

Part 1 Young love

Chapter 1 *Two young lives*

March 1945

‘Megan, make me a cup of tea, will you?’ shouted Harry Jenkins from the front of his small shop. ‘And then come in here and talk to me.’

‘Here you are, Dad,’ said Megan, giving him a big cup of hot tea and trying to smile. Every day it was the same. As soon as Megan got home from school, her father asked for his tea and then he wanted to know everything about her day – what she had done at school, if the teachers were pleased with her work, who she walked home with. She was sixteen years old and she was fed up with it all. Why did he have to be so interested in her?

‘So, Megan, how was school today?’

‘OK,’ said Megan.

‘Did the teacher tell you about last week’s exam, then?’

‘Yes.’

‘And?’ asked Mr Jenkins.

‘And what?’ said Megan, knowing very well what he wanted to know.

‘And, how did you do? Come on, girl, if you’re going to go to college, it’s important that you do well at school.’ Nobody from Mr Jenkins’ family had ever gone to college,

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but now there might be a chance for Megan. He wanted her to get away. The Welsh village of Tredonald where they lived was a coal mining village. Nearly all the men worked down the mine, getting the dirty black coal out of the ground. Mr Jenkins didn't want his daughter to marry a coal miner, or even to spend her life working in the shop – she was too good for that. He hadn't asked Megan what she wanted.

At the other end of the village, Megan's friend, Huw Thomas, was finishing his work for the day.

Huw was also sixteen years old and already tired of life. He worked eight hours a day, five days a week in the village coal mine. There was nothing much else for people in the village. You either worked underground, or you didn't work at all. That was it. But it was better than being a soldier and fighting in some foreign country, like a few of the men in the village. The prime minister in London kept saying the war was nearly over, but Huw wasn't sure if he believed it.

Huw got into the lift at the bottom of the mine with a group of other tired-looking men. Their faces were black from the coal and at first he didn't see his older brother, Gareth, standing opposite him. They smiled at each other, but didn't speak. The lift climbed slowly and noisily up from the dark underground world. Ten dirty faces looked up towards the light.

At the top, it took a few seconds for their eyes to get used to the daylight. They walked over to the bath house, taking in the fresh air. For Huw this was the best moment of the day. He had only been a miner for six weeks, but it felt like longer.

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Gareth was waiting for him outside. 'All right, Huw?' asked Gareth. 'How was it today?'

'OK,' Huw said. 'It'll get better, I hope.'

'It will,' his brother replied. 'Look at you. Your arms are stronger already, after only five weeks.'

'*Six* weeks,' said Huw.

Gareth laughed. 'It's hard work, all right. But we're lucky to have jobs. We need the money, with Dad not working.'

Huw couldn't remember the last time his father had had a job. Some days, his father left the house early in the morning and came home with a bit of money, or something for them to eat. And some days he didn't come home at all. Life was not easy for the Thomas family.

The two brothers walked down their street and said 'hello' to the wives, sisters and daughters who had come out of their houses to welcome home their returning men. But outside Huw's house there was no-one to welcome them home. Huw had never known his mother. She had died when he was born. His father and his two brothers, Richard and Gareth, had been his family. And now there was no Richard – killed two years ago while fighting in North Africa.

'Dad!' shouted Gareth. 'We're home. What's for dinner?'

There was no answer.

'Must be out,' said Huw.

'Or in bed,' Gareth said. 'I'll go and look.'

As soon as Gareth entered the bedroom the smell of whisky hit him. His father was asleep on the bed with all his clothes on.

'Drunk again,' Gareth told Huw. 'Where does he get the

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money from to go to the pub? You didn't leave any in the house, did you?'

'No, of course not. Except for the money in the box to pay Mr Jenkins for last week's food. But he doesn't know where we keep that, does he?' Huw took out the small box from its hiding place. He opened it. 'He's taken it all!'

'Well,' said Gareth, 'you'll have to go and explain to Mr Jenkins that we can't pay him until the end of the week.' Gareth moved around the small kitchen angrily opening cupboards looking for food. 'And ask him if he'll give us some bread or potatoes. He can add it to next week's bill,' he said.

'Why is it always me who has to explain?' asked Huw.

'Because you're the youngest and Mr Jenkins might feel sorry for you,' replied Gareth. 'Go on, Huw. I'm hungry.'

Huw knew why his father got drunk, but knowing didn't help. He was angry with his father. Nobody would give work to a forty-year-old man with a drink problem, so Huw had had to leave school and start earning money.

Megan looked up from her book and saw Huw coming into the shop. She thought he looked tired and angry.

'Hello, Huw,' she said smiling. 'You OK?'

'Not really... the usual things,' said Huw.

Megan and all the village knew about Huw's father. Mr Jenkins listened while Huw explained the latest story. Mr Jenkins felt sorry for Huw, but there was nothing he could do about it. Life was hard for everybody. It was wartime. Other families had lost sons in the war: David Thomas was not the only one. But he was the only one who had started drinking, leaving his two sons to look after themselves.

Megan said, 'Feel like going for a walk later, Huw?' She

and Huw had been friends for years. They used to sit together at school, and out of school they spent a lot of time with each other. Now their friendship seemed to be getting even stronger.

‘Yeah, great,’ replied Huw. ‘I’ll come here at about seven. Is that all right, Mr Jenkins?’

‘Yes, but not for long, Megan,’ said Mr Jenkins, putting a few potatoes in a bag for Huw. ‘You’ve got school tomorrow, remember.’

But Megan knew the real reason that her father didn’t want her to be out with Huw for long – he was worried about their continuing friendship. They were not children any more and Mr Jenkins had seen how Huw looked at his daughter.