

Christmas Eve, 1939

Frankie sat in the corner of the café, hands wrapped around a steaming mug of tea, her mood completely at odds with the festive atmosphere that pervaded the room. Brightly coloured decorations hung from the ceiling and the soothing strains of *Silent Night* came from the gramophone in the corner. Tears pricked at her eyes. *It's not fair. Just because Addie's a few years older, doesn't mean she's more capable than me.*

Thinking about her sister only brought more tears to her eyes. This time they were about more than the injustice of her situation. She missed Adelaide. It was nice having a bedroom to herself for once, but it felt odd waking up and not seeing her sister's face across the room. *They could at least have given me a chance to prove myself. They didn't have to send me home straight away.*

As soon as war had been declared, Addie had announced she was joining the newly re-formed Women's Land Army.

'We're going to need to grow as much food as we can,' she told them over dinner. 'And if the men are all going to be off fighting, they're going to need women to grow it.'

'But Addie, there are plenty of farms around here,' their mother argued. 'Couldn't you just go and work at one of them? I'm sure the Dawsons would welcome the extra help.'

Adelaide shook her head, her expression stubborn. 'I'll go wherever they send me. The Dawsons have plenty of help still.'

Lily opened her mouth to continue the argument but her husband's hand on her arm was enough for her to change her mind. Laurence Thompson rarely put his foot down, but when he did, his word was final. She glanced at him and he smiled gently before patting her arm. She stabbed the potato on her plate, focusing her frustration on the food instead.

Frankie looked at her father and saw he was now smiling sympathetically at his eldest daughter. *He knows. He must do. But how?* Frankie was sure her proud sister would not have breathed a word about what had happened, so was at a loss to explain how their father had found out that Addie had ended her relationship with Aubrey Dawson. She wondered if he also knew why and found herself fervently praying that their mother remained in ignorance. Frankie and Addie adored their mother and neither could bear the idea that anyone thought less of her than they did.

The party Frankie was sulking in the corner of had been Lily's idea. Her initial suggestion had been to have it at The Mermaid, but when the Lido café had been suggested as an alternative, she had decided that the evacuees would probably prefer the novelty of the pool. It would be far too cold to swim of course, but they would enjoy watching the crabs and eels swimming around in the water. They had planned to take in evacuees of their own at the hotel, but the Royal Navy had commandeered it instead to use as their on-shore base. Lily had still wanted to do something to help 'those poor children' and the Christmas party was the result.

'I'd have hated it if you two had been little and I'd had to send you away,' she told Frankie. 'Those poor little mites must be missing their families dreadfully. I just want to do something to help cheer them up a bit. Christmas is a horrible time to be away from the people you love. Who knows when we'll be able to have proper parties again, so let's make the most of it while we're still able to.'

There had been no talk of a quick end to the war in the Thompson house. Lily and Laurence had lived through the First World War and Laurence's brother had lost his life on

the first day of the Battle of the Somme – two years into a war that was meant to be over by Christmas.

‘Cheer up Frankie, it might never happen.’ Kenneth Ford slid into the empty chair next to her and he nudged his shoulder against hers.

‘It already did,’ she said glumly, aware she was being unfair. Her sister’s friend was nice and he was only trying to help. It wasn’t his fault the Land Army had found out she’d lied about her age.

‘You can always apply again in a couple of years,’ he said, tilting his head and pulling a face at her in an attempt to make her smile.

She grinned in spite of her foul mood. Ken always had the ability to make her feel better. She’d miss him when he left after Christmas. He’d joined the RAF and was off to Blackpool for his basic training in the New Year. Like her sister, he’d been a constant in her life and his departure was another blow.

‘You will write to me when I’m away, won’t you?’ he said suddenly. ‘I don’t know where I’ll end up but I’ll want all the news from home still. Avonstow won’t seem so far away if you’ll send regular letters.’

‘Of course I will,’ Frankie said. ‘I doubt there’ll be anything interesting to tell though. I expect my life will be very boring once you’ve all gone off to do your bit.’

‘You’ll miss us then?’

‘Every day! I’ll sit by my window pining away until you come home again.’ She laughed, suddenly feeling much better.

Getting up from her chair, she put her mug to one side and headed towards her mother. Aubrey Dawson might have described Lily as *no better than she ought to be* but as far as Frankie was concerned, there was no better woman in the world and if Lily wanted to give the evacuees a party to remember, then her daughter would do her best to make sure it happened.

From his seat in the corner, Ken watched her go. He would tell her, he decided. After Christmas. *I just hope she feels the same*, he thought.