

Chapter 1

May 1941

Judith read the letter again, tears of pride welling in her eyes. She gave her eldest daughter a big hug. 'You're a clever girl, Kitty. I'm so very proud of you. To think of a daughter of mine going to Rivenshaw Girls' Grammar.'

The girl hugged her back, then pulled away, her smile fading. 'It's nice to know I could pass, Mum, but we both know Dad won't let me go to a posh private school.' She sniffed hard and when that didn't work, smeared away a tear with a damp, crumpled handkerchief.

'Your father isn't here much now he's in the Army. I'll make sure you do go.' Judith gave her daughter another hug. 'No one turns down the Esherwood Bequest.'

'But it'll cost a lot more than Baker Street Senior School, so how will you manage? There's the uniform to buy and other things too, like hockey sticks. And before the war, the girls went away on a *trip* every year.'

It might have been the moon, to hear Kitty speak of travelling anywhere. Judith felt guilty that she'd never had the money to take her children away from Rivenshaw, not even into Manchester. But things were going to change now. Oh, yes! Kitty wasn't going to miss this opportunity.

She tapped the letter. 'It says here that not only will your school fees be paid by the bequest but they'll buy your uniform and books. I don't see how your Dad can complain about that.'

'He'll find something to moan about. He always does. Anyway, only posh people go to the Girls' Grammar. I wouldn't fit in.'

'That's changed. There are other girls sent there by the local authority these days. I

was reading about it in the paper. The grammar school isn't just for fee-paying students now; it's for everyone who deserves a good education.'

Kitty gave a bitter laugh. 'Dad doesn't care about that. He wants me out earning as soon as possible so he can take my wages for his boozing.'

It upset Judith that her children's lives were being increasingly affected by Doug's failings as a father and earner. He'd changed greatly from the man she'd married, never had a kind word for anyone these days.

She knew what Kitty was doing—preparing for disappointment, that's what. Well, this time Judith wasn't going to let her daughter lose her big chance. 'You'll fit in anywhere if you're polite, friendly and work hard. I'll manage whatever you need apart from uniform and books.'

She saw Kitty's disbelieving look. They had been very poor before her husband joined the Army after a drunken spree. There had been days when she'd gone without food, apart from a slice of bread, so that her children could eat.

Now she got part of her husband's army pay every week as well as what she earned, which made a big difference. There was talk of making women take up the jobs men had left. She didn't need much convincing; she needed the money too much.

Other women wept at their husbands going away, she'd been hard put not to dance for joy.

Kitty shook her head, not so easily convinced. 'There'll be bus fares, as well. It's right out at the other side of town.'

Judith sighed. The hard times before the war had marked her eldest, made poor Kitty grow up too quickly. At eleven, the child should be thinking of skipping ropes, not worrying about money. 'I'm working at the mill now and I'm managing to put a bit aside, so we'll have enough money for the extras and the fares. We'll get by.'

Kitty snorted. 'When Dad comes back, he'll take your money and buy rounds of drinks for his friends at the pub.'

'Not if I hide the money. Things are going to change in this family, love.'

'Dad hasn't changed and he won't. When he comes home on leave, he still hits you.'

Judith hated the children to see that. She hesitated, nibbling her thumb, as she always did when thinking hard. 'Look, for the time being, we won't tell him about you getting the scholarship.'

'He'll find out.'

'Even if he does, he won't be here to stop you going to grammar school. It's a wonderful chance for you.'

Kitty looked at her sadly. 'You always look on the bright side, Mum. How do you manage that?'

Judith didn't tell her eldest child how hard it was to smile sometimes. Doug hadn't been like this when he was younger, or she'd not have married him. He'd been a bit rough, but fun. The fun stopped when she fell pregnant. And now, at thirty-two, she sometimes forgot the good times. They'd never really returned, after all.

Yet out of her increasingly unhappy marriage had come her three children who were the joy of her life. They were such good children and deserved a chance for a better life. She'd do anything for them.

