



# Love Everlasting

*-Because love knows no boundaries*





# Love Everlasting



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## Synopsis

### **Three generations of women and a stunning revelation that will rock their lives...**

As the past comes crashing into the present, two worlds collide to unveil a shocking discovery.

Cupid's arrow soared swiftly from the bow, as Vincent, a Canadian pilot and Vivi Davenport a Land Army girl, met in 1942. Britain is gripped in the throes of war, as ordinary folk cling to the last vestiges of the norm in a world rapidly becoming unrecognisable.

Fast forward seventy years...

Love-shy Zoe Davenport, 27, projects a sparky personality to disguise her insecurities, as she garners gossip, at the local beauty salon where she attends to the blue rinse brigade and the trendy set who covet her skilled nail art. When love comes knocking will she welcome opportunity, or slam the door in its face?

Eccentric Mrs D is a stalwart advocate for the four-legged clientele at the Veterinary Hospital, where she rules the roost. However, she's no stranger to love with the two-legged variety and carries a secret yearning for an unlikely recipient. Will love blossom, or is she destined to be the batty old animal champion who spends her remaining days in the company of her furry friends?

Nothing ruffles Effy Scott, a vibrant octogenarian. With forty years spent travelling the world as a flight attendant, she's experienced plenty and picked up two husbands along the way. She undertakes a surprising move and befriends Jake, a grumpy wheelchair bound oldie. With his friendship comes a shocking disclosure that rewrites a history long ago put to bed.

Love Everlasting is a sweeping love story with a rich tapestry of characters.

## Prologue

Vincent

*I wish I could capture this moment, and place it securely in the folds of my memory, to be unwrapped and savoured piece by precious piece at a later date.*

*I just know with all of my heart, that I shall never be as happy or as fulfilled as I am right now, my darling girl.*

*As I lay beside you, drinking in your loveliness, your delicate scent pervades my nostrils. I find my gaze drawn to the dresser, upon which stands a frosted glass perfume bottle, oval in shape and sealed with a stopper.*

*When opened, the fragrance floats like a silken kiss upon the surrounding air. I wish that these cherished moments spent with you could likewise be contained, for later enjoyment.*

*If only this were possible, I would carry it next to my heart, when I am away from you. Then...In the dark of night, when I am the loneliest, and the terror fills my heart, eating at my soul, I would gently ease the stopper off and inhale a whiff of this moment and you.*

*A single trace would still my aching heart until I lay beside you again feeling your silky softness close against me.*

*For you mean everything to me...*

## **Vivi – 1939**

### **Chapter one**

On Sunday, September 3rd, 1939, Vivi Davenport's perspective changed forever, although it would be two years before her plan could see fruition.

The morning started out the same as any other, with Vivi helping her dad, Albert, shine the family shoes. They worked silently with none of the usual competitive spirits. In fact, the air almost crackled with tension. The smell of the polish was distinct, and Vivi would later associate it with the end of her childhood.

Vivi's mum, Nancy, called them to the table and poured out mugs of strong hot tea. Normally, Sunday Breakfast was a relaxing time, but today Albert shovelled in his food, almost choking on a piece of sausage.

'Steady on, Albert,' Nancy said. Her eyes mirrored her concern as she reached over and squeezed his hand.

'It's no good, I've got to go.' Albert stood up forcefully, knocking his chair over. His mouth was a tight line.

He was off to the pub where his work mates congregated, awaiting the announcement from the Prime Minister. Retrieving his jacket from the back door hook, he shrugged it on and placed his cap firmly on his head. It was not without trepidation that he first kissed his wife, and then hugged his daughter, before departing.

Vivi bowed her head as she forked in the last of her breakfast. Once done, she scraped back her chair and gathered up the dirty dishes, afraid to meet her mother's gaze as her insides churned and fizzled.

'Mum wh-'

'Let's just wait and see, Vivi.'

Nancy fastened her apron tighter and went to fetch the veggies from the cold store. Together, they sat peeling carrots and potatoes to accompany the chicken, ready to go in the oven. Sunday dinner was another ritual and today was no exception.

The minute hand of the clock edged its way towards the top, signalling the approach of the eleventh hour. Nancy's fingers trembled as she fumbled with the knob of the wooden, battery-operated wireless and slowly turned the dial.

Vivi picked at a fingernail and Nancy tapped a rhythmic pattern on the table - a sound that was deafening to Vivi's ears. Even Trooper, the family cocker spaniel, sat with his head on his paws, his golden eyebrows knitted and his expression mournful.

Mr Chamberlain began his address to the nation, and Nancy Davenport grasped Vivi's hands and held them tightly between her own as they listened to the sombre voice of the Prime Minister.

'Now may God bless you all ...' Vivi heard Mr Chamberlain say as he approached the end of his speech, with the suspected worst outcome revealed. His closing remarks went unheard as her mother spoke. 'Fetch your dad Vivi. I need him at home now.'

'But, but, Mum.'

'Just do it!'

Vivi stood on shaky legs and fumbled to put on her coat. She missed the arm opening, and Nancy held out the sleeve for her, patting her shoulder when she finished.

