

# ***England late 1923***

***Norah***

# 1

Norah Webster looked up from her machining as the charge hand stopped next to her.

'You're wanted at home, lass. Urgent.'

She shoved her chair back and stood up. 'Do you know why?'

'The lad didn't say. I'll have to dock your pay for the time you're away from your machine, mind.'

But she wasn't listening. She grabbed her coat and ran all the way home with it flapping open.

She'd moved back in with her parents after the war when she lost her job as a porter at the railway station to a returned soldier. She was ashamed at having to seek their help, but as a widow, she found it impossible to earn enough to run a house of her own on women's peacetime wages, let alone provide properly for her eight-year-old daughter Janie. But she consoled herself with the thought that her money helped her parents out, too, so she was still paying her way.

When she got there, Norah saw a group of solemn-faced neighbours gathered near their house. They greeted her in subdued voices but avoided her eyes. Pushing open the front door, she heard her mother's anguished weeping coming from upstairs and her steps faltered.

She climbed the stairs slowly, stopping in the doorway of the front bedroom, still

panting from running home. Her mother was kneeling on the floor by the bed, weeping loudly and unrestrainedly, holding the hand of the still figure lying there. She didn't even notice her daughter.

Norah went forward and knelt to put an arm round her. No need for anyone to say her father was dead. You couldn't mistake that look. 'What happened, Mum?'

Annie clung to her. 'He dropped dead at work, just keeled over and died, they said. They fetched the doctor straight off, but it was too late, so they brought him home. The first thing I knew was when they knocked on the door. Oh, Norah, he's gone, left me! How can I bear it?'

More sobs erupted from her and all Norah could do was hold her and let her weep for a while. She looked over the top of her mother's head at the calm face of her Dad. Such a lovely man. So hard to believe he was dead. Tears welled in her eyes, but she didn't give in to the desire to weep. Someone had to stay strong, do what was necessary and organise the funeral. Her mother was a weak woman, who'd depended on her husband. What would become of her now? What would become of them all?

After a few minutes Norah decided this couldn't go on and said gently, 'You have to stop crying now, Mum. We've things to do.'

But Annie went into hysterics and couldn't be calmed. In the end they had to send for the doctor, who gave her something to make her sleep.

Norah sent a neighbour's lad round to tell her sisters what had happened, and almost as an afterthought, told him to go to the slipper factory afterwards to tell them she'd be taking the rest of the week off to bury her father.

Her sisters arrived and they went to see their father, then wept together. But neither of them was prepared to lay him out, so Norah did it.

By the time her daughter came home from school, she'd done that and made arrangements for the funeral, too. Well, that was easy enough to do, wasn't it? Her parents had taken out burial insurance a long time ago, paying threepence a week to ensure they had a decent send-off, not a pauper's funeral. The insurance company only dealt with one funeral firm, who offered a standard service to those insured, so you didn't get any choice about the details unless you could pay extra.

And they couldn't. Neither she nor her sisters had any money to spare because times were hard.

Janie fell silent when she heard what had happened and whispered, 'Like Daddy.' She cried softly and sadly. She'd been her granddad's favourite and maybe he'd spoiled her, but they both had so much fun together that Norah hadn't tried to stop him indulging the fatherless child. She tried to comfort her daughter, but what could you say, really? Death was so final.

After her daughter had sobbed herself to sleep, Norah lay awake for a long time in the back bedroom, lying very still in the double bed they shared, staring bleakly into the darkness. Was it possible to provide for herself, her mother and Janie without her father's wages?

However carefully she did the sums, it wasn't. The pennies didn't stretch that far, with her wages little more than half a man's. That meant they couldn't keep this house, or any other.

\*\*\*

On the Saturday afternoon of that same week, Andrew Boyd knocked on the door of his fiancée's house and waited for Betty to answer it. For once, she wasn't smiling, didn't invite him in.

For a few moments they stared at one another then he asked the question whose answer he'd already guessed from her expression. 'Did you read the pamphlet I gave you?'

'No. I threw it in the fire.'

