doggedly attempted to read her book.

She'd had no lunch and her stomach rumbled. Now, the pouring rain added to her misery as she waited for the number 42 bus outside Kirkdale station. At least in the train she'd been inside. Drops of water ran under her collar and seeped into her shoes. *How much worse could it get?*

'Expect bus'll be late as usual,' the woman in front said to her companion. Their umbrellas bobbed as they talked, their accent so strong it was difficult for Lana to catch everything.

'S'not their fault, Mags,' the second lady said as she moved a little to the side to escape her friend's umbrella spokes. 'They've gorra lot on their plates what with all them holes in the road. I don't know how they do as well as they do.'

'It's your sort who never get things made any better,' the first woman retorted. 'You see the good in everyone. It's ones like me who complain and get changes made. Then you cop the benefit but I end up the stirrer.'

Lana gave a start. It sounded as though the two were about to go into a full-scale row. To her relief the other one chuckled. 'That's true. They just think what an old dragon you are and what a lovely woman *I* am.'

'If only it were true.' Mags gave her friend a little push.

So they were only poking fun. She'd have to try to understand their humour if she did end up living here. But she wouldn't think that far ahead. No point in getting her hopes up.

'Bingham,' called out the conductor as the bus slowed to a halt.

Lana glanced at her watch. Already three o'clock. Nearly an hour late. Not a good impression to give.

'Is the village school very far?' she asked him as she alighted.

'No, pet. Not five minutes. It's just up the road ahead of you. Low red-brick building on the other side. You can't miss it.'

With the trains often delayed interminably, and sometimes not running at all, Lana had decided to stay the night in a bed-and-breakfast one of her customers had recommended. Her heart gave a little skip of freedom at the thought of being in a place where she wasn't known. She wouldn't have to force herself to smile when someone she hadn't seen for a while enquired, 'How's that gorgeous fiancé of yours?'

When she explained, the person would be embarrassed and clearly wish they'd never asked. She'd have to mumble some excuse to rush away before they saw her tears.

She braced herself now and stepped down from the bus, thanking the conductor, relieved to see the rain had eased. The school building came in sight after only a few hundred yards. A sign pointed to 'Office' and she hurried through an arched entrance that opened onto a haphazard garden of concrete path, flower borders and patches of vegetables, with one dejected-looking tree stuck in the middle. The path led to a door with a notice: 'Please ring the bell and enter'.

She found herself in a hall about the size of her parents' front room. To one side was a recess with a protruding sign: Office. A woman of indecisive age, her hair scraped back into a severe bun, sat peering through a glazed screen, looking Lana up and down before she spoke.

'Miss Ashwin?'

Lana nodded.

'You're very late.'

Not the warmest welcome, Lana thought, as she shrugged off her damp raincoat, giving herself time to respond.

'I'm really sorry,' she said, folding her raincoat and laying it across her arm. 'The poor driver had to make so many detours with all the damaged streets. I don't envy them their jobs at the moment.'

'That's as maybe,' the woman said with a sniff. 'Mr Shepherd has been waiting I don't know *how* long. I'd better let him know you've *finally* arrived.'

Lana looked around, longing to sit for a few moments after her long journey but there was no seat provided. They obviously didn't want to let visitors linger too long, she thought, biting back a grimace. What a sombre place. She almost decided she wouldn't bother seeing Mr Shepherd, but could hear her mother telling her not to be so rude. Well, she'd meet him and be quick about it, saying she realised Liverpool was just too far away, then make some excuse that her parents needed her as they hadn't been able to find a suitable person to help in the shop. Anything to escape.

These thoughts were churning around her head when she heard someone call her name.

'Miss Ashwin?'

She swung round to see a figure limping towards her.

'George Shepherd.' She held out her hand and he shook hers briefly. 'Come this way.'

She followed him along a corridor and another short passage where he opened a door on the left and ushered her in.

'Sit down, Miss Ashwin. Expect you've had a frightful journey.'

He spoke in a crisp tone like a military man and didn't seem to expect a response to his comment. She nodded and took in a breath.