'Go on Vivi, there's a good lass,' she murmured. 'It'll be alright; you'll see...'

Vivi nodded. Her eyes shone with unshed tears, and she was already halfway out the door, on legs primed to dash the half mile to her dad's local pub. As she ran, she noticed that the streets were devoid of life. No girls played hopscotch or skipping, and no boys kicked stones or were seated in wooden go-carts, careening wildly down the streets, until their scuffed shoes, acting as brakes, brought them to a standstill.

Instead, an eerie silence amplified the sound of her feet as they pounded on the pavement. A lone cat sat on a wall as a testament that life did still exist.

Vivi reached her destination and came to a halt. Unsure of her next move, she bit on her knuckle and jiggled her leg. She had never been in a pub before. The presence of women was not encouraged, except for a Saturday night when husbands' treated their wives to a port and lemon or perhaps a sweet sherry.

The landlord, Marty, hired Ralph, the blacksmith, to play the piano. He possessed a beautiful baritone voice. Folks would join in singing the old favourites, as they gathered around him. As the night wore on and the ale flowed freely, Marty would give the nod. The men would shift the furniture back against the wall and roll up the worn and tattered rug, under which lay an old wooden plank floor. The inebriated men would shuffle their wives around the makeshift

dance floor as Ralph crooned the show tunes by the likes of Gershwin and Porter. Another favourite for a bit of a knees-up was *Roll out the Barrel*.

Ralph would take a break, to enjoy a complimentary pint of fine ale, before the evening wrapped up with a last slow dance.

The men were happy to oblige their women, it being a sweetener for the expected intimacy that followed in the privacy of their homes. There were no *headaches* allowed on Saturdays. Many pregnancies sprang from this ritual, and Vivi's conception was no different.

Today, the mating game was far from their minds. Although Vivi's family owned a wireless, not everyone did, so the men were gathered in the pub, waiting for the news that would irrevocably change their lives. Albert wanted to be with his pals to listen to Mr Chamberlain.

Having heard the worst, Nancy Davenport wanted her husband home. It was almost as if she expected tanks to come rolling down the streets at any moment, or perhaps, for the sky to fill with aeroplanes, with their engines droning ominously, dropping their horrific cargo, spewing out death and destruction.

Inside the pub, the men sat in stunned silence. The broadcast ended, and as one they raised their voices in excited chatter.

Alf Bishop looked out the window of the corner shop. He spied Vivi stood outside the pub and flipped the closed sign on the shop door. His shoulders drooped, and with a heavy sigh he took off his brown overall.

His thoughts swept back to the last war. They had called it the Great War, but there was nothing great about it in Mr Bishop's opinion. He knew the clueless fools would be rushing to join up. He'd done the same in 1915, after a year of waiting impatiently for his eighteenth birthday. He'd gladly accepted the *King's shilling*.

Now he stood, watching Vivi shuffling nervously. He knew why she was there. In his mind's eye, he could see her father Albert, sat inside with his fist clamped around a pint pot of best bitter.

Before long, the young men would be scooped up, off to war, perhaps never to return. Those too old to serve would still do their bit for the war effort. Some would form the home guard, while others filled the munitions factories. Women too, would leave their homes and venture into jobs once considered unthinkable.

Mr Bishop called up the stairs to his wife in the living quarters. 'I'm just nipping out. I'll be back in twenty.'

'Okay, love, dinner will be on the table.' It was a subtle reminder to return soon.

'Right you are.' He locked up his shop and crossed the road. 'Hello, Vivi. I bet you're looking for your dad. Shall I give him the nod?'

Vivi let out a heartfelt sigh at this unexpected reprieve. 'Oh yes please, you see...' She tripped over her words and struggled for composure. 'Mr Bishop, we're at war! Did you hear Mr Chamberlain?' She finished in a whisper.

'Aye Vivi, I did,' he answered, his voice low. He pushed open the pub door. The air was blue with cigarette smoke. Vivi could hear the rumble of male voices before the sound became muffled by the closing door.

Alf Bishop paused, to let his eyes adjust from the bright sunshine. He approached the bar, ordered a whisky and downed it in one, before strolling over to Albert to tap him on his shoulder. 'Hello Albert, your lass is waiting outside,' he said.

'Thanks, Alf.' Albert nodded, before downing the last of his pint. He stood, donned his cap, adjusted his trousers and with a farewell wave at Marty, he left. Out on the pavement, he patted his daughter on the shoulder, and arm in arm they walked home.

'Will you have to go to war Dad?' Anxiety gnawed at Vivi's stomach, and her chest was tight.

'Nay love, I'm too old, but many a mother is going to be waving goodbye to a son.' He expelled a big puff of air.

Albert cast his thoughts back to the last war and shuddered at the memory. Unbeknownst to him, Vivi's thoughts were also of war as she vowed to do her bit as soon as she was old enough.

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Everyone had expected the action to start immediately, and some, who knew no better, was a bit disappointed. Albert dug up the roses and replaced them with a vegetable garden, alongside an Anderson shelter. The shelter had yet to be used to provide cover. Nancy used hers for cold food storage. The neighbourhood kids delighted in playing in theirs.