He was shocked by that. 'You didn't think I might want it back?'

'It was all lies. I don't know why you believe them.'

Her voice was shriller than usual and he wished she'd chosen somewhere more private for this confrontation, but that was Betty all over. She never thought before she acted.

He repeated what he'd been telling her for a while now, only he said it more strongly. 'It wasn't lies. It was a chance for us, and a good one, too. You know how I hate my job, hate this town as well. I feel stifled here after going overseas during the war. Other countries are warmer, brighter, more cheerful.'

For a moment he turned his head to scowl at the long row of shabby little houses built up the hill in steps, each dwelling exactly fourteen foot wide. Folk here lived on top of one another. Soldiers had lived together even more closely in the barracks. He longed for space and air and bright sunshine, and the freedom to do as he wanted with his life, to be on his own if he wanted. 'I've tried, Betty. God knows I've tried. But I *can't* settle down here. And why should I when there's a better alternative?'

She took a step backwards, the tears she seemed able to produce at will running down her face, and said in a voice throbbing with emotion, 'Not even for me? You said you loved me, Andrew, but you can't have meant it.' Pulling out a lace-edged handkerchief, she dabbed delicately at her eyes.

'I did mean it. You know that. And even if I stayed here, jobs aren't safe these days.'

'You're the charge hand at the foundry. You'll always have a job. They don't lay off charge hands.'

'Don't be so sure about that. They had to put people on short time at the spinning mill this week and they cancelled a big order at our works. So now we have to put our men on short time, too.'

She waved one hand impatiently. 'It's always been like that. Full on with work, then short time, and later things start picking up again.' She pressed one hand to her breast in a theatrical gesture. 'If you love me, you'll—'

'Love won't make jobs for people. You should read your father's newspapers instead of wasting your money on that stupid *Picture Show* magazine.'

She abandoned the pose to glare at him. 'It's only twopence a week and if you men can go and waste your money watching football matches, I don't see why I can't take an interest in the cinema.'

It was an old argument and he shouldn't have raised it again, but when she started posing and acting like those silly film stars she adored, it really got to him. Especially now. 'No one will be able to afford to go to football or the cinema if things go on like this. Business is bad all across the north and getting worse. You'd think we'd lost the war, not won it. And anyway, that doesn't change the fact that I can't *stand* being shut up inside that damned noisy workshop all day.'

She gave him one of her soulful looks. He'd thought them beautiful when he first met her, but knew now she was play-acting half the time, modelling herself on her favourite film stars. It was starting to irritate him, but still he wanted her, couldn't help himself, she was so soft and pretty.

'If you insist on going to Australia, I can't marry you, Andrew.' She pressed one hand

pressed against her breast and bowed her head.

The silence was broken only by the striking of the town hall clock in the distance and a dog responding with a couple of half-hearted barks.

*Get it over with, he told himself. You know she'll never change her mind about this.*

He could see her watching him out of the corner of her eye, knew she was hoping her dramatic ultimatum would force him to stay. Only he'd told her the simple truth: he couldn't face staying. Still, it was hard to say the words.

When he'd met her, six months after his wife died, he'd fallen madly in love. Betty was not only pretty, but cheerful and lively. She made him laugh and feel whole again. What man who'd been through the war wouldn't enjoy the prospect of a rosy, smiling woman like her to brighten his days? It had seemed like a miracle that the prettiest girl in town loved him in return.

But love wasn't enough, not for him, and he steeled himself to look away from those big blue eyes. 'So you never even read the pamphlet or tried to find out about what it's like in Australia. It's a wonderful country, Betty. A man can make a good life for himself and his family out there. Just think, we'll own our own land.'

'What use is that to people like us? It's farmers they need to work the land. You're not one—you know nowt about farming, *nowt!* And I'm not going to be a farmer's wife. Let alone I like living in town, it's back-breaking work, farming is. Besides, I've told you before and I meant it: I'm *not* moving away from my family, not for anything. I've brothers and sisters here, Andrew, and my father's a widower.'

