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CHAPTER ONE

Kate

APRIL 1941

Churchwood, Hertfordshire, England

It was a bright Monday morning in early spring and, like many English villages, Churchwood was going quietly about its daily business – until a scream shattered the calm and froze passers-by in their tracks. Having just emerged from the bakery, Kate Fletcher was one of them, though she froze for only a moment. As another scream lacerated the air, she whirled around to see the tall, lanky figure of Marjorie Plym waving her arms hysterically as she ran down the path from the church. *What on earth . . . ?*

Kate was tall too, and, having worked on a farm all her life, she was both fit and dressed in practical breeches with her long chestnut hair secured in a no-nonsense plait down her back. She wasn't the only person who moved towards Marjorie, but she was by far the quickest, throwing her shopping basket down beside her bicycle, then racing across the village green to catch Marjorie as she stumbled through the churchyard lychgate and collapsed in tears.

'What is it, Marjorie? What's happened?' Kate asked, easing the ~~Copyrighted Material~~ *Copyrighted Material* girl to the ground.

Marjorie was too hysterical to answer.

Oh, heck. Kate wasn't good at this sort of thing. She hadn't had the practice. As a member of the notoriously rough Fletcher family, Kate had been shunned in Churchwood for most of her life. As a result, she'd always treated her neighbours with bold-eyed disdain, despite loathing her family just as much as anyone. Only since Alice Lovell had moved to the village and befriended her had Kate's sharp edges softened. Gradually, she'd welcomed the village into her life just as, with Alice's influence, the village had started to welcome her – even gossip-loving and rather silly Marjorie, once one of her snootiest critics. Despite that, Kate was still out of her depth when it came to dispensing comfort and sympathy.

She glanced around desperately and was relieved to see Alice, now her best friend, approaching through a gathering sea of other faces. Alice might be a slight, fair-haired little thing but she was both clever and compassionate. She'd know exactly how to handle Marjorie.

'I've no idea what's going on,' Kate told her. 'Can you take Marjorie while I investigate?'

Alice looked at Marjorie's prostrate form then sent Kate a sympathetic glance as she got down beside her and reached for the older woman. 'Come to me, Marjorie. Kate needs to get up.'

Whimpering, Marjorie slithered over to Alice, who nodded at Kate to suggest it was fine for her to go now.

Relieved that Marjorie was quietening already, Kate scrambled up and ran along the path to the church. St Luke's church had a floor of mellow stone

and flint in Victorian times and the entrance was an old oak door. Kate passed through it and stood for a moment to adjust her eyes to the shadows within. There was a central aisle with pews and pillars on each side, an arched roof overhead and an altar at the front. All was hushed quietness, motes of dust flickering in the light from the high stained-glass windows.

‘Hello?’ Kate called.

No one answered and she could see nothing amiss. She set off along the aisle, glancing from side to side and still seeing nothing untoward. Reaching the front pews, she paused and called out again. ‘Hello?’

Silence, but Kate noticed that flowers were scattered beneath some sort of pedestal flower holder. Had Marjorie come in to arrange them only to drop them? A minor accident hardly appeared to justify screams – unless she’d been stung by a bee hiding in the petals? April was early for bee stings but still possible, and it would be typical of Marjorie to play up a sting to make herself look interesting in the eyes of the village.

Kate could see no bee now. Gathering up the flowers, she returned them to the pail in which Marjorie must have brought them. She turned away to leave – and gasped.

A foot was sticking out of the half-open vestry door. It was wearing a black sock and a shoe with a hole in the sole. Kate took a steadying breath and walked over to see the rest of the Reverend Septimus Barnes lying on the vestry floor as though he’d fallen backwards, arms outstretched.

It was obvious that the ageing, white-haired vicar

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had said his last prayer in this life because his eyes were open in a glassy stare, but Kate kneeled down beside him anyway and, after a moment's hesitation, touched his cheek. It was icy, with none of the softness of living flesh.

Not being a churchgoer, she'd never got to know Septimus Barnes well, but he'd seemed a decent sort of man and Kate felt sadness for him. Perhaps, though, he'd have been pleased to end his days in the church he'd served for so many years.

She returned to Alice. 'Reverend Barnes,' she said, and was glad to see that Alice understood immediately.

'Could you fetch my father?' Archibald Lovell was a retired doctor, and though Septimus Barnes was beyond earthly help, Dr Lovell would know what was best to be done. 'Better fetch Naomi too,' Alice added.

Kind but bracing Naomi Harrington was Marjorie's oldest friend and the best person to comfort her.

Kate set off at a run back over the green to where she'd left her bicycle outside the bakery. 'What's going on?' a woman asked.

'Sorry, Mrs Hayes. Can't stop.' Kate retrieved her basket from the ground and hung it over the handlebars; then she pedalled off at speed towards The Linnets, the picturesque cottage where Alice and her father lived on the edge of the village. There she skidded to a halt, dashed up the short path and banged on the door.

Dr Lovell blinked at Kate like an ageing cherub when he finally opened it. A widower, he'd retired from his London medical practice the year before

last and was spending his days studying civilizations from the distant past. Doubtless she'd distracted him from ancient Greece, Egypt or another such place.

'Alice needs you,' Kate said, only to regret her choice of words when she saw the alarm in his eyes.

'She's fine,' Kate assured him hastily. 'It's Reverend Barnes who's . . .'

'Unwell?'

'Beyond unwell, I think.'

'I see. Let me get my things.'

'He's in the church. I need to fetch Naomi too. It was Marjorie Plym who found the vicar.'

'Ah, Miss Plym.' No further explanation was needed.

Kate rode the bike across Brimbles Lane and between tall gateposts on to the drive of Foxfield, the grandest house in the village, where Naomi lived. Middle-aged Naomi had once been Kate's arch-enemy, and where she'd led the rest of Churchwood had followed, but, thanks to Alice and a dawning appreciation of each other's better qualities, Kate and Naomi had become firm friends.

