

## THE ROUND-UP

Early Monday morning we caught the bus to Paddington Station. As was usual these days, I'd barely slept a wink. For once, though, there was a bit of good cheer in the air, and with the fish paste sandwiches Mum had made us for the journey it felt almost like we were going on a day trip. Gloria, who'd come along to keep our spirits up, also had news to share.

'I've done a bit of asking about,' she said, 'and managed to sort a very nice place down in Devon for you both to stay. It's by the sea and—'

'Are we going to stay with your sister?' I blurted out.

Mum rolled her eyes. 'Let her finish, Olive.'

'It's all right.' Gloria smiled. 'Yes, you're going to Queenie's.'

I grinned, delighted. This was *good* news because, being Sukie's penpal, Queenie might know something about her disappearance, or be able to shed light on my boyfriend theory. She might even be able to explain about the map. Besides, going to stay with someone who knew my sister meant we'd not be living with a total stranger. I'd never met Queenie, but I knew she'd taken on running the village post office after her and Gloria's parents died. She was only nineteen, so it was a big responsibility, but Gloria said that's what the war did to people – it made them grow up fast.

'What d'you think, Cliff?' I gave him an enthusiastic nudge. 'We're going to stay by the sea!'

He looked up from the *Beano* comic he was reading. 'Can you see the beach from the house?'

'Better than that, Cliff: you can see the lighthouse,' Gloria replied.

Cliff and me shared an excited look: a lighthouse!

'Queenie's place is enormous – attics, cellars, the works,' Gloria went on. 'And it'll be nice to travel down with the other children being evacuated, won't it, eh?'

'*Other children?*' This threw me rather. 'I thought they'd all gone already.'

‘From your school, yes. A few schools stayed open in other parts of the city, but it’s got so bad lately they’ve been told to leave as soon as they can.’

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The noise hit us the moment we left the bus. Coming from inside the station, it sounded like a school assembly only twenty times louder. Even the loudspeaker making crackly announcements couldn’t deaden the racket of hundreds of high-pitched voices all talking at once.

‘Gosh.’ I gulped. ‘That sounds like *a lot* of children.’

‘It’ll be fun for you, not being the only ones on the train,’ said Mum, straightening Cliff’s collar.

I wasn’t so sure: more likely it’d end up being an almighty crush, and I worried about losing Cliff in the crowds. This time I’d make certain we didn’t let go of each other.

Inside the station under the huge glass roof canopy, things got more overwhelming. A sea of different school hats – straw boaters, blue bowlers, woolly green berets – stretched as far as you could see. Being the only ones here from our school, we didn’t have a teacher, so we stood near a group that did, hoping the billeting officer who was handing out labels would tell us what to do.

‘I don’t understand where I’m to tie it,’ said a girl in brown uniform.

Her teacher looked ancient – at least forty – and was crotchety in that way old people can be. ‘Oh for heaven’s sake, Esther Jenkins, *do* listen to the instructions.’

The second his back was turned, the girl and her friends swapped labels, so Esther became Dorothy, and Dorothy – whoever she was – became Mabel, until the whole group was giggling. It was quite funny really, except I was too on edge to laugh.

Eventually the billeting officer in her green army jacket and skirt reached us.

‘Names, please,’ she said, checking her extremely long list.

‘Olive and Cliff Bradshaw, staying with Queenie Pickering,’ Mum replied.

‘Budmouth Point. That’ll be coach D,’ the woman said, then to us: ‘Make sure you sit in the right coach, please. Mr Barrowman’s going

with you. When you get there he'll be teaching you in the village school, isn't that nice?'

I nodded, already anxious that I'd forgotten something she'd said. Cliff was gazing about him with eyes on stalks, so I knew he hadn't even been listening.

'Look lively, Olive,' Mum said, jolting me from my thoughts. 'Put your name on the label.'

She'd dug a pencil out of her bag and I had to write my name, date of birth and home address. It was a brown card label with string attached, which I went to tie on my suitcase.

'No.' Mum stopped me. 'It's got to go on *you*.'

Right above our heads, a loudspeaker sprang into life: 'Platform twelve for the nine-fifteen a.m. service to Penzance. Platform twelve, the train is ready for boarding.'

I'd a feeling of wild terror that I wasn't ready. It was happening too fast. I wanted a bit longer to say our goodbyes, for it might be months or more before we saw Mum again.

'Now listen, darling,' she said to me. 'You're to look after your brother, all right?'

I wasn't sure I was capable of even looking after myself, but I nodded wretchedly. 'I'll try my best.'

'You'll be fine. You'll be together.' She forced a smile. It made me sadder to think we were leaving her on her own, but her job was here in London. She had to work to pay the bills, so we'd still have a nice home to come back to when these awful air raids were over.

The buzz of noise was becoming urgent. Children moved quickly now, teachers were shouting. I pressed a hand to my stomach, feeling it churn with last-minute nerves.

Mum and me both spoke at once: 'That's your train.' 'We'd better go.'

I hugged Gloria, who gave me a bag of toffees for the journey. I thanked her, then put my arms round Mum.

'Just a minute, let me check you both,' she said, pulling away. Taking out her hankie, she licked it, then wiped Cliff's cheeks, which he hated. Then she smoothed my fringe, even though it was already clipped aside. 'That's better. You're tidy, at least.'

I didn't want to look at her. But she took hold of my chin and gazed deep into my face. It was like she was trying to remember me, even though I was still there.

'Look after your brother, there's a good girl,' Mum said again, sounding like she had a cold coming. 'Write to me, won't you?'

I nodded. 'Any news of Sukie—'

'Of course,' Mum replied hastily. 'But try to put it from your mind, darling.'