'Surely we're safe here Albert, in sleepy Seaside Flats?' Nancy asked.

‘We’re close enough to Liverpool, so you never know - a stray bomb could land our way...’ He shrugged and with a lift of his cap, he gave his head a good scratch. In actuality, evacuee children were beginning to arrive in Seaside Flats, sent by train from Liverpool at the Government’s urging.

Rationing was in full swing, and the women spent a good portion of their lives queuing for food. The young men began to disappear, plucked up by the recruitment agencies. Most of them were eager and primed for their big adventure. Older, wiser eyes, watched sadly.

Mother’s lowered their heads as they struggled to hide their tears. Meanwhile, the men presented a false bravado, congregating in the pub, drinking toasts to the safe return of their sons and nephews.

Vivi observed these changes, biding her time.



**1941**

**Chapter two**

‘You’re not going, and that’s final!’ Her father thumped his fist on the kitchen table.

It was the winter of 1941. Vivi blinked back tears and stood her ground. Her face was white and strained and hidden in the pockets of her cardigan, her fists were clenched, with her nails dug into the palms of her hand.

‘Dad, please, it’s only a matter of time before we’ll have no choice. I’m eighteen, and if I sign up now I’ll be able to choose.’ Vivi was resolute in her decision to join the WAAF, and she struggled to keep the whine out of her voice.

‘I know how old you are.’ With his face set like thunder, he folded his arms tight against his chest. ‘When I heard your first cry I rushed up the stairs.’ He jabbed his finger at the doorway. ‘I was the first one to hold you. Me!’

He paced the floor, raking his fingers through his hair rather like he’d done while his wife laboured, but now his once blue-black hair had a scattering of grey.

‘I presumed that one day a suitor would woo you. I never expected to lose you to war.’ His face collapsed into middle-age, and he flopped into a kitchen chair.

‘Oh Dad,’ Vivi said. ‘I promise I’ll be careful.’ She grabbed his hand. The palms were calloused, but his touch was gentle as he returned her squeeze.

‘But why the WAAF, Vivi?’ He tilted her chin to meet his gaze. ‘If you joined the Land Army you could stay home. You could get a local assignment.’ His eyes pleaded.

Albert drank in her features, the China blues eyes, rimmed with black lashes, pert nose and rosebud lips all perched prettily upon a heart-shaped face. Vivi was dazzling, just like her mother, though where her mother was fair with brown eyes Vivi shared his silky black hair and blue eyes. Both women stood five foot tall, with a petite almost boyish frame and both exuded femininity.

Albert knew what men were like, especially in these uncertain times. He longed to keep her out of harm’s way.

Nancy Davenport was out queuing for their daily rations, along with Billy and Ethel their evacuee children. Moments later, two rosy-cheeked children came bounding through the doors, giggling. Nancy followed close behind, smiling. The children were eager to share the story of Mr

Greaves dog, Wally, running down the road carrying a slipper, with Mr Greaves in hot pursuit, muttering curses.

Nancy observed the father and daughter sat at the kitchen table and urged the two children to wash their hands and put the shopping away.

‘But ...’

‘Later, we’ll tell them later.’ Nancy patted Billy’s shoulder. She knew he was bursting to share Wally’s antics. ‘Be sure to put the meat and butter in the cold store, Effy.’

Effy rolled her eyes but kept quiet.

Both Vivi and her dad spoke in unison.

‘Hello Mum, can you ...’ Vivi held up a hand.

‘Hello love, come sit down ...’ said Albert, tapping the back of a kitchen chair. He was sure she could talk sense into the girl.

‘Hold your horses, both of you, while I put the kettle to boil.’ She filled the kettle and settled it onto the gas cooker.

Momentarily distracted, Vivi asked, ‘Did I hear you say butter Mum?’ She rubbed her hands, her eyes wide with hope.

‘Just two ounces love.’ Nancy flashed a weary smile. She spent half her life queuing for food and the other half trying to create tasty meals from the meagre rations.

Today, she’d got lucky at the butcher’s and had managed to purchase a chicken. She was stood at the front of the queue when Mr Jones, a local farmer had entered the shop carrying six dead chickens for trading. Everyone knew this was a no-no, but turned a blind eye, with the hope of being on the receiving end.

Mr Bamber kept a record of who had received what and when. He paid no heed to those willing to pay a little extra for under the counter bartering.

‘Mum, can we go and play on the sandhills now?’ Effy tugged at Nancy’s hand, just as the kettle began to whistle.

‘After you’ve had a cup of tea and some bread,’ Nancy said pouring the boiling water into the teapot

‘Can we have some of the butter?’ Billy hopped from foot to foot, rubbing his hands.

‘Billy, you know the butter is needed.’ Nancy threw him a sharp look. ‘But you can have a sprinkle of sugar on your lard.’

‘Aw thanks, Mum!’ Billy was renowned for his sweet tooth. He threw his arms around her. Billy loved his cuddles.