She turned as Ben and Gillian came rushing in, hungry after playing out with their friends. 'Come and hear how clever your sister is.'

When she'd finished telling them about the scholarship, she untied her apron. 'Now, let's go and tell your grandpa. It'll make his day.'

She kept an eye on Ben, who could be a bit jealous of his older sister, but he was looking at Kitty as if he'd never seen her before. Judith took the opportunity to whisper to

him. 'See what happens when you work hard at school. You and Gillian are just as clever as our Kitty. You could get a scholarship too, if you tried hard, Ben love.'

He frowned but for once didn't pull away when she hugged him. He was growing fast, her lad was. At nine, he was the tallest in his class. She reckoned he was going to be a big man like his father. She prayed he wouldn't have Doug's violent streak, though.

As they walked along the street, she wished her mother were still alive to hear the news. She'd have burst with pride.

On his next leave Doug was even more grumpy than usual. He complained that Judith was out at work when he arrived. As if she had any choice!

While she was making tea for the family, he complained about the new sergeant and living conditions at the camp, then asked her for money.

'I've not got anything to spare.'

'If you're out at work you must have. You should give some of your money to me now. It's criminal the way they take money out of my wages to send to you lot when you don't need it.'

In spite of her struggles, he got her purse out of her handbag and took all the coins it contained.

'What about the children? I have to feed them.'

'You've food in the pantry. They'll be all right.'

Fortunately, she'd hidden most of her money, but she resented losing even that small amount.

When the children came in from playing – they'd been wise enough to stay outside – he complained about their noise. He hit Ben within the first half hour, then smacked little Gillian's cheek when she tripped over and made him splash hot tea over his hand.

Kitty was still at her friend's house down the street. After she came home, she ate her meal quickly then said she had homework to do and escaped into the front room. This was furnished only with an old table and rickety chairs Judith had bought second-hand for the children to do homework on.

Kitty didn't come back into the kitchen till her dad went to the pub, then they all listened to the radio. It was an old set someone had given them and very crackly, but it was wonderful to be able to listen to what was going on in the world.

Judith was tired after a hard day's work, but she stayed up after the children had gone to bed, in case Doug was still in a bad mood when he came home. She didn't want to face him in bed anyway, or it might lead to something else.

She couldn't afford to have another child, not with what she was planning. Though actually, her husband hadn't seemed to want her in that way for months. And thank goodness for small mercies.

Just after closing time the front door banged open and Doug stormed into the kitchen. 'Why didn't you tell me about our Kitty getting that scholarship?' he yelled, clutching a chair back to steady himself.

'I was going to, only you went straight out to the pub.'

'Think I'm a fool? You didn't tell me because you were hoping I wouldn't find out.'

'Yes, I was. Because I knew you'd not be pleased and proud like any other father.'

'I'm not pleased. I won't have a daughter of mine going to a fancy school and looking down her nose at me.'

Judith folded her arms. 'If you'd stop getting drunk and fighting, she'd have no reason to look down her nose at you. You used to be a good worker till the booze got you. Anyway, she's going to the grammar school, and that's that.'

He gave her a slow, superior smile. 'No, she isn't. The lads at the pub were telling me

what to do. I can write to the Esherwood trust and refuse my permission. She won't be allowed to take up the scholarship without it. The father is the one who has the say about things like that. *Head of the household* still means something, you know.'

Judith stared at him in shock. This was even worse than she'd feared. Was what he said correct? 'What sort of man are you, trying to deny your daughter this chance?'

'A working man and proud of it. I know where me and my family belong, and that's with our own sort. So don't try to go against me or you'll regret it. *My* daughter isn't going to a posh school. She's going out to work as soon as the damned government will let her, then she can pay me back for what she's cost me to bring up. Now, stop nagging and make me a cup of cocoa.'