Gravel flew into the air as Kate skidded to another halt. It must have alerted Naomi, whose sitting room overlooked the drive, because she came into the hall just as her maid Suki opened the door to Kate's sharp rap.

'Thank you, Suki,' Naomi said, and the little maid retreated.

'It's Reverend Barnes,' Kate said. 'He's . . . um . . .'

'Oh, heavens.' Naomi touched a hand to her chest.

'Marjorie found him.' Again, no more needed to be said.

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‘I’ll come straight away.’

‘You won’t mind if I go on ahead?’

‘Of course not. My dumpy little legs will never keep pace with your long ones.’

Kate returned to Alice, passing Dr Lovell on the way. ‘Your father’s almost here and Naomi won’t be much longer.’

Alice sent her a thankful look. Marjorie was still in a state of collapse, though the hysterics had subsided to moans and occasional shudders.

‘Is there anything else I can do?’ Kate asked.

‘Keep people away? They all mean well but Reverend Barnes deserves his dignity, and I don’t think he’ll get that from being stared at by half of the village.’

‘Understood.’

‘Could you also tell people that the bookshop won’t be opening today?’

Doubtless Alice thought that was a matter of respect too, as the bookshop was held in the Sunday School Hall. ‘I’ll put a notice on the door,’ Kate agreed.

The church, the vicarage, the hall and the elementary school stood next to each other along one side of the triangular-shaped green, the other sides being home to shops and cottages. Kate entered the hall, located a pen and paper amongst the bookshop stores and wrote: *Today’s bookshop session is cancelled out of respect to Reverend Barnes.* She paused before adding, *We expect to reopen soon,* for surely that was the case.

She pinned it to the door, spent a few minutes encouraging people to leave the scene and then returned to Alice. ‘My father is in the church,’ Alice told her.

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‘Good. I wrote that we’ll open the bookshop again soon.’

Alice nodded. ‘I can’t imagine Reverend Barnes would wish us to pause for long so perhaps we could reopen on Wednesday. Do you think you might be able to come a little early for a meeting with the others?’ Alice, Kate and Naomi ran the bookshop alongside Janet Collins, May Janicki and Bert Makepiece. ‘We should talk about how we want to mark his passing as he was such a staunch supporter.’

Kate suspected he’d only supported the bookshop in its early days because Naomi was involved and he treasured his invitations to Foxfield. But over time he’d come to appreciate it on its own merits. ‘This is a splendid way of bringing the village together,’ Kate had heard him say.

‘It would be nice to honour him in some way,’ Kate agreed, though she had no suggestions. Alice was much better at the niceties of life than she was.

‘We need to talk about next month’s programme anyway, and . . .’

Kate waited but no more words came. ‘And what?’ she prompted.

Alice looked as though she wished she’d stayed quiet, though why she should—

Ah. ‘You’re not worried the bookshop won’t survive without Reverend Barnes’s approval?’ A new vicar was bound to be different from an old one, but surely he wouldn’t want to change a bookshop that had become the beating heart of the village?

‘I’m not worried,’ Alice assured her, ‘but it can’t hurt to think about the future, can it?’

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Kate supposed not, but the very idea of change had jolted her. The bookshop hadn't only become the beating heart of the village, it had also become a crucial part of Kate's existence. After years of being on the outside of village life, she'd been reluctant to get involved at first, but Alice had encouraged her to give it a try and Kate had never looked back. The bookshop had brought her friends and a wonderful sense of belonging. She learned all sorts of things there too – from the books, magazines and newspapers she borrowed and from the people she met. The bookshop was also fun, especially when it threw parties! The thought of slogging on the farm day after day without those bursts of joy . . . it frightened her.

'Do you think you might be able to come on Wednesday?' Alice asked.

Kate pulled herself out of her gloom. 'I can try.' It was always difficult for Kate to get away from the family farm.

'Why not go home now?' Alice suggested. 'Get ahead on your work?'

'You don't need me for anything else?'

'You've done plenty already. And look. Here comes Naomi.'

Huffing and puffing from walking quickly on her stout little legs, Naomi was red in the face. She exchanged nods with Kate and Alice then bent towards her friend. 'Now, now, Marjorie. You've had a shock but it's time to get up.'

Marjorie groaned. 'If you only knew what I've been through.'

'I understand it's been difficult. But sitting on the ground and ~~Copyrighted Material~~ Copyrighted Material isn't helping.

Come along. Up you get and I'll take you back to Foxfield for a cup of tea.'

The proposal acted on Marjorie like a tonic. 'Perhaps I can manage to get up now.'

Kate lingered long enough to help haul Marjorie to her feet. The older woman's shoulders always drooped but she also swayed a little today. 'Big breaths, Marjorie,' Naomi instructed. 'That's the ticket.'

'I'll see you on Wednesday,' Kate told Alice. 'If I can get away.'

Cycling homewards, Kate's thoughts returned to the bookshop. Started by Alice as a way of bringing the Churchwood community together, it was so much more than an ordinary bookshop. It opened several times a week and was a place to come for tea and companionship. For entertainment too. Stories were read out loud, sometimes for children, sometimes for adults. Activities and talks were held, from knitting and fashion to Digging for Victory in village gardens. Then there were the social gatherings with beer and dancing, often attended by staff and patients from the nearby military hospital. And if anyone needed help due to illness or some other reason, the bookshop was the place where aid would be arranged.

Surely there could be no reason for changing something so wonderful? But perhaps it really was just a case of deciding the best way of helping a new vicar to understand the bookshop's merits.