Nancy was reminded of the day in the late summer of 1940 when the evacuees arrived from Liverpool. They had been herded like cattle onto the railway station platform. Local farmers’ stood with their big arms folded surveying the arrivals, seeking strong lads, to work on the farm. The women wanted capable girls to help with the laundry and the cleaning. Nobody wanted a scrawny looking child.

As Nancy stood observing, she noticed a small boy and girl. The boy clung tightly to his sister’s hand, and his lip quivered. The girl wore a stern expression. The pair was undernourished, with ragged clothing, and their gas masks hung from their small package of belongings. The boy jiggled his legs, needing the toilet. He reached out to grasp the skirt of one of the billeting officers who turned and slapped his hand.

The boy’s bladder overflowed, and urine ran, streaking the dirt on his legs. His mouth opened in a sob as his tears escaped.

‘Billy!’ the girl said.

The billeting officer raised a hand to strike. Nancy’s ire grew and she marched over and said, ‘I’ll take these two.’ She waved a hand at the boy and girl, neither of whom looked over the age of five. They were seven and eight, but small for their age.

Nancy swallowed her bristling anger and knelt down to ask the children their names.

The girl replied, ‘This here’s our Billy and I’m Ethel.’

‘Well, Billy and Ethel, would you like to come and live with me?’

‘No thanks Miss, we wanna go home to our Mam.’ Ethel stood her ground with a determined jut to her chin.

Billy was of a softer nature, and when he saw the kindness reflected in Nancy’s eyes, he slipped his grubby hand in hers and whispered, ‘Yes, please.’

Ethel received a slap on the head from the billeting officer. ‘Don’t be so cheeky, you dirty blighter.’

Nancy placed herself between Ethel and the women. ‘There’s no need for that!’ With her arms folded and her manner brusque she squared up to the women. ‘Now, unless you’ve any objections we’ll be on our way. What do you need me to sign?’

The officer itched to deny her, but she knew no-one else would want these two dirty, scrawny children. She thrust forward her clipboard and said, 'Fill this out, please.'

Nancy didn't regret her decision as she walked home clasping the children's hands, but she knew that Albert would not be thrilled. He'd instructed her to find him a lad who could assist him. He was a skilled tradesman and with the young men away he was busy. Neither Billy nor Ethel would be able to help him.

The first thing Nancy did when she got the children home was to strip off their clothes and place them both in the bath. Their clothes were thrown on the fire as soon as Nancy had found replacements.

A year had passed since that day and although Albert had privately berated Nancy, he'd soon grown to love Ethel and Billy. Their parents, Arnie and Edie Boswell however, were a nightmare! They came for a three-day visit on Boxing Day 1940, travelling from Liverpool by train.

The hours spent with the children were of the bare minimum, preferring to enjoy the delights of the neighbouring town of Blackpool.

'A woman's entitled to a bit of fun surely?' Edie Boswell challenged as she stared down Nancy, with her arms folded defiantly. Arnie Boswell was too busy freeloading on the rationed tea and bread, to get involved in the dispute. Neither parent offered Nancy their food coupons.

On the first day of their stay, Ethel and Billy were eager to show their parents the beach and the sandhills. Bundled up in warm clothing, they headed out, only to return ten minutes later with Edie declaring, 'All that fresh air's unhealthy for a body!'

They rose late each day and after breakfast would offer a hasty 'ta-ra,' departing without their children and not returning until the pub closed.

Nancy doubted that either parent would have acted differently had they known it would be the last time they would see their children. On their way back through the darkened streets of Liverpool, they were both killed in an air raid. The bombing had been particularly harsh over the Christmas holidays.

Albert and Nancy decided to postpone telling the children of their parent's demise, especially since the visit had unsettled Ethel. She started stealing from the sweet shop. Briefly, Ethel's peers revered her until, on her third attempt, Mrs Bishop caught her red handed. Mr

Bishop walked a tearful Ethel home and spoke with Nancy who agreed to meet with the Bishops' after the close of business.

Later that day, Nancy and Albert escorted a reluctant Ethel to discuss her punishment. Mrs Bishop invited them to join her in a cup of tea, without sugar, and a glory bun. Nancy, already mortified over Ethel's behaviour, was quick to refuse the Bishop's rations.

Mrs Bishop insisted, 'We've not been blessed with children, so we can afford to splurge once in a while,' she gestured with a plump arm, to the seats at her kitchen table. 'Please, do sit. I've been thinking, and the Mister and I both agree, don't we Alf?' she looked at her husband who had entered the room.

Mr Bishop nodded his affirmation and finished her sentence. 'We think that the young one should come and work in the shop for an hour each day after school for one week, without pay, and then I reckon the whole matter can be forgotten.'

'I think that's more than generous,' said Albert with a smile. He turned to Ethel who sat chewing on her thumb.

'What have you got to say for yourself, Ethel?'

Ethel bowed her head and muttered, 'I'm sorry.'

'Right, that's settled. Now let's enjoy our tea, shall we?' said Mr Bishop.

Mrs Bishop poured the tea, and offered the plate of buns, insisting they each take one. When she came to Ethel, she said, 'I'm curious Ethel, why did you steal from us? You seem like a nice girl.'