'Damned nuisance, this bloody war,' he said, then smiled at her reaction. 'I do apologise, Miss Ashwin. Too used to being with chaps all day long. Not used to females in the least.'

She smiled, the tension dissipating a little. 'Don't mind me,' she said, thinking he must have been a soldier injured in the war.

'I don't work here, God forbid,' he said, grimacing. 'I'm from the council – Education Department. The school is understaffed with everyone rushing to do their bit but we *must* keep the schools going. These nippers need a bit of continuity in their lives, poor little buggers.' He looked across the desk and made a tutting noise. 'Oh, sorry. Am in bad habits.'

'There's no need at all to apologise, Mr Shepherd, but coming here I realised Liverpool was much further from home than I'd thought. I wanted to tell you in person that I'm afraid I've wasted your time. I know you haven't offered me the job as I've only just arrived, but I'll be catching the train home tomorrow. I see now that I should stay a bit closer to home.'

Mr Shepherd's skin tone changed colour. 'You mean we're both on a wild goose chase. Shouldn't you have thought of that before I arranged the interview?'

'It's my turn to apologise,' Lana said quietly. 'It's hard to know how one would feel upping sticks and leaving family behind. I can't see myself being happy here. And if I'm not happy then the children won't be. I'd be doing them a disservice.'

'I believe I'd be the best judge of that.' George Shepherd tapped his pen on the desk. His eyes, a strange mixture of brown and green, caught hers.

Lana squirmed in her chair, feeling seven years old and being told off by her teacher. She was just about to say it was best to know sooner rather than later how she felt when he came out from behind his desk and opened the door. For an instant she thought he was sending her off with no further ado, but instead he called a passing lad.

'Young man, please go to the kitchen and ask them for a tray of tea ... cake, too, if they've got any.'

He went back to his chair and a smile twitched on his lips. 'Can't send you away with nothing inside you,' he said. 'Have you eaten?'

'Not since breakfast.'

'Hmm. You'll waste away if you carry on like that.' He looked at her gravely. 'While we're waiting, tell me about yourself. Humour me. Even though you've turned down a job I haven't yet offered you.'

Lana couldn't help a small smile. He had a dry sense of humour, which she liked. She explained a little of her circumstances without mentioning Dickie but again, as though he knew she was holding something back, he barked: 'Husband? Boyfriend?'

'I had a fiancé,' she said with only a faint tremor.

'Had?'

'His ship was torpedoed by a U-boat only a few days after leaving Liverpool. Most of them survived but not Dickie.'

'Bad luck. How long ago?'

'Forty-one. He left on 23rd August and went down on the 28th.' She swallowed hard, desperate not to allow her voice to waver. His mother and father had told her as much as they knew, both of them with tears pouring down their cheeks. She'd never spoken about it to anyone else, not even her own parents, except to say he'd drowned.

Mr Shepherd's eyes widened. 'On the *Otaio*?'

Lana gave a start. 'Yes. How on earth did you know?'

'I was also Merchant Navy. That's how I got this gammy leg.' He appraised her for a minute. 'Why didn't you join up? Help get the buggers.' He grinned. 'And this time I won't apologise for swearing in front of a lady. It's the only name that suits them.'

She gave a weak smile back. 'I agree. I wanted to but failed the medical in the ATS.'

'Oh? On what grounds?'

'Flat feet,' she mumbled. It was as though she had something to be ashamed of, she thought, crossly.

'Sorry to hear it but of course it wouldn't affect your teaching abilities.'

There was a knock at the door and a maid entered holding a tea tray.

'Please thank Cook and ask her for a round of sandwiches for the lady,' Mr Shepherd said.

'Yes, sir.' The girl bobbed her head and vanished.

'You're very kind,' Lana murmured.

'Not at all. I just want to know what I can do to persuade you to stay here and do the vital job of educating children.'

'Teaching is what I love,' Lana said cautiously. 'It's just that Liverpool is so far away.'

'From your parents?'

Lana nodded.

'Are they ill?'