Brimbles Farm was more than a mile away along the lane that ran between Alice's cottage and Naomi's Foxfield. It was never a pleasure to return there. Why would it be? Only a few more solid years in her mother

died, Kate had been brought up as a skivvy to her four obnoxious older brothers and her surly father, a man she'd only ever called by his given name of Ernie because he allowed none of his children to call him Dad or Father, probably because he preferred to keep them at an emotional distance.

She'd been an unpaid skivvy until recently when Alice's threat to help Kate build a new life elsewhere had enabled her to negotiate a tiny wage of two shillings a week – recently renegotiated to three shillings – and time off to spend with her friends.

Not that taking time off was easy. There was always too much work, for one thing. And for another, Ernie and her brothers begrudged every minute she spent away from the farm, still seeing her as the spinster daughter who should devote her entire life to running the house and working in the fields.

Kate had no intention of staying on the farm for ever, but she wasn't looking to forge a new life elsewhere just yet. Having found friends only recently, she was in no hurry to leave them. She needed to save some money before she ventured into the wider world too. And she also felt she was contributing to the war effort by helping to grow food for the country's tables. Until she was ready to leave, Kate was keen to keep some sort of peace at home and give her father no excuse for stopping her wages or trying to keep her from her friends. It meant she often laboured from the crack of dawn to well into the evenings.

Reaching the farm, she locked the bicycle in the barn to keep it safe from her brothers' mischief and carried her basket into the kitchen. Expecting to find the room empty, she came to a sudden halt as she saw

that all five Fletcher men were there, the atmosphere so taut that it felt like electricity was crackling around them.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked.

‘Ask this pair of idiots.’ Ernie smacked the ginger heads of his youngest sons, twins Fred ’n’ Frank, then pulled a chair from the table to sit down with his back turned to them in fury.

‘They’ve joined up. That’s what’s wrong,’ Kenny, the eldest son, told her.

‘Joined the army?’ Kate stared at the twins in shock. Despite their size they looked like naughty school-boys dragged before the headmaster.

‘Both of ’em,’ Vinnie crowed. He was the second eldest, and even in a crisis he couldn’t contain his glee at seeing his younger brothers in trouble.

Kenny glowered at him. ‘I don’t know why you think it’s funny.’

‘Vinnie’s an idiot too,’ Ernie spat. As ever, the only emotion he was allowing himself was anger, though he had to be feeling more than that. After all, he valued his sons far more than his daughter.

‘He *is* an idiot,’ Kenny agreed. ‘Because it means there’s going to be a lot more work for the rest of us.’ He stared hard at Kate. ‘That includes you.’

‘I always do my share.’

‘Your share just got bigger. All our shares just got bigger, so don’t start feeling sorry for yourself.’

Was she feeling sorry for herself? Not exactly. Uppermost in her mind was fear for the twins. She couldn’t like them as people, but she loved them as brothers and shuddered at the thought of them being injured – or worse.

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The possibility of harm coming to them hung in the air like a presence – sharp and jagged, stoking up anger because none of the Fletchers could express softer emotions. Except for Kate. ‘I’m sorry you’re putting yourselves in danger,’ she told the twins and for perhaps the first time in their lives they looked grateful to her.

Kenny was still raging. ‘What’s the point of being exempt from military service if you go and join up?’ he fumed.

‘It seemed a good idea in the Wheatsheaf last night,’ Frank confessed sheepishly.

‘An adventure,’ Fred added.

‘*Adventure?*’ Kenny was apoplectic. ‘There’s no adventure in getting shot or blown up!’

‘It was the beer that made it seem . . . sort of glamorous,’ Fred admitted.

‘Drunken idiots,’ Ernie spat.

‘But why enlist this morning when you’d sobered up?’ Kenny demanded.

‘We got a lift from Billy Cheeseman and Tommy Boyd,’ Frank said. ‘They enlisted too.’

‘And you were afraid of what they’d say if you went back on what you’d agreed last night,’ Kenny guessed. ‘Pathetic. That’s what you two are. Pathetic.’

The twins exchanged more embarrassed looks.

Kate placed the bread in a cupboard then closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. She too was worried about what the twins’ departure would mean for those left behind. They might be short on brains but there was no doubting their brawn. Even if they wasted a great deal of their energy in larking around, the farm’s prosperity still owed much to them.

Without them that prosperity would suffer and doubtless Kate's wage would be the first casualty of any cutbacks in spending. If that happened, she'd be plunged back into the dark days when her only clothes were worn and patched cast-offs from her brothers. And with no time to see her friends, desperate loneliness would engulf her again.

She too would have a battle to fight after the twins left. A battle to keep some sort of life of her own.

CHAPTER TWO

Alice

It had been a rush to prepare the Sunday School Hall for the Wednesday bookshop session and still leave time for a meeting, but they'd managed it. Books, magazines, newspapers and comics were laid out on tables around the edge of the room. Still more tables stood in the centre with chairs around them so people could sit together and chat. Toys lay on mats on the floor ready for the children, and in the kitchen, cups, saucers and biscuits awaited teatime. Looking around, Alice registered smaller details too: the basket in which people could place items for future fundraising, from jars of preserves to lavender bags and hand-made wooden toys; the noticeboard on which they could advertise things they needed or wished to sell, swap or give away, and the plate on which they could donate a few pennies towards running costs if they could spare them.

As always, the sight of the bookshop warmed Alice with pleasure. She was proud of it. Grateful to it too, as it had given her a much-needed sense of purpose.

This wasn't the time to stand idling, though. 'Shall we begin?' she asked.

They settled at a table – Alice; Naomi; bear-like market gardener Ben; Mal, a handsome long-term

Churchwood resident Janet Collins; and tall, elegant May Janicki, a newcomer who'd moved from London shortly before Alice, bringing with her three Polish refugee children who were the nieces and nephew of her husband, Marek. Like Alice's fiancé, Daniel, and Janet's youngest son, Charlie, Marek was away at the war.