Ethel, with her bun half poised between her mouth and her plate, let her hand drop. The bun landed on the table. Her face crumpled, and she began to cry. When she was spent, Ethel tried to explain. 'I love living here,' she said.

'Then why steal?' Nancy asked.

'I wanted the kids to like me, so I told them Billy and me came from a nice house like yours, then me ma and da showed up all shouting like and being drunk. I pretended the sweets came from them, so the kids would still like me...' Ethel's lip turned down.

'We never had a bedroom before,' Billy said standing up and sneaking a hand inside Nancy's. He looked up at her and said, 'I wanna stay with you and Uncle Albert.'

'Oh, sweetheart, of course, you can!' Nancy gathered him to her and held out a hand to Ethel, who grasped it.

‘Vivi too?’ Billy asked.

‘Do you like you having a big sister Ethel?’ Mrs Bishop asked.

Ethel nodded, unusually tongue-tied.

Billy piped up, ‘Vivi's smashing. Do you remember the day we walked on the beach really far, Ef?’

Ethel nodded and her eyes shined at the memory of when the sea was out, and they'd pretended they could walk to Southport. It seemed like they'd walked for miles before they spied the tide on the horizon and turned back towards the town. Vivi held onto their hands, and they had run nearly all the way so that their sides hurt. They'd collapsed giggling on the beach.

Nancy realised it was time to tell Ethel and Billy about their parent's death. It was important that they knew where they belonged. She and Albert had already agreed that they would adopt the children.

Effy had two questions to ask when told about her parents. ‘Can me and Billy call you Mummy and Daddy and will you call me Effy? I don't like Ethel. That's my name when I'm in trouble!’

Albert threw back his head and roared with laughter. ‘Oh Effy, you are a caution!’ he said.

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Once Nancy had fed the children, she buttoned them into their coats and made sure they wore their balaclavas and mittens.

‘No taking your things off once you're out of sight. It's a brisk wind whipping about the seafront, and I don't want you getting an earache.’ She directed this last at Billy, who suffered from frequent bouts of pain. He'd wake in the night, crying until Nancy gave him ear drops and a hot water bottle.

‘I never get an earache,’ Effy boasted, puffing out her chest.

‘Nevertheless, I expect you to wear your balaclava,’ Nancy scolded without rancour. She tapped them both on the bottom and dispatched them out to play. ‘Be careful crossing the roads.’ She waited until they were safe before going in after a final wave.

Satisfied, Nancy gave her attention to Vivi. ‘Right, what's all the palaver about?’

Nancy would have preferred to have this conversation with her husband present, but he'd only come home for his midday meal, and now he had returned to Langley Farm. He was helping Gerard Langley, to construct a new cow shed.

The project was put on hold when war broke out, and it had taken two years to gather the materials needed, using war coupons. Gerald looked forward to milking his cows in a shed that did not have buckets scattered around to catch the rain from the leaky roof.

'Oh Mum, I told Dad that I wanted to sign up for the WAAF, but he was livid. He wants me to be a land girl. If Dad had his way, I'd be down the road at Langley farm.'

'Oh Vivi, you knew what to expect. Don't worry, you go ahead and apply. I'll talk to your Dad.'

'Oh thanks, Mum!' Vivi threw her arms around Nancy.

'Steady on!' Nancy laughed. 'You'll have us both over in a minute.'

### Chapter three

Vivi was alone when the postman pushed the official looking envelope through the slot in the door, to land with a plop on the door mat. A thrill of excitement rushed through her as she picked it up and clutched it to her breast for a moment, before picking up the letter opener and slitting the top of the envelope.

It was exactly two weeks since she'd been for a medical for the WAAF and six weeks since she had first stood up to her father and told him she was applying. A week of arguments had followed until finally, Vivi had stormed out of the house and taken a bus into Blackpool. Her mother had given her a copy of her birth certificate, and with the law on her side, Albert Davenport had been unable to stop her from signing up.

Albert did not speak to her for two days.

Nancy argued that it was only a matter of time before Vivi would be called to join. Surely it was better she chose her posting?

Albert accepted his defeat with belligerence. 'Doesn't mean I have to like it,' he said.

Effy and Billy were just glad the shouting had stopped.

Vivi sat with her tea and toast untouched as she read and re-read the contents of the letter. How could it be so? There must be some mistake. She stood up, gripping the edge of the table, her knuckles white, before flopping back into her chair. Her disappointment was ripe. They had rejected her!

Her mind scrambled, searching for an alternative, but she drew a blank. She opted for a walk on the sandhills to clear her head and whistled for Trooper. Silence greeted her and then she realised he was with Nancy.

'Ergh!' She harrumphed and grabbed her purse, shoving it fiercely into her coat pocket along with her keys.

The wind howled around her as she marched over the sand, and the sky was bleak and heavy with the threat of rain. The day was a perfect match for her mood. 'Damn! Damn and blast!'

A lone figure walked along the water's edge with a collie dog that frolicked in the brine. The person halted as he caught the sound, if not the words. He scanned the horizon and found nothing to raise the alarm and continued on his walk, stopping every few minutes to throw a stick for his dog.