Judith did as he'd ordered, though normally she'd have told him to make it himself, even if he did thump her. As he relaxed in front of the fire, she tackled him again. 'Doug, please won't you reconsider and—'

'*Please won't you reconsider!*' he mimicked in a silly high voice. 'You read too many books, you do, then spout fancy words at me. No, I bloody well won't reconsider. I'm the master in this house and don't you forget it.'

'Some master you are, taking your bad temper out on the children. Fancy hitting a seven-year-old child like our Gillian and then spoiling Kitty's big chance.'

Upon which he thumped his wife as well, knocking her to the floor and yelling, 'Shut up, you nagging bitch! Shut— bloody— up! It's a waste of time educating girls. They'll only marry and have children. Look at what all that reading did to you. Made you a know-it-all, that's what. You're not fit to be a wife, you aren't. You don't do anything to please a man. You even dress like a dowdy old hag.'

She stayed on the floor as he stared at her. Then he cursed and went up to bed.

She spent the night on the sofa, and glad to.

She wasn't going to spend her life being knocked around. She couldn't do anything yet about leaving him, though, not till she had some money saved. She'd ask to work full-time at the factory from now on. Kitty could keep an eye on Gillian after school and on Saturdays.

Judith wished she had brothers and sisters, cousins, someone to turn to, but her father wasn't much use, and the last cousin of her own age was in the army. His wife was living down south with her family. It was really hard sometimes to manage on her own with three children.

The next day was a Saturday and Judith didn't have to go to work, though she would have to once she started full-time.

She got ready to go shopping. Doug was still in bed and didn't stir when she crept into the bedroom for clean clothes. He was lying on the bed, fully dressed. Lazy devil!

She made no attempt to hide the bruise on her face, as she had done in the past, and as she got out her shopping bag, the children stared at her in puzzlement.

'Shall I fetch your make-up, Mam?' Kitty asked.

'No, thank you. My face is fine as it is.'

'But it shows where Dad hit you.'

'Then it'll just have to show, won't it?'

'When I'm a man, I'll hit him for thumping you,' Ben muttered.

'Thanks, love, but I don't want you hitting anybody,' she said quietly. 'Don't grow up like him, Ben love, or you'll break my heart.'

He nodded and put one arm round Gillian's shoulders. She'd noticed before that he tried to protect his little sister whenever their father was home.

'Why don't you children walk over to see Grandad?'

They nodded. They knew why she was saying that. To get them out of the house.

Head held high, Judith walked a little way with the children, to the far end of the group of terraced houses people called Lower Parklea.

Unless it was raining, they always took the long way round to their grandad's, going along the edge of Parson's Mead. It was a small park but everyone enjoyed having some greenery and open space nearby, and they were grateful to the Esher who'd given the park to the town nearly a hundred years ago.

As she went into Timmins Corner Store, Judith could feel people staring at her. She intended to show the world what Doug was like from now on, so she'd come here to buy a pound of potatoes she didn't need and would take her time about it too.

When Mrs Timmins stared at her face, Judith said, 'Doug's home.'

'You usually try to cover the bruises up.'

She could feel her face going hot. Had it been that obvious? Of course it had. She'd been fooling herself. 'Well, I'm not bothering to hide it any more. Gillian has a bad bruise on one arm, too.'

'Eh, love. He didn't hit that little lass as well?'

She nodded.

'What some women have to put up with!' Mrs Timmins paused, holding the scale of potatoes above Judith's sacking bag. 'My husband says your Doug's upset about Kitty winning the scholarship. He was grumbling about it in the pub last night. You'd think he'd be proud.'

'He says he'd not letting her go to the grammar school.'

'Eh, that's mean, that is.'

Judith tried to blink away her tears, but some escaped. As she fumbled in one pocket after another for her missing handkerchief, Mrs Timmins came out from behind the counter and pushed one into her hand.

‘Here. Use this, love.’

‘Thanks. I’ll wash it and give it back.’

‘No, keep it. I’ve got plenty.’ She changed the subject. ‘What are you going to do about sheltering from bombs?’