Just then Kate arrived too, and hastened to a seat. 'Sorry I'm late.'

Alice guessed from her anxious expression that Kate had found it particularly difficult to leave the farm today. Alice half wished she'd urged her to stay at home. But while Kate could be spirited – her glares could make people quake – her confidence was still fragile at times so Alice hadn't wanted to exclude her.

'I thought it would be helpful to have a quick word about Reverend Barnes as he was a good friend to the bookshop,' Alice said. 'Have any of you heard about plans for his funeral?'

She looked particularly at Naomi, who'd known him best.

'I telephoned his niece to offer condolences and she told me she'd prefer to hold the funeral near her home in Bristol instead of Churchwood,' Naomi said.

The old vicar had long been a widower and had never had children, so his niece was his closest relative. Even so, Alice had expected him to be buried in Churchwood. From the looks on their faces, so had the others.

'He was our vicar for thirty years,' Janet pointed out.

Naomi shrugged. 'His niece doesn't plan to come here at all. She's going to arrange for removal men to

clear the vicarage for the next incumbent. She was businesslike about the whole thing.'

'We could still send flowers as a gesture of thanks for the way he supported us,' Alice suggested.

'Better than nothing,' Bert agreed, but it was clear that they'd all have liked to do more.

'There's something else you should know,' Naomi said.

'Oh?' Alice had put Naomi's sombre mood down to the death of her old friend but perhaps there was more to it.

'I heard Cecil Wade talking.'

There was a collective grimace. Cecil Wade was a newcomer to the village, a pompous man with a high opinion of himself and a low opinion of so much else – especially women and the bookshop. He'd only visited the bookshop once, spending no more than ten minutes looking around at what was a typical bookshop scene: young mums with babies in their arms; small children playing merrily; older women laughing over a romance novel that featured a dash-
ing duke on the cover; and older men teasing each other over dominoes. 'I'm afraid I have more important calls on my time,' he'd announced, sneering, and he'd never returned.

'You all know that Cecil replaced me when I stood down as churchwarden,' Naomi continued. 'Apparently, he's already been in touch with the Diocese about Septimus's replacement.'

'That feels rather quick,' Alice said. The old vicar was barely cold.

'I heard him in the Post Office telling Arthur Fel-
lows about a telephone call made to the

archdeacon. It seems the archdeacon feels the timing of the vacancy is fortuitous in that he knows of a minister who's just what Churchwood needs. I explained to Cecil that I'd been unable to help overhearing and asked for more information. All he'd say was that the man the archdeacon has in mind is a splendid chap.'

A moment of quietness followed as everyone thought it over. 'Was it Cecil or the archdeacon who described the man as splendid?' Alice asked, because Cecil's idea of a splendid chap was likely to be radically different from theirs.

'I believe it was the archdeacon.'

'Then the man really might be splendid, though to be honest – and it still feels early to be talking about Reverend Barnes's successor – I'd like to see Adam Potts in the role.'

'Me too,' Bert said. 'Young Adam's been a curate over in Barton for several years now. He must be due a parish of his own.'

Adam had sometimes taken services at St Luke's when Reverend Barnes was away or unwell and he supported the bookshop enthusiastically, visiting often and joining in with storytelling, crafts and even tea-making.

'Adam would be perfect,' Janet agreed.

Naomi nodded. 'None better.'

'I don't go to church, but I think the world of Adam,' May said. 'He's wonderful with the kids and so kind too.'

'Kate?' Alice asked. 'I know you're not a church-goer either, but what are your thoughts on Adam?'

Kate looked startled, as though her thoughts had

been elsewhere, but she rallied herself to say, 'He'd be great for the village.'

'Then we're all agreed.' Alice felt pleased but also concerned because an anxious frown was cutting through the smooth skin on her friend's forehead. The bookshop had done wonders for Kate's self-esteem so any threat to it was certain to worry her, but was something else troubling her too?

Alice turned back to Naomi. 'You may not be a churchwarden any more, but you still sit on the council at St Luke's.' The Parochial Church Council helped with the management of church affairs. 'Will you be involved in appointing the new vicar?'

'I believe appointments are decided jointly between parishes and the Diocese. Vacancies are often advertised so there can be several candidates.'

'There's no reason why Adam shouldn't be one of them?'

'Not as far as I'm aware.'

'Then I suggest we encourage him to apply. The archdeacon's man may be splendid but so is Adam.'

'Good idea to give the lad a nudge,' Bert said, to nods all round because Adam's natural modesty might stop him from putting himself forward.

'Shall we talk to him about it the next time we see him?' Alice asked Naomi.

'Yes, let's,' Naomi agreed. 'There's a meeting of the church council tomorrow evening. I'll speak up for Adam then. For the bookshop too, of course.'

'Thank you.'

Voices reached them from outside. The happy voices of people arriving for the bookshop session.

Kate got to her feet and hurried back to work. I

wish Adam and the bookshop well, but I might struggle to stay involved in future.'

No wonder she looked depressed. Something bad had happened, but what?

'The twins have enlisted,' Kate explained. 'It's going to mean a lot more work for the rest of us.'

'Oh, Kate!' Alice cried.

'Surely the twins are exempt from military service,' Naomi said, and Kate's mouth twisted.

'They chose to join up.'

'I'm sorry—' Alice began but Kate was already through the door. Sympathy always turned her prickly.

Bert shook his head. 'Don't anyone try to tell me those Fletcher boys joined up to serve King and country. They just let beer and bravado drive whatever sense they had out of their tiny minds.'

And as a result poor Kate was under more pressure than ever.