Unheeding of the cold, Vivi flopped down into a sand bunker and sat that way gathering her thoughts as she mulled over her predicament. She knew her dad would be delighted, and even her mum would be relieved. Despite her support, her mum would prefer she stay close.

‘Well to hell with that,’ Vivi told a seagull that hovered expectantly, perhaps hoping for a tasty nibble. She stood up and felt in her pocket for her purse, glad she’d had the foresight to put it there. A quick glance at her watch told her there was a bus due in five minutes. She brushed off the sand from her coat and broke into a light run. She’d show them all! With a quick dash home, she collected her documents from the sideboard and was just in time hop on the approaching bus.

The family gathered around the table later that day, enjoying a portion of bubble and squeak, with one fatty piece of bacon finely chopped to make it go further. Effy however, was enjoying a rare entity. She gleefully pushed a piece of bread and lard into a soft boiled egg. It was a gift from the Bishops’ who had done a deal with one of the farmers for some flour.

Long after her week of working in the shop as punishment for stealing, she now had a permanent position helping Mrs Bishop with odd jobs. At eight years old, she was not quite old enough to serve the customers, but Mrs Bishop assured her it wouldn’t be long. Effy puffed out her chest, filled with excitement and self-importance.

Effy had oohed and aahed over the eggs, and Mrs Bishop had given her one as a gift. The Bishop’s had grown fond of Effy.

Vivi ate her dinner in silence, and when done, she retrieved the letter from her cardigan pocket, and handed it to her father, without explanation. She observed the shadow of concern cross his face as he noted the return address.

Mirth soon replaced his frown, and he slapped his hands against his thighs and exclaimed, ‘Well, fancy that!’

Albert saw his wife’s sombre expression and his daughter’s mutinous tight-lipped face. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. He coughed, to try and hide his delight that the WAAF had rejected Vivi on account of her flat feet.

It was too much for him. He rubbed his hands and exclaimed, ‘Gerard Langley will be pleased!’

Vivi saw his thinly disguised glee and blurted out waspishly, ‘I’m sorry to disappoint you Dad, but I won’t be working at Langley Farm.’ Her eyes glinted with defiance.

With his mug of tea poised halfway between the table and his mouth he said, 'Eh, what do you mean?'

'I've enrolled in the Women's Land Army. Apparently, they don't mind flat feet!'

Astonishment met the announcement, and you could have heard a pin drop. Even Effy, lost in the delights of slurping up the last yellow drops of her chucky egg, hesitated with spoon mid-air.

'You're joking right?' Albert was aghast, and his face was chalky, save for two red spots high on his cheeks.

'Oh Vivi,' murmured Nancy. She reached for Albert's hand and urged, 'Now love, don't go getting in a tizzy. It's not good for your heart.'

Albert retrieved his hand from Nancy's grasp and pushed his chair from the table with force, causing it to topple over. With quick strides, he reached the hall cupboard, where he grabbed his coat, and with a slam of the door, he left the house.

Billy looked longingly at Albert's dinner, then wisely busied himself drinking his weak tea.

Vivi stood with the intention of following her dad, but Nancy grabbed her arm. 'Leave him be love; he needs time to digest it all. A man is supposed to protect his family, and he feels he's not able when you're off to God knows where...'

'There's a war on Mum,' Vivi snapped then remorseful, she uttered, 'I'm sorry Mum, I know.'

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The Davenport family congregated on the platform of the train station. It was an icy January morning, and they stood shivering and stamping their frozen feet. Vivi cupped her hands together and blew on her mittened fingers.

Jack, the porter, was huddled inside the waiting room in front of the coal fire. It was only Billy's insistence that they watch for the train's arrival that kept them in the frigid outdoors.

'Don't forget you need to change at Kirkham,' Albert said to Vivi. 'Now tell me again, what's happening at Preston?'

'I'm to go to the waiting room on platform two, and there will be an officer there who will meet all the recruits. At that time, I'll be assigned to a group and find out where I'm going. Don't worry and I'll write as soon as I'm able and let you know what's what.'

‘Me too,’ said Effy jumping up and down. ‘Write to me too!’

‘You too Effy,’ Vivi promised, smiling down at her newly adopted younger sister.

They heard, before they saw, the train puffing as it approached the station with its smoke billowing.

‘It’s here!’ Billy clapped his gloved hands as the train came around the bend on the track and approached the platform in a hiss of steam and smoke. Billy rushed to run his hands along the sleek engine, as one by one the rest of the solemn group hugged and kissed Vivi.

‘Don’t talk to strangers and watch out for those Yanks, do you hear?’ Albert Davenport said in a gruff voice. ‘I believe they offer silk stockings to the girls, and one can only imagine the favours they expect in return!’

Albert rested his chin on Vivi’s head and stroked her hair, before kissing her. His gaze met hers, and she saw his eyes dark with love, and then he thrust a five-pound note into her hand and closed her fist around it. ‘You come home straight away if you don’t like it. There’s plenty enough money there for the fare.’