She spoke in broken tones but he could see no tears and there was a watchful look in her eyes. It was as if she'd turned suddenly into a stranger, someone he didn't know, someone very different from the woman whose kisses drove him mad with longing, the

one who snuggled against him in the cinema, warm and soft.

He pushed those memories away. He'd made his decision. It was the only one possible because there were his sons to think of as well as himself. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, he took a step backwards.

Her mouth fell open in shock and she stretched one hand out towards him. 'Andrew, love, don't do this. You'll feel better about everything once we're married, I know you will.'

'I won't change my mind, Betty. They're *giving* land to ex-servicemen out there in Western Australia, just giving it away for the asking. And I'm going to ask for some.'

He watched as she fumbled for her ring finger and took off the engagement ring he'd given her, an extravagance she'd coaxed out of him. She held it out, mute now, her lips a tight thin line, anger rather than sorrow in her face.

When he took hold of it, she didn't let go for a minute and he realised in shock that she expected him to let her keep it. Well, he wasn't going to do that. He'd spent far too much money on her over the past few months already. He jerked it away from her and put it in his pocket.

She stepped back, scowling blackly, no longer pretending to weep.

'I wish you well, Betty.' He turned away and strode off down the street, not looking back. It was over, his brief dream of a happy married life, a life more satisfying and exciting than his placid first marriage had brought.

The only dream he had left now was to move to Australia, make a better life for himself and his sons, and by hell, he was going to make it come true, whatever he had to do.

And surely a government wouldn't lie about something as important as giving land

to ex-servicemen?

\*\*\*

After the funeral, Norah's family gathered at the house for a conference. They put all the children in the back room and forbade them to go outside and play on such a solemn day. It had poured down during the funeral and although it had stopped now, the skies were heavy with more rain.

Norah kept her head bowed as her eldest sister's husband stood up. She didn't want them to see how bitter she felt about the blows fate kept dealing her, losing her husband, losing her war job, now losing even her home.

'No need to tell you all why we're here. We have to decide what to do for Mum and Norah.' He paused, cleared his throat, then said it. 'Me and Emily can take Mum in, give her our front room, but we can't take you and Janie as well, Norah love, well, not for more than a few days, any road. I only wish we could. And we can't help you with the rent, either, because I'll be on short time from next week.' He paused as there was a murmur of sympathy. 'So, unless you've got any ideas, keeping Dad's house is out of the question.'

She shook her head, her throat aching from holding back tears.

Her youngest sister gave her an apologetic look. 'We've got Phil's father living with us already, so we've not an inch of room left at our place, either. You can always come to us in an emergency, but not permanently. Sorry, love.'

Norah could only manage a quick nod. She knew they'd help her if they could.

'You an' Janie will have to find lodgings,' her sister Emily said. 'I'll ask around.'

'Thanks.' She listened as they went on to discuss how to sell the furniture, how to get every extra penny for it they could, so that Mum would have a little something behind

her.

Only once did Norah interrupt. 'Some of the furniture is mine. I'm sorry, but I can't let you have that. I may need it, or if I have to sell it, I'll need the money it brings for me and Janie.'

There was silence, then her brother-in-law said, 'Sorry, love. We weren't thinking.'

'Me and Mum will start sorting through our things tomorrow, separating hers out,' Norah said. 'If we're out by next Friday, it'll save paying another week's rent. I'll ask at work if I can store my stuff in the old shed for a few weeks, just till I see how I'm placed. I'm sure they'll let me. They're not using it just now.'

After that she let them talk, didn't dare open her mouth in case the sobs burst out, as pieces of her mother's furniture that she'd polished and cared for nearly all her life were shared out or priced.

She hadn't many pieces of her own left. Her life didn't seem to add up to much, even though she'd always worked hard.

She felt quite desperate inside, but tried not to let it show.

\*\*\*

Andrew walked his sons to Sunday school, usually one of his favourite activities, because it gave them time to chat about their week without the rest of the family listening in. Today, however, he answered the lads mechanically, still feeling upset.