'My mother's been very ill but she's much better now. No, it's not that. They own a grocer's shop and it's too much for them now the assistant's joined up and my mother is having to run the house as well as do the bookkeeping.'

'They could always sell up and come to Liverpool. Be near their daughter.'

'They couldn't do that. You see, my mother doesn't even go out, so she'd never move.'

'What do you mean?'

'She has a condition. Agoraphobia.' She rarely told anyone this as they had either never heard of the condition or found it impossible to understand, and she was tired of hearing people say her mother should buck herself up. But she felt she owed Mr Shepherd an explanation for all his trouble.

'She was always on the nervous side,' she continued, feeling his gaze on her, 'but going through the Blitz has made her far worse. She began to get nervous attacks and now she's too frightened to catch a bus into town on her own – or even go into our village by herself.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' George Shepherd said, steeping his hands. 'Not a nice thing to have to deal with. But she wouldn't want that to hold you back, would she?'

'Oh, no,' Lana said truthfully. 'She wants me to live my life to the full. In fact, both my parents encouraged me to apply for this job, even knowing it was near Liverpool.'

'Well, then ...'

They were interrupted again with the welcome sound of the maid bringing in a plate of sandwiches. George pushed the plate over to her.

'Yours,' he said. 'And Cook's custard tarts. You'll feel completely different with one of those inside you.' He chuckled. 'Don't talk. Just enjoy it.'

He poured her a cup of tea and she drank it down gratefully. The two triangles of egg and cucumber sandwiches slipped down easily, and Mr Shepherd was right about the cook's custard tarts. He insisted she eat the second one as well. They were delicious.

'Better?' Mr Shepherd said.

'Much. Thank you.'

'Well, then, why don't I show you round. It's an interesting building and you've come all this way.'

She loved seeing different schools, getting a measure of how they ran, seeing if there was anything they did that would improve her own school – not that the headmaster at her last school had ever taken any notice of her suggestions.

'I'd like that,' she said as she rose from her chair.

'I'll show you a couple of the classrooms,' he said, limping by her side. 'This one's Miss Booth's mathematics class.'

Lana peered a few moments through the glazed door to see a blur of children sharing desks. An older girl suddenly caught her eye. She sat at the side of the class halfway between the children's desks and the teacher at the front. The girl raised her head and looked through the glass. To Lana's surprise she threw Lana a look of utter despair, then bent her head down again, scribbling rapidly in her notebook.

She was obviously extremely nervous about something. How odd. She was a pretty child, but those eyes had registered such misery for someone so young.

Just as Lana stepped back, the door opened and a young woman stood there, brown eyes warm with welcome.

'Do come in,' she said. 'Are you the new headmistress? Oh, I do hope so.' She didn't stop for Lana to say otherwise. 'The children are so excited to have a new headmistress. They weren't all that fond of Mr Benton. He was terribly strict. Like some Victorian master.' Her hand flew to her mouth. 'Oh, dear, I shouldn't talk like this in front of you, Mr Shepherd. You'll get me sacked.'

'I doubt that.' George Shepherd smiled as he lightly touched Lana's arm to guide her in. 'Teachers aren't two a penny any more, so we may be stuck with you.' The teacher chuckled. 'Anyway, I've brought Miss Ashwin to have a look round the school. And yes, I'm trying to persuade her to take the position of headmistress.'

With a loud scraping of chairs thirty-odd children scrambled to their feet. Lana noticed the older girl was the last one to stand up.

'Children, this is Miss Ashwin, come to say hello.'

'Good afternoon, Miss Ashwin,' they chorused.

The older girl didn't move her mouth.

'Sit down, children,' the teacher said in a raised voice. She smiled and put out her hand, saying quietly, 'Wendy Booth. Seriously, please think about the position. We're a friendly bunch when you get to know us, and we need someone like you desperately.'

'I haven't made up my mind yet,' Lana said, lamely.

'What have you been saying to put Miss Ashwin off?' Wendy Booth grinned mischievously at George Shepherd.

'On the contrary, I'm doing my best to encourage her.'