Vivi looked down at the note, and her jaw dropped. ‘But!’ The money represented more than a man’s weekly wage.

Albert placed a finger on her lips and shook his head.

‘Oh, Dad,’ she said, throwing her arms around him as her lips quivered.

Instead of embracing her, he thrust her from him and said, ‘Be a good girl, Vivi,’ His tone was brusque. He turned and left the platform without a backwards glance. Once outside the station, he dashed a hand across his eyes, before lighting a cigarette with trembling hands.

‘All aboard who’s going aboard,’ cried the porter in his self-important manner. He blew his whistle hard.

Nancy Davenport gave another quick hug as did Effy. Vivi picked up her case and ascended the train’s steps.

‘Vivi, Vivi, don’t go!’ Billy said, suddenly aware she was leaving.

Vivi paused at the top stair and leant down to Billy, who rushed up to hug her.

‘Ta ta shrimp,’ she said, using her nickname for him. Billy ran down the platform as the train began to move, anxious to be the last to wave her off at station’s end.

‘God bless, love,’ Nancy called. She pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes before having a hearty blow of her nose. The engine chugged slowly at first, expelling steam and

smoke, before picking up speed and as her vision of Vivi diminished, Nancy's heart lay heavy inside her chest.

Effy slipped a hand into Nancy's and stood silently watching the departing train as the tears coursed down her face. When the train was out of sight, she looked up at Nancy and asked, 'Vivi will come home again won't she?'

'Of course Sweetheart,' Nancy reassured. She sent a silent plea heavenward, asking for Vivi's safe-keeping. 'C'mon Billy,' she called to the boy who stood straining his eyes as he gazed into the distance.

Albert Davenport stood outside the station, smoking his cigarette, His face was crumpled and lined, but when he saw his family, he mustered up a smile and said, 'C'mon, let's be having you. It's brass monkey weather.'

He set off in the direction of home but stopped a few minutes later and turned back to his family. 'Perhaps Mum'll be able to find a scraping of cocoa in the tin and a drop of milk for mixing. That'll warm up our bones. If we join it with a slice o' bread and that blackberry jam that we got at Christmas, then I reckon we'll be laughing.'

Albert bent down a little and encouraged Billy to hop up for a piggyback ride.

'I'll see what I can do.' Nancy summoned a smile, linked her arm through Effy's and began to sing, '*We'll Meet Again...*'

Renowned for his splendid baritone voice, Albert joined in, and soon the four of them sang with gusto as they trooped homeward. Passersby smiled in their direction. Everyone was missing somebody, and more than one eye moistened.

Meanwhile, Vivi was on her way to Kirkham where she would make her first connection. She was pleased to have found a seat. Her stomach was all aflutter, and her hands trembled with a mixture of nerves and excitement. She folded them in her lap and focused on trying to count the cows and sheep. They neither knew nor cared that the country was at war as they grazed. A fine misty drizzle sprayed against the window as the train clickety-clacked along the track with its whistle blowing as it approached the country stations.

'Next stop Kirkham, all change,' called the conductor, as they approached the town. The train was reaching the end of the line and would return to where it had begun its journey.

As the engine shuddered to a halt, Vivi reached up to the luggage rack and attempted to retrieve her suitcase, only to find she was unable to lift it down. The Porter had placed it

overhead. Fortunately, a man in an unfamiliar blue uniform passed through her carriage and observed her dismay.

‘Easy Sugar, I’ll help you,’ He spoke a dialect that was new to her. Vivi blushed, flustered and out of her depth, as the man took control and insisted on carrying her suitcase off the train.

‘Thank you,’ Vivi said.

The man placed her suitcase on the platform and held out his hand. ‘Hi, I’m Wilf Clark. I’ve been training at Warton, but I’m returning to my unit. I’m with the Canadian Air Force.’

‘Oh thank God, you’re not a Yank!’ Vivi blurted out and then covered her open mouth

Wilf burst out laughing then said, ‘I’m not sure how to reply, except to say I’ve always been proud to call myself a Canadian!’

‘Oh dear!’ Vivi wished the ground would open and swallow her whole. ‘My dad told me I mustn’t talk to the Yanks.’ She was aware of sounding childish.

Wilf was easygoing and quite unlike the men Vivi knew from her previous job working as a telephone operator. Those men were authoritative, and although they had treated her with respect, they were rather aloof.

The Porter blew his whistle as the train to take them onto the next leg of their journey approached the other platform.

‘Oh my goodness,’ Vivi said. ‘The train’s coming!’

Wilf picked up her suitcase and slung his kit bag over his shoulder, beckoning her to follow him over the footbridge to the other side.

With a stroke of luck, they were once again able to find seats in the third class compartment. The train chugged out of the station. Wilf reached into his kit bag and took out a packet of sandwiches wrapped in wax paper and offered her one.

‘Oh thank you, but I couldn’t possibly,’ Vivi said. Her cheeks flushed red.

‘Please yourself.’ Wilf shrugged. He rummaged some more and pulled out a flask which he unscrewed. Steam rose into the air along with an exotic aroma. Vivi leaned forward in her seat, as she fought the urge to sniff the air.