‘Doug says we can hide under the stairs.’

‘You can come into our shelter, if it gets bad round here like it has in London.’

‘Thank you. We’ve been lucky here. Most of the bombers head for Manchester.’

As Judith walked home, she felt even more determined to follow her plan. Her girls weren’t going to grow up being beaten, and her son wasn’t going into a lowly job, either. She’d do whatever she had to do and *make* it happen.

Doug was out when she got back and he didn’t come home till the pubs closed that night. Judith didn’t care where he’d been, as long as he wasn’t at home.

He announced his arrival by yelling, ‘What did you tell Mrs Timmins, you bitch?’

‘I didn’t tell her anything.’ Judith pointed to the bruise on her face. ‘This spoke for me. Anyway, people already know what you’re like. I haven’t been able to hide all the bruises you’ve given me over the years.’

He breathed deeply, but didn’t hit her again. ‘I’m going to bed.’ He turned to say, ‘I don’t want you in my bed any more, you know. Who’d want to screw a scraggy old bitch like you when there are other women eager to please a soldier? Yes, eager and willing. Women as aren’t so scraggy where it counts.’ He touched his chest suggestively then went upstairs.

She tried not to let her shock at this boast show. She got her blanket, put out the light and curled up on the old sofa.

But in the dark, tears flowed. She’d guessed Doug was finding his pleasure elsewhere when he stopped taking her in bed. Now it was out in the open, that settled it. When he came home, she’d sleep down here.

And as soon as the war was over, she was leaving him. They said in the papers the fighting would last a year or two more. That'd give her time to save up and make plans.

Next morning, Doug lay in bed till eleven o'clock then got up and raided the pantry. He ate the whole of the family's meat ration and most of the bread.

'The children will have to go without meat for days if you take it all,' she protested. 'Take my share but leave theirs, for pity's sake.'

'I'm the man of the house and I'm a soldier. I *need* good red meat to keep up my strength so that I can defend my country.' He cleared his plate with a challenging expression, cramming the meat into his mouth and chewing it noisily.

Pig! she thought but kept her lips firmly pressed together. She sighed with relief as he went out. He didn't say where he was going and she didn't care. She'd have to beg some bones from the butcher's and make up a broth with potatoes and barley, but it wouldn't be the same without meat.

When Doug came home, he looked round for his kitbag which she usually left ready by the door. 'Haven't you packed for me yet?'

'I don't pack bags for people who thump me.'

He glared at her so fiercely, fists bunching, that she thought he was going to hit her again.

'You're no use for anything, you aren't. Where are my clean clothes?'

'I didn't have time to do any washing. I was too busy comforting the children for being thumped and bathing my own face. Besides, they do the washing for you at the camp. Why should I do it?'

He raised his fist again, and she turned the other cheek towards him. 'Go on! Black my other eye. Let everyone in the street know what you're like.'

He didn't take her up on this invitation, but he did give her a shove that sent her staggering across the room to sprawl on the hearthrug. 'You're not worth the effort. But I won't forget to write to the Education Department about our Kitty. She's *not* going to that fancy school.'

Judith got up and stood by the fireplace, wishing there were a fire to give her comfort, but it was warm enough to go without, so she was letting the coal rations pile up for the winter. Arms folded, she let him rant on as he packed his own bag. She watched in disgust as he crammed the dirty, sweaty clothes in with the few clean ones.

He'd never been this bad before. What had got into him? Was it those friends of his from the pub? Word was they were into black market stuff and kept flashing their money. Was he jealous? Or was it his new mates in the army? She had a sudden thought: some soldiers pinched Army stuff to sell on the black market. She hoped Doug wasn't doing that, but he certainly seemed to have enough money to buy booze.

She didn't dare ask him, hardly dared move until she'd seen him leave the house.

She didn't go as far as wishing him dead, but if he did get killed, she'd not grieve, she admitted to herself.