'In that case, don't take her next door. Mrs Parkes has had to cope with a very unruly child who's disturbing the others. Not a good scene for Miss Ashwin to see.'

'I've probably seen worse,' Lana said fervently. 'That sort of thing doesn't put me off. But we're keeping you from your class,' she finished as she noticed the sea of faces watching them curiously.

'Yes, I'd better get back,' Wendy Booth agreed. 'It's been lovely meeting you, and I do hope you'll join us.'

Lana smiled and turned before the teacher could discern her tears. She felt Wendy could be a friend. It had been too long since she'd had someone to confide in. To lay the past to rest. To think of the future.

George Shepherd took her round the rest of the school and even introduced her to Meg, the cook, who bustled about, but had a smile for her when Lana thanked her for the sandwich and custard tarts.

'I didn't mention the salary,' George Shepherd said when they returned to the office. 'Four pounds a week plus accommodation in a two-bedroomed cottage in the grounds with Janice Parkes, the history teacher Miss Booth mentioned.'

It was more than she'd expected. It seemed that a headmistress was generously rewarded for the added responsibility. She hesitated, not knowing how to answer.

'And you'd be running the show,' George Shepherd cut into her thoughts slyly, 'making sure you were one happy family, kids included. I think you'd make a marvellous success of it.'

'As I explained, I've never held the position of headmistress.'

'That's not a problem,' Mr Shepherd said immediately. 'But we did want someone with more than a couple of years' teaching experience, and you've had three times that.'

Lana was silent. Mr Shepherd was waiting for her to answer. She began to feel uncomfortable.

'Where do the children come from?' she asked, more for something to say.

'Mostly Bingham, but some from the neighbouring village, which is even smaller. One twelve-year-old, Priscilla Morgan, lives at Bingham Hall – that's the Dr Barnardo's orphanage, half a mile away – but she attends school here. I'd like to talk to you about her in particular. She desperately needs help. Mr Benton was not the kind of person she could talk to. She's an orphan but won't believe it. It's had a devastating effect on her studies as she's been removed from the girls' grammar school in Liverpool where she'd been doing very well up until then.' He took his glasses off and polished them with a soft cloth before pushing them back on his nose. 'Didn't you say you taught eleven- to thirteen-year-olds?'

Lana nodded.

Mr Shepherd was watching her closely. She was sure he was talking about the girl who had given her such a look of hopelessness.

'She's got wonderful potential,' Mr Shepherd continued. 'She's a difficult child – not naughty, really – it's just that she doesn't trust anyone any more. I think you'd be able to help her. She deserves it.' He leaned back in his chair, his eyes unwavering. 'So what do you say, Miss Ashwin?'

Chapter Four

The return journey on the train was even more fraught than the one going to Liverpool. It stopped at every possible unnamed town, and sometimes in between for no apparent reason. No sirens had gone off and the guard hadn't explained the reason for the hold-ups. He probably didn't know himself. Lana's frustration was fuelled by her thoughts, which were spinning out of control. The children needed a headmistress in place of this Mr Benton. Deep down, she knew she was capable of doing the job, though it would be a challenge – a big step up. She wished she could have met Janice Parkes who she'd be sharing the cottage with. That was important. She wouldn't be able to stand anyone who was morose, or worse, didn't stop talking. She couldn't help a wry smile. Mrs Parkes was more than likely a perfectly nice person and *she* would be worrying herself sick as to who was about to step into what she'd probably considered to be *her* cottage.

She wondered what Dickie would say if he could see her now. How she missed him. Her eyes stung with unshed tears as she tried to block out the recurring nightmare of the torpedoes that struck his ship, leaving him to drown or be blown up – she'd never know for sure. Even so, it felt too much to bear. Such a wasted life. And all the others, of course. Later she'd learned there were many survivors, and that had made her even more upset. Why couldn't Dickie have survived?

For the hundredth time she wondered what his last terrified thoughts had been. She gulped. She mustn't break down in front of the other people in the carriage.