Gloria, I noticed, was biting her lip; it left lipstick smears on her teeth. Like they'd done at home in our kitchen, her and Mum shared one of those loaded grown-up looks. What it was all about, I didn't know. Nor was there time to ask. Our train was being called again, and Cliff was hanging impatiently off my arm.

'Go on, then,' Mum said, giving me a gentle push. 'Stick together. You'll be all right.'

I took a big breath, like I was standing on the edge of a wall trying to find the courage to jump.

'Come on,' I said to Cliff, taking his hand properly. As soon as we started moving, the crowds that surrounded us buffeted us towards the train. When I looked over my shoulder, Mum and Gloria had gone.

Most of the train doors were closed by now, though heads and arms still hung out of the windows. The guards, strolling up and down the platform, were telling everyone to take their seats.

Coach D was divided into three big compartments. Each one was full, smelling of heaters on too high and damp, dusty clothes.

Cliff looked like he might cry with disappointment. 'I wanted to sit by the window.'

I gave him a toffee and told him not to worry, though I didn't honestly think we'd get a seat at all.

Making our way down the train, we stepped over sprawled legs and enormous pairs of feet. They were older kids than us, in the uniforms of at least two or three different schools, who looked bored already and the journey hadn't even started. After searching the entire length of the carriage, we'd still not found a seat. So, putting our cases down flat, I told Cliff to perch on top of them. I'd be all right leaning against the wall – at least that was the plan. Sitting down, Cliff had just opened his *Beano* when a hand swooped in and grabbed it.

‘Hey!’ Cliff looked up.

‘Give that back!’ I cried.

At eye level was a label saying ‘Dorothy Roberts’, but the face above it belonged to that naughty girl, Esther Jenkins. Her hair was in two dark brown plaits, the pointed ends of which looked like they’d been sucked. She was holding Cliff’s comic high above her head. It annoyed me that she’d taken it without asking.

‘That’s not yours!’ I said, reaching for it.

‘It is now.’

I tried to make a lunge for the comic, but she was taller than me.

‘I bought that for the journey,’ Cliff protested.

‘Tough,’ Esther said. She spoke a bit oddly, using English words but sounding foreign. ‘It’s ours now.’

Before we could do anything, the comic got passed on to a boy, then another boy, before disappearing down the carriage.

Esther patted Cliff on the head – ‘Thanks, pal’ – before going back to her seat. Cliff’s bottom lip started to quiver.

‘Sssh, don’t cry,’ I said, putting my arm round his shoulders. ‘We’ll get it back.’

‘Shut up, Olive! Leave me alone!’ He turned away, burying his face in his arms. I didn’t know what to do. There were no teachers on board to tell, though through the window I saw that same old one out on the platform, arguing with a guard. Sukie, I knew, wouldn’t stand here feeling useless. Even worse, Cliff had started sobbing. I’d promised to look after him and was doing a lousy job of it.

‘Stay there,’ I told Cliff.

Heading down the carriage, I soon found the *Beano*. Two girls were poring over a Dennis the Menace cartoon on the centre pages.

‘Umm ... excuse me,’ I said politely, stopping at their seats.

The girls kept their heads down.

I tried again. ‘I don’t know if you realise but that belongs to us. You can borrow it if you want, when my brother’s finished reading it.’

They ignored me. I felt rather stupid. Especially when the boys in the next row started laughing and jeering, egging people on to join in until it spread through the whole carriage.

Thoroughly flustered and wanting the whole thing to just be over, I tried to grab the comic again.

The carriage fell silent.

Standing in the doorway was a teacher, the one who'd been arguing on the platform. Now, it seemed, it was our turn.

'Carson! Mitchell! Don't you know your alphabet?' he barked.

The girls reading Cliff's *Beano* jumped out of their skins. As the comic slithered to the floor, I snatched it.

'You're supposed to be in coach F, not this one,' he yelled. 'I've just spent the last ten minutes trying to sort out the confusion you've caused.'

'But Mr Barrowman, sir ...' One of the girls tried to speak.

The teacher – *our* teacher, I realised dismally – cut her dead. 'Each coach is for a different location, you foolish girls. This is coach D, going to Devon. You're in coach F, which will be going to hell and back if you're not careful. So move yourselves. You're holding up the whole train.'

Mortified, the girls rose out of their seats and got their suitcases. The whole carriage watched without a word. I crept back up the aisle towards Cliff.

'You there! The girl in the checked coat!' Mr Barrowman barked.

I stopped. Turned round. 'Me?' Which was a stupid thing to say since no one else was wearing a checked coat.

'Take these.' He clicked his fingers at where the girls had been sat. 'Hurry up now.'

Cliff and me slid on to their still-warm seats. Reunited with his *Beano*, my brother soon cheered up. But right in my eyeline, just down the aisle, was the person who'd started it all.

'What you looking at?' Esther Jenkins mouthed.

'Dunno. Hasn't got a label on it,' I muttered to myself, though like all of us she had one swinging from her coat. I just hoped she'd lose interest in me once we got moving.

Walking up the aisle, Mr Barrowman checked our names against his own shorter list, and made Esther and Dorothy swap their labels. The moment he took his seat at the front, Esther Jenkins started on me again: 'You with the bruise on your forehead.'

I made a point of gazing out the window. She didn't take the hint.

'You snitched on my friends,' she said. 'They had to move carriages because of you. And now they won't be billeted with us, so I'd say that's your fault.'

It wasn't my fault, I knew it wasn't. I didn't make them sit in the wrong part of the train. I didn't snitch on them either, yet Esther Jenkins blamed me and I felt hot and miserable with the injustice of it.

Settling back in my seat, I consoled myself with two thoughts: Queenie, at least, would be kind and friendly and might know more than I did about where my sister was. Plus I'd never seen a proper lighthouse before.