Wilf teased her. ‘What, you’ve never tasted coffee before?’

‘No, is it nice?’

‘You’re kidding me right?’ Wilf observed her earnest expression and shook his head, dumbfounded. ‘Well, I’ve heard of everything now. How primitive you guys are!’

Vivi squared her shoulders, filled with righteous indignation.

Wilf pulled a face and said, ‘I’m sorry Sugar, I didn’t mean any harm. Here try some.’ he offered her the cup from his flask, which held a brown, steaming brew.

Vivi sat back down and accepted the proffered cup. First, she sniffed it and then took a tentative sip and then another. She couldn’t help herself. She tipped her head back and drank till the liquid was gone.

Wilf grinned at her. ‘Horrible stuff eh?’

‘It was delicious,’ Vivi said, beaming before casting a forlorn look into the empty cup, amazed that she’d drunk it all. ‘I’m sorry, that was rude of me.’ She handed back the cup.

‘Don’t worry Sugar, I’ve more here,’ Wilf said. His voice was steady and reassuring, and Vivi relaxed.

They passed the rest of the journey, exchanging pleasantries and as they approached Preston, they had sown the beginnings seeds of friendship. She learnt he was married, came from Hamilton, Ontario in Canada and had a little boy named Raymond.

She told him about her life in Seaside Flats, including the two evacuee children, Effy and Billy, who were now an adopted part of her family. He asked if she would write to him, as a friend of course, and she agreed, providing his wife wouldn’t mind?

Vivi felt her insides tighten as this part of her journey came to its conclusion. She gazed through the train window at the busy station. People wearing different coloured uniforms bustled. Vivi’s heart beat a tattoo as she disembarked and became engulfed in the flow.

Wilf noted her confusion and directed her to a bench. ‘Wait here Sugar; I’ve just got to check the timetable, and then I’ll help you, okay?’

Vivi nodded and gave him a grateful smile. ‘Thanks, Wilf.’ As she looked around her eyes widened in shocked fascination as she spied her first coloured person.

He was a big, brawny man, who stood lounging against the wall, looking like he owned the world. The man reached into his top pocket and pulled out a pack, from which he took something. Vivi was not sure what it was. The man removed the wrapper and placed the contents in his mouth and began to chew.

His gaze came to rest upon her, and Vivi blushed, embarrassed that he had seen her watching him. She wasn't to know that he had spotted her long before she saw him. Vivi dragged her eyes away from his but couldn't resist another glance. His gaze was still upon her, and he winked before flashing the whitest of smiles. His smile transformed him, and Vivi knew at that moment that her life was changed forever.

He was the most beautiful male that Vivi had ever seen, and she was utterly dazzled. She gave him an adoring smile.

'Vivi,' Wilf had returned from his task. He received no response and following her gaze he said, 'Oh no, oh no Sugar!'

He guided her away and down the platform. Vivi looked back for a last desperate glimpse of the man who stood transfixed watching after her.

'To get to Platform two, we need to cross the bridge,' said Wilf. He pulled on Vivi's arm, determined to move her away from the vicinity of the coloured man. For although the man was a fellow pilot, his sort was out of bounds.

'Stop it, stop it, Wilf. How dare you?' she said, tugging at his arm. 'Let me go. I don't even know you!'

Wilf released her, 'You know you're right. I've better things to do!' He thrust Vivi's suitcase at her and hitched his kit bag onto his shoulder and strode away.

Vivi stood, rooted to the spot, unsure of what to do next. She longed to find the coloured man with the pearly smile, but common sense told her she needed to report to the recruitment stall set up on platform two.

Wilf was halfway over the footbridge when he glanced back at where Vivi stood. With a grunt, he turned around and retraced his steps. 'Come on Vivi.' He picked up her suitcase, 'Follow me.'

This time, she did not argue. 'Why are you so kind?'

'You remind me of my younger sister Janet,' he said. Vivi jogged to keep up with him.

'There you go, sugar,' he said as they arrived at Vivi's reporting station.

Impulsively she hugged him. 'Stay safe Wilf.' With a sharp intake of breath, she approached the desk and spoke to the stern looking woman with the clipboard.

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Vincent

*She stood there on that crowded platform, in the midst of people rushing to and fro, looking like a beautiful flower, not quite in bloom. It was clear she was on the cusp of womanhood, an angelic innocent with a figure to make a grown man weep. Despite her ridiculous uniform, her glory shone through.*

*I lounged against the wall, observing her undetected, trying to appear cool. I was a dark-skinned man in a land of pale faces. The pilot, my fellow countryman, had escorted her off the train, but now she stood looking bereft. Were they a couple I wondered?*

*She must have felt the heat of my gaze, for her china-blue eyes met mine and seared my heart. I chanced a smile, which she returned with a tremulous one of her own.*

*Time froze as I fell in love and I knew that no other would ever fill the hole left in my heart as she departed with the pilot who had returned... I could not bear to stay a moment longer, so I turned and walked away. I had completed nine missions over Germany, but none was as difficult as that walk away from her.*