With an effort, Alice turned to welcome the arrivals. 'Glad to see you're over your cold, Mrs Hutchings . . . Yes, you can play with the hobby horse today, Tommy . . . You're on tea-making duty today, Mrs Hayes . . . That's right, Edna, May and Janet are collecting clothes for families who've been bombed out of their homes in the Blitz . . . Bert's going to lead a session on making toys for Blitz children and Churchwood children alike, rag dolls and toy trains, things like that . . . An embroidered tray cloth will make a lovely raffle prize, Pam . . .'

Phew! As everyone settled, sitting near friends and calling out to others, Alice felt another burst of pride. The bookshop was wonderful and the possibility of a new vicar sweeping it away on a tide of change was

surely slight. Even so, it panicked her a little because Churchwood needed the bookshop, and Alice needed the sense of purpose it gave her,

Three hours later the session ended and Churchwood's residents filed out, calls of 'Thanks!' and 'See you next time' ringing in the air. Alice helped to clear up then walked home to the cottage.

It felt quiet after the bustle of the bookshop. Waiting in the kitchen for soup to heat on the stove, Alice stared out of the window at the back garden. The cottage had been empty for a year before her father bought it, and the garden had been neglected. Now it was bright with spring flowers – yellow daffodils, red tulips and purple irises. There was also a large vegetable patch and a coop for Alice's chickens, Audrey, Constance and Louisa. Both vegetable patch and chickens had been Kate's idea and she'd been a great help in getting them started.

Poor Kate. Alice felt a spurt of anger towards the twins for leaving Brimbles Farm in the lurch and going off to the war.

Thoughts of the war led inevitably to Daniel, currently serving in North Africa after being rescued from the beaches of Dunkirk the previous year. Alice touched the ring he'd given her when they'd become engaged last summer – a central aquamarine with diamonds on each side. 'An aquamarine matches your eyes and reminds me of the sky on a sunny day,' he'd explained. 'That's how you make me feel, darling girl – as though the sun has come out and painted the sky a glorious blue.'

Alice felt the same way about Daniel. Not that their romance had **Copyrighted Material** Daniel still blamed

himself for an accident that had injured her hand and left her unable to work – so far, anyway. Alice hadn't blamed him at all, but for a frighteningly long time she'd pushed him away, suspecting he only wanted to marry her to rescue her from dependence on her father. That misunderstanding was behind them now, but Alice still wished desperately to find paid work so she could prove to Daniel that he needn't worry about her. Much as she loved the bookshop, she didn't earn a penny from it.

Becoming self-sufficient was important to Alice's pride as well. Even as a child she'd worked for her father after school, at weekends and during the school holidays. She'd enjoyed it, and the activity had saved her from loneliness after the death of her mother. She'd also loved the fact that she'd earned extra pocket money. It had given her spirits a real boost to know that the gifts she gave to her father at Christmas and on his birthday were bought with money earned through her own efforts. To know, too, that she could buy books or other small items for herself, and that when she gave to charity, she was donating from her personal money.

After leaving school at the age of sixteen she'd worked for her father full-time until his retirement. She'd made appointments for him, looked after his patients, typed his letters, paid his bills, ordered his supplies and kept his account books in order. She hadn't earned a lot of money as her father also paid the running costs of their home, but it had been enough to give her the independence of buying her own clothes and paying for her other expenses.

Alice hated the thought of moving on with

her life, she was back to being supported by her father and marking time until Daniel supported her instead. Her father was all generosity, but Alice knew his retirement funds were modest. He'd been a kind and careful doctor but not one for mollicoddling patients who liked to be fussed over and were prepared to pay for the privilege. As a result, his practice hadn't been the most successful in London and it upset Alice to know that the more she drained his funds, the less he'd be able to afford the comforts and small luxuries he deserved after working hard for so many years.

Daniel would be all generosity too, but Alice wanted to enter the marriage with a little money of her own behind her. With a sense of pride and achievement too.

She exercised her hand daily but it would always be weak and her fingers would always be prone to painful cramping. She was managing tasks such as cooking that had once been impossible, but she was still slow and needed help with lifting anything heavy. It seemed that no one wanted to employ a secretary who could no longer type, and Alice's injury made her unsuitable for more physically challenging work.

Opportunities for employment in Churchwood were few anyway as it was a large village rather than a town. She'd still applied for jobs in neighbouring towns, keeping her applications secret because she didn't want anyone to feel sorry for her when they were rejected – as thus far they always had been. A jewellery shop had refused to employ her because, even though the job involved no heavy lifting, her injury made fastening and unfastening clasps difficult. An office manager had declined to employ her as a supervisor because she was considered too young – barely

twenty – with no recent experience. Another office manager had rejected her as a bookkeeper because she struggled to lift the heavy accounts books. Alice was determined to keep trying, though.

She put her hand through a few exercises now, Daniel's ring sparkling amid her scars. He'd kissed them tenderly when he'd placed the ring on her finger, assuring her that *they* were beautiful because *she* was beautiful. Their ugliness bothered her much less these days, but she still chafed at being unable to work.

After the soup lunch, she washed the dishes and got ready to walk to the military hospital where she volunteered several times each week. It was the patients' need for books that had initially sparked the idea of the village bookshop. Now hospital and bookshop regularly came together for social events that made everyone feel part of the Churchwood community.

Alice's route took her past Brimbles Farm where Kate lived. There was no sign of her in the fields but perhaps she'd be out later when Alice returned. Kate needed friendly faces around her just now.

Arriving at the hospital, Alice exchanged smiles with Tom, the middle-aged porter who'd become a friend. 'I hear you've had a death in the village,' he said.

'Reverend Barnes.'

'Old chap, was he?'

'In his seventies, I should think.'

Tom nodded and Alice guessed he was thinking that a death that followed a long, fulfilling life was sad but the natural way of things. In contrast, the hospital patients were mostly young. Some would recover their health in full but others faced

challenges while an unlucky few wouldn't survive at all. It was the wish to improve the men's lives that kept Alice coming to volunteer in all weathers.