'Promise me you won't join up.' She could hear his voice at their last parting. 'I couldn't bear to think of you in any kind of danger. No matter what happens to me, I want to think of you teaching children. That's where your heart is. And I love you for it.' He'd looked at her and grinned. 'Besides, with that red hair of yours and a quick temper to match, I can't see you toeing the line or taking orders.' When she'd opened her mouth to protest he'd kissed her lips to hush her. 'I probably know you better than you know yourself. The kids need someone original like you to give them hope in this crazy world. They are the future now.'

But my heart's no longer in it, she wanted to scream at him as she sat on the carriage seat squashed between two women in the ATS. Three airmen were standing close by and smoking. Her eyes began to water. *That rotten stinking Hitler and his friends caused you to die and I'm going to do everything in my power to help pay them back, so help me God.*

The people in the carriage were starting to throw her curious looks. She turned her face away and wiped her eyes with a handkerchief.

When she finally arrived home her mother bustled into the kitchen to heat up her supper. Lana followed her, watching as her mother put the plate over a saucepan of boiling water and a lid over the top.

'There ... that won't take more than a few minutes to heat through,' she said, looking round and smiling. 'Go and keep Dad company. We've had ours ... and we're dying to hear about it.'

'Your mother's been on tenterhooks all day, wondering how you were getting on,' her father said.

'Well, he's offered me the position,' Lana said, as her mother put a plate of macaroni cheese in front of her. 'More money – four pounds a week and all found. Sharing a cottage with another teacher. I didn't meet her but I met one – the mathematics teacher. She was awfully nice.'

'What about the man who interviewed you?' her father said.

'Mr Shepherd? He was nice too. He doesn't work there – he's from the council – but he interviews prospective staff.'

'Have you decided?' her mother said, smiling encouragingly.

'Not really.'

'What did you tell him?'

'I said I'd think about it and let him know either way by telephone by the end of the week.'

Her father nodded. 'Very wise, dear. It's a big decision. But if you say you'll take it, your mother and I are right behind you. The change of scenery would do you the world of good and you'd do a marvellous job. Those children would flourish. But only *you* know what would suit you best.'

'Thank you both.' Lana gave them a relieved smile. They were the dearest parents in the world and she wanted them to be proud of her. She shrugged. She didn't know what she wanted, but she couldn't bear to be in limbo for much longer.

It was the afternoon. She'd been watching her father attend to several customers who were plainly upset with their meagre rations. The egg delivery that was promised definitely for today hadn't come in, and one lady had grabbed an orange from the half-dozen in the basket clearly marked 'For Children Only', saying she wanted to give it to her daughter who had just had a baby. Dad had explained the oranges weren't for babies but for children who could peel their own fruit. The lady lost her temper and said it wasn't fair and she was sick of queuing for what little was left when she finally got to the top of the queue ...

And then someone opened the shop door making the bell jangle. A man walked in. He was the same height and build ... same chestnut hair ... same narrow face. For a fleeting moment, in the dim electric light, she thought Dickie had come back to her. Her heart jumped and she had to put her hands on the edge of the counter to steady herself. But this man didn't have Dickie's heart-melting smile. As her pulse slowed, the man gave her a brief nod and put his list on the counter.

But it was too late. That initial reaction jogged her memory of when she'd first met Dickie. She'd come home from teaching for the summer holidays and had just brought her father and Marjorie a cup of tea. She saw the appreciative smile as the man looked at her, then lowered his eyes to her hands, giving a slight nod. It was the summer before war was declared.

'He came in every day for a week,' her father told her, smiling. 'Poor chap. You should see the look of disappointment on his face when he sees you're not there. He's been in just now and asked me to give you this note.'

Lana laughed. 'It's like something out of a Jane Austen novel,' she said as she picked up the letter opener her father always had handy in a jam jar on one of the shelves behind her.

Dear Lana, (it's what your father calls you so I hope you don't mind)

I keep hoping to see you when I go in the shop, but I've now run out of things to buy!

So I prepared this note in case the same thing happened today – and it did. You weren't anywhere in sight.