Parting from Tom with another smile, she made her way to Ward One. Stratton House was a grand Palladian-style mansion that had stood empty for several years before being taken over by the military. Now it was a bustle of activity, the rows of iron beds and hospital equipment contrasting with the elegance of floor-to-ceiling French windows, wood-panelled walls and chandeliers.

Matron was in the corridor. 'Good to see you, Alice. We've a couple of new faces in. I'm sure you'll do your best to cheer them up.'

Alice had found Matron rather stern in the early days, but they'd developed a warm regard for each other.

'Got any books today?' Corporal Mikey Allardice called the moment Alice entered the ward. He had a leg injury that was taking a long time to heal.

'I expect I'll have some later.'

Alice consulted the notebook in which she kept a record of the books which were out on loan to patients and the books which they wanted to read next. A circuit of the three wards yielded nine books that patients had finished reading and Alice distributed them to other men. Returning to Ward One she smiled at the new patients, Privates Law and Webster, but neither seemed inclined to talk. Patients often took time to thaw from the shock of their injuries. 'Let me know if you ever want books,' she told them.

Billy Barker waved to catch her attention. 'If you've time, I'll be glad if you could write me a letter for me.'

He'd damaged his arm but was glad to be out of the war and counting down the days until he could return to his wife and little boy.

Alice wrote a letter for Billy, chatted to some of the men who liked to laugh and joke, then read a couple of stories out loud, finally leaving the hospital to friendly calls of 'You're a ray of sunshine, Alice!' and 'Come back soon!' It was rewarding work but, like her bookshop activity, it was unpaid.

Once again Alice failed to spot Kate in the fields on the walk home. The Fletcher men didn't welcome visitors, but unless Alice saw her friend within a day or two she'd brave their disapproval and visit anyway. It wouldn't be the first time Alice had defied the Fletchers' hostility. Not that she could provide any practical help to Kate, but a visit would show that her friendship was valued.

Alice reached home to find two envelopes on the doormat. She wasn't expecting a letter from Daniel as she'd heard from him only two days ago, so she felt no particular flurry of anticipation as she carried them into the kitchen. The topmost one was addressed to her in handwriting she didn't recognize. Bookshop business? Or a letter of rejection in reply to one of her job applications?

Alice tore the envelope open and drew out a single sheet of notepaper. It had been sent from an address in St Albans.

Dear Miss Lovell,

Thank you for applying for the role of part-time assistant with regard to my memoirs. I should be obliged if you would call

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beginning 14 April) to discuss your application further.

*Yours sincerely,
Hubert Parkinson*

Alice gasped. She had an interview! An actual interview!

She'd seen the advertisement in the Hertfordshire Echo: Person wanted to assist with curating papers for a family memoir. Ten hours per week. Salary to be discussed. Apply setting out relevant experience to . . .

Of course, her application might go no further if typing skills were required, but perhaps they wouldn't be. Alice was more than capable of reading and recording papers, photographs and the like. She had plenty to offer, even with a damaged hand.

Turning to the second envelope, she felt a jolt of surprise followed by a fizz of excitement as she realized Daniel had written again after all. He must have news for her. Was he coming home on leave?

*Dearest Alice,
I've heard that I'm being granted leave! I don't know exactly when I'll be back in England. If I can let you know, I will. Otherwise I'll simply turn up on your doorstep.*

I can't wait to see you, darling girl. In fact, I'm floating on air at the thought of it . . .

So was Alice. Despite her worries, joy was fizzing through her veins. Daniel was coming home!

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CHAPTER THREE

Naomi

Oh, dear. Naomi looked around at her fellow members of the St Luke's church council – known locally as simply the church council – and felt trepidation trickling through her like cold rain down a window. She'd spoken confidently at the bookshop meeting when she'd agreed to champion both Adam Potts and the bookshop, but all along she'd doubted her ability to be of any use. The reason for that doubt sat at the head of the table in a natty little bow tie, smiling smugly and doubtless congratulating himself on his greatness in the world – Cecil Wade, self-appointed chairman of the meeting now Septimus Barnes was dead.

If only Naomi hadn't stood down as churchwarden! She'd have been chairing the meeting herself instead of sitting on the sidelines, but she'd had no idea that Cecil, so recently arrived from Brighton, would put himself forward for the position, then set about dominating everyone else through a combination of belief in his own superiority and a way of making other people feel small.

Naomi was supposed to be communing with the Almighty, giving thanks for the life of Septimus Barnes during the moment of silence Cecil had

ordered. Instead, she was seething at Cecil's hypocrisy, for he'd held the old vicar in contempt and rarely taken the trouble to conceal it. Yes, Septimus had been foolish at times. Occasionally he'd been tiresome too, in the way he'd sought invitations to lunches and dinners, especially at Foxfield. But his heart had been in the right place, and he deserved more than Cecil's sneers.

A cough from Cecil signalled the end of the silence. They'd already discussed the wreath the council would send to the funeral. Now Cecil rubbed his hands as though consigning Septimus to history while relishing his own starring role in the future he was planning.

'I'm pleased to report that I've drawn up a rota of visiting ministers to lead our church services while the position of vicar is vacant. I've also been in touch with the Diocese about the vacancy and I'm hopeful that it won't be long before we have a new vicar in place. The archdeacon already has someone in mind. A first-rate fellow, from what I hear.'

Cecil loved sucking up to Church bigwigs.

'What can you tell us about this candidate?' Naomi asked.

Cecil sighed and glanced around at the other council members – all men – inviting them to share his exasperation in being interrupted by the silly woman in their midst. 'Reverend Forsyth is recently returned from Africa but I know no more at present,' he said with exaggerated patience. 'It's early days in the appointment process, Mrs Harrington.'

He never called her Naomi though he called

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everyone else by their first names. She guessed it was his nasty little way of making her feel an outsider.

‘*Very early days,*’ he added, his tone suggesting that anyone with a modicum of intelligence would know that and not be asking asinine questions.

‘I look forward to hearing more about Reverend Forsyth,’ Naomi said, hoping she wasn’t blushing. ‘I believe other ministers can apply for the role if they, too, wish to be considered for it?’

‘I can assure you that proper procedures will be followed. The Diocese has vast experience of these things.’

‘No doubt. And we have experience of our village. We’ve built up the sort of community that works for everyone. We should ensure that the Diocese understands that and supports all aspects of it.’

‘You’re thinking of your so-called bookshop,’ Cecil guessed, wrinkling his nose in distaste.

‘Partly. The bookshop has become an important part of village life. It’s also played a role in getting more people to attend church services.’

‘You don’t believe the work of this council and the late Reverend Barnes has had anything to do with increasing church attendance?’

‘I didn’t say that. I’m simply pointing out that the bookshop has made a difference too. People feel relaxed coming on to church property when visiting the bookshop. It’s made some of them decide to try church services too.’

She looked around at her fellow council members again and suspected there wouldn’t be an ounce of fight in any of them. Her gaze fell on Seth Padgett,

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the second churchwarden, but he took fright and looked away. Naomi was sure Cecil had only invited Seth to serve alongside him because he was an easy man to dominate.

Once again she wished she hadn't stepped down and let Cecil take over, but she'd had her reasons. For years Naomi had tried to compensate for her insecurities with bossiness, but while she'd certainly done some good in Churchwood, it hadn't made her much liked as a person. Gradually, she'd come to realize that people tried to ingratiate themselves into her company only because of her status as the richest woman in the village with the best house to which invitations were much coveted. Possibly, some people had been a little afraid of her too.

Recognizing that Alice's more democratic approach to getting things done was better for all concerned, Naomi had changed her ways and learned to relax her control on things. As a result, she'd formed truer friendships and grown happier. Standing down as churchwarden had been part of that retreat from bossiness. Unfortunately, she hadn't anticipated Cecil Wade stepping into her place.

'I'm thinking of encouraging Adam Potts to apply for the job,' she said now. 'Several of us feel he'd be an ideal fit for Churchwood.'

She was pleased when Wilfred Phipps said, 'Nice young man is Adam.'

Perhaps Wilfred had some backbone after all, but everyone else looked too wary of being belittled by Cecil to say a word. Not that Cecil would abuse them exactly. He simply had a way of sighing – more in sorrow than anger – when things fell and stretch

on and on until the person who'd challenged him could bear it no longer and muttered that perhaps they'd been mistaken. Satisfied that his will would prevail after all, Cecil would smile and, gulping in relief, the offender would mop perspiration from their brow.

'Young, though,' Cecil pointed out. 'Inexperienced.'

'He's been the curate at Barton for several years,' Naomi reasoned. 'He's always been popular when he's stood in for Reverend Barnes. He knows our ways, too.'

'He certainly knows *your* ways, Mrs Harrington.' Cecil's smile suggested that she only wanted Adam so she could wrap him around her finger.

'You won't object if I encourage him to apply?'

'It isn't for me to object,' Cecil said, with a modesty he clearly didn't feel. 'I'm sure all applications will be considered on their merits.'

Naomi didn't approve of violence but her hand itched to slap the smugness from his face.

They discussed a few more matters, and then the meeting concluded. 'It'll be good to have Adam Potts taking the service on Sunday,' Wilfred Phipps said to Naomi as they left the Sunday School Hall.

'It will. I'll have a word with him then about applying for the Churchwood role.'

'Good luck,' Wilf said.

Naomi felt encouraged. Perhaps she could win support from other council members if she approached each one privately rather than hoping they'd stand up to Cecil in meetings. If several supported her, she might convince them that there'd be safety in numbers from Cecil's displeasure.

Pushing that awful man from her mind temporarily, she spared a few moments of sympathy for poor Kate – how typical of her brothers to join up without consideration for anyone else – and then turned her thoughts to Alexander.

‘I’ll be home tonight,’ he’d told her on the telephone.

‘How nice,’ she’d replied, keen to maintain the appearance of a happy marriage even if the past year had brought her to the realization that it was a loveless one.

At twenty Naomi had been plain, tongue-tied and hampered by a father she adored but who was considered a common little man by the society into which he hoped to introduce himself and his daughter. When dashing Alexander Harrington took an interest in her, she’d been hugely relieved. And when her father died unexpectedly – her mother having died many years earlier – Naomi had been glad to marry the man who swore he loved her.

She’d fought a long battle with disillusionment over the years that followed but had finally stopped resisting the obvious and accepted that the only thing Alexander loved was the fortune she’d inherited from the sale of her father’s quack tonics business. Not that she’d been half as rich as he’d hoped.

Naomi had still tried hard to make the marriage happy, and it saddened her to know she’d been unsuccessful. She was particularly grieved that they’d had no children. Still, as long as they treated each other with respect, she was content for the marriage to limp on. Alexander had his career and his golf. Naomi had her **Copyrighted Material** bookshop.

Suki must have been on the watch for her because she opened the door as her mistress reached it. 'Mr Harrington has arrived, madam.'

Doubtless a friend with a mysterious supply of petrol had dropped him off. Alexander's own petrol ration was nowhere near enough to get him to and from his London office each day, let alone around the country for golf. As a result, he'd decided to live mostly at the London flat as he wasn't the sort of man to demean himself on trains and buses if there was any way of avoiding mixing with the rough and ready sections of humanity. Naomi hadn't had the use of the Daimler since the beginning of the war, of course.

She handed her coat to Suki, accepted the maid's offer of tea, and went into the small sitting room where she spent most of her time. There was a mirror over the mantelpiece and she used it to check her appearance and tidy her hair. Not that she had any hope of Alexander finding her attractive, but a woman had her pride. Satisfied that at least she looked neat, she patted the head of Basil, her mournful-looking English bulldog, then left the room to tap on the door to Alexander's study.