I was wondering if you fancy going out somewhere where we can talk. I would like to get to know you better and hope you feel the same. If so, we can go to a little restaurant in York where I know the owner. The food is very good.

What about this Saturday? Say, 7 p.m.?

Do please say you'll come.

Dickie Knight – maybe your knight in shining armour!

She'd laughed at that and taken a chance, though she'd been wary. She knew nothing about him but her father vouched for him saying he'd been a regular customer for the last three months and was always polite and well spoken. As if that made him a good person. Lana gave a wry smile. But her father prided himself on being a good judge of character.

Six weeks later Dickie told her he had fallen in love with her. Then the following week Hitler invaded Poland, and three days later Britain declared war on Germany. Dickie joined the Merchant Navy the following day.

He loved the sea – she knew that. It was her only major concern. She'd have to be prepared for long absences. But in a way it suited her independent spirit. It was always romantic when he came home on shore leave – as though they were meeting for the first time.

It had taken a year before he'd mentioned marriage.

'I've decided when this blasted war ends I want to settle on shore. I've already seen enough sea to last me the rest of my life. And enough terrible things.'

He'd always refused to give her any details.

'You don't want to know,' he'd said, tenderly smoothing the hair away from her forehead and kissing it. 'But I've realised I want to be with you always. Will you marry me, darling Lana? I promise I'll be a good husband.'

'You'd damned well better be,' she laughed. 'And the answer is yes, I'll marry you. But only when the war is over.'

'Why wait? We're not a couple of kids. I'm thirty-two and you're twenty-nine.'

'Don't remind me,' she'd said, chuckling. 'All right, then, we'll marry the next time you have at least three days' leave. I'm determined to have a honeymoon, even if it's only two nights.'

Feeling the tears well at the memory she rushed from the shop, leaving her father to serve the man who'd reminded her so much of Dickie. She had to get away. Dickie was right. She'd be far more use teaching children.

Lana could almost see in her mind's eye Dickie's triumphant grin when she telephoned Mr Shepherd to say she'd decided to take the position as temporary headmistress.

'When can you start?' he asked immediately.

She thought quickly. It was 29th March. 'What about the beginning of May? Easter is late this year so I could come after that.'

'What about the first of April?' Mr Shepherd didn't pause.

Lana grinned to herself. 'And risk being an April Fool?'

This time Mr Shepherd clearly hesitated. Then his voice came over the line. 'The second, then. Would that be possible? I can't tell you how desperate we are, and we think you'll be the perfect choice.'

'You're not giving me much notice,' Lana said, reluctantly. But what notice did she really need? Mrs Brooke, a young widow, had started that morning in the shop and appeared quick to learn and was delightful with the customers. 'All right,' she said. 'The second of April it is.'

His sigh of relief blew down the telephone wire, making her smile. 'Good. I'll get the paperwork ready for you to sign when you're here.' She could picture him now, relieved the headmistress vacancy was resolved. 'It will be a three-month probation period to make sure we're happy on both sides. I'm sure we will be. The salary will be five guineas a week, all found, with most Saturdays and every Sunday off. One week's holiday pay a year.'

Lana hesitated. She'd have to say something.

'Five guineas a week sounds wonderful, but you told me at the interview it was four pounds.'

'My fault. I was looking at the teachers' salary. You'll be the headmistress but I appreciate you telling me.' He paused. 'Does that sound fair?'

'Very.' Strangely she felt a huge relief as though an inner part of her was settled.

'Any further questions?'

'Do any of the children board?'

'No. It's strictly a day school. But with this war we know that could change at any minute. We have a couple of large upper rooms that could easily be turned into dormitories, should the need arise.'

She could sense that Mr Shepherd wasn't about to make any idle chat. He'd got the replacement and simply wanted to get on with matters. That suited her very well.

'Thank you very much, Mr Shepherd,' Lana finished. 'You've been most kind.'

'We will look forward to seeing you in four days' time, then.'

'Yes, four days' time,' she repeated.

Maybe things were finally falling into place.

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