'Come in,' he called.

Naomi entered and he glanced up from his desk, nodding by way of a greeting. Even at fifty he was a good-looking man with clean-cut features and the sort of sharp blue eyes that could scare people a little.

'Good journey home?' she asked.

'Giles Dawning dropped me.'

'It's good to see you. About dinner . . .'

'A tray will suit me best. I need to work.' He gestured to the papers on his desk.

‘Of course.’ Naomi hadn’t really expected him to eat with her. ‘Suki is making tea.’

‘I’ve already told her I don’t want any.’ He’d poured himself a glass of whisky from the crystal decanter he kept in the room.

‘Septimus Barnes passed away on Monday,’ she said.

‘Oh?’

‘It’s believed his heart gave out.’

Alexander nodded but clearly wasn’t interested, having only ever felt contempt for the vicar’s fawning ways.

‘I’ll let you get on,’ she told him. ‘I think I’ll have my tea upstairs. It’s been a busy day and I’d like to rest my feet before dinner.’

Alexander only grunted.

Suki appeared with a tray as Naomi left the study. ‘Could you take it upstairs, please?’ Naomi asked.

‘A rest before dinner. Just the ticket.’ Suki was a sweet little thing.

Naomi fetched Basil and followed Suki upstairs. After the maid had left, Naomi kicked off her shoes with a sigh of relief. She had wide feet that ached often. Plumping up her pillows, she climbed on to the bed while Basil settled on the rug she kept beside it especially for him. But she’d left her book downstairs. It was a romance involving a pretty girl called Louella and a handsome Adonis called Raul. Nonsense, really, but Naomi was enjoying it, even if the characters’ torrid emotions highlighted the coolness that existed between herself and Alexander.

She heaved herself off the bed, made her way down the carpeted **Copyrighted Material** and retrieved the

book from behind a cushion in her sitting room. The chances of Alexander going in there had been small, but Naomi still hadn't wanted to risk him seeing the book and giving one of his lip-curling sneers. Not wanting him to catch her with it now, she retraced her steps, walking as quietly as she could manage, given that she was no lightweight.

She was passing the door to Alexander's study when she heard laughter. Alexander's laughter, but not his usual hard bark. This laughter was soft. Intimate. And it stopped her in her tracks.

Heart beating faster, she moved closer to the door and heard him speak. She couldn't make out the words but, again, the tone was . . . tender? Seductive?

No, it couldn't be. The solid wooden door must be distorting the sound.

She stiffened as she heard movement in the kitchen. Not wanting to be found eavesdropping, Naomi hastened upstairs. But she didn't read a word of Raul and Louella's story. Her mind was too full of what she'd heard – or thought she might have heard.

But it was ridiculous to suspect Alexander of an affair. Not for a moment had he ever given her cause to wonder if there might be someone else, and even in the early days of their marriage he'd shown little interest in physical intimacy. He was too austere. Too cold.

Or was he only austere and cold with her? Might there be another side to the cool, irritable man she knew? A warmer side he showed only to the woman – or women – he saw behind Naomi's back? After all, he'd always had plenty of opportunity, having spent much of his time away from home even before the

onset of wartime petrol shortages. Only rarely had a week passed without him spending one, two or even three nights in the London flat as he'd often worked late or entertained clients. Weekends, too, had frequently been given over to clients or golf. In fact, some of his golfing tours had lasted a week or more.

But no. Alexander simply wasn't a philandering sort of man. Naomi reached for her tea but the doubts crept back, carving a hollow of uncertainty inside her. It was one thing to know their marriage was loveless. Naomi could live with that. But could she live with the insult – the disrespect – of being betrayed, especially while Alexander continued to enjoy her money?

Basil let out a whimper as though sensing her distress and Naomi reached down to caress his ugly head. 'What am I going to do?' she asked him.

The sensible thing was surely to do nothing because she was letting her imagination take flight over something she might simply have misheard. It wasn't going to be easy, though. Naomi could feel the worm of suspicion burrowing into her head even now. *Alexander might be having an affair*, it whispered.

'Oh, shut up!' Naomi told it out loud, startling poor Basil.

She turned her thoughts to the bookshop instead. What a difference it had made to her life. It had brought her friends. Real friends, who kept loneliness at bay and made her feel a valued member of the community instead of a woman who stood on the sidelines barking orders at others. It made her feel useful, too, because the bookshop helped people and Naomi was part of that. It also made her smile and laugh and enjoy the sort of carefree fun she'd never

known before. It would leave a huge hole in her life if it closed.

A picture of Cecil Wade came into her mind. When Basil shuffled closer and gave a sorrowful whine, Naomi felt he was speaking for both of them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kate

Breakfast at Brimbles Farm had always been an unpleasant experience for Kate. A typical day involved the Fletcher men grabbing the food with filthy hands and scattering crumbs in all directions as they crammed it into their mouths. Fred 'n' Frank would fight over something or other. Vinnie would indulge his spitefulness by spilling tea or smearing butter over the table. Meanwhile, Ernie and Kenny would talk grumpily about farm matters. Today was worse, though. Today all was grimness.

Ernie hunkered over his plate, glancing up only occasionally to glare at the twins and mutter, 'Idiots!'

Vinnie's malice was in temporary abeyance following a slap round the head from Ernie, while Kenny stared gloomily into space and the twins sulked because they were in disgrace.

Kate was glad when they all went outside to work, though as she pegged out washing she could hear distant complaints about a problem with the tractor. Broken machinery would be all they needed to make a bad time worse.

The twins' wild and selfish behaviour had long appalled Kate, but it chilled her to think of them going into danger. Copyrighted Material Alice, May and