He'd told his family yesterday that he wasn't going to marry Betty after all and they'd been shocked. His sons were more worried that this might prevent them going to Australia, which they both regarded as a wonderful adventure, than about losing Betty, whom they'd merely tolerated.

He biggest worry was how he was to get accepted for the West Australian

government's Group Settlement Scheme if he didn't have a wife. The information he'd been sent made it very plain that a man who had children needed a woman to work alongside him and care for them. There were schemes for single men, but not, it seemed, for widowers like him. He'd sent for another pamphlet to replace the one Betty had burned, just be sure of the details. But he knew most of them by heart, really.

A little lass pushed past them and ran helter-skelter down a steep part of the path. She let out a shriek as she slipped on a damp patch and fell heavily against a low granite wall that guarded the grave of one of the richer families. Immediately she began to wail, clutching her knee and he could see the blood trickling from a bad graze, even from where he stood.

He moved to help her but a woman got there first, so he held back. Within seconds she had the child sitting on a nearby gravestone and had taken a clean handkerchief out of her pocket, passing it to her own lass, who ran off to dampen it.

Andrew turned to his sons. 'Off you go to Sunday School, lads.' He watched in pride as Jack and Ned ran down the hill, then slowed to walk sedately through the side entrance of the church hall. At ten and seven years old, they were a fine, sturdy pair. All three of them were living with his cousin Lyddie at the moment, had been since his wife died. But Lyddie was expecting her first baby, a miracle after years of trying, and she wasn't well. She was finding it hard going, caring for them all, so whatever happened, he had to make some changes and find a permanent home elsewhere. He'd been holding off doing anything because of going to Australia.

The lass came running back with the handkerchief, dampened now, and stood to one side watching while her mother cleaned the gravel from the child's knee. The woman waved her daughter off towards the church hall, then attended to the wound. She talked

cheerfully the whole time to distract the injured child, asking her name and where she lived. Such a capable woman, bonny too in a wholesome way, her brown hair cut short and curling in the nape of her neck underneath the brim of her hat. He couldn't imagine Betty doing this sort of thing for a stranger. But he couldn't imagine this woman stirring a men's senses as Betty did, either—or even trying to.

He sucked in his breath on this thought and turned away, striding along the narrow streets to his cousin's house. When he got there, however, he found that her parents-in-law had arrived earlier than usual for Sunday tea. Somehow, today, he couldn't face sitting with them in the front room that Lyddie kept so neat, a room where you hardly dared move in case you knocked over an ornament. He didn't want to make laborious conversation or hear the old couple saying the same things they said every week.

He felt he needed to be free of such restrictions today, free to have a think about his future, so called out, 'I'm going for a walk till it's time to meet the lads, Lyddie love. I only came back for my coat because it's a bit parky outside.' Winter was coming on quickly. He was dreading it. He grabbed his overcoat from the hallstand and was out again before anyone could protest.

In spite of the intermittent showers, he pulled his collar up and went for a brisk walk, heading up to the moors' edge. No time to go further or he'd have enjoyed a real tramp across the tops. He had a lot to consider and always thought better in the open air.

He wasn't giving up. He was going to Australia and getting his own land, whatever it took. He'd never wanted anything as much in his whole life.

\*\*\*

After she'd helped the little girl who'd fallen, Norah decided to go for a walk. She'd spent the last four days shut up in the house, sorting through their possessions. Her

mother had alternately wept and snapped at her, and she'd tried to be patient because it was hard to lose your home and become dependent on your own children, she understood that.

But today Norah reckoned she'd earned a quiet hour to herself, so went to walk briskly round the new park. Only that was too tame, too full of people, so she made her way up the hill to where the wind blew freely across the moors and she didn't have to pretend about anything.

Stopping where the streets ended, she stared wistfully up the narrow track that wound between two farms. Beyond them the moors rolled away into the distance, empty, bare, beautiful. She loved to tramp across the tops, wished she had time to go further now. *Ah, why torment yourself?* she thought. *You can't get away, so you must just paste on a smile and get on with it.*

She turned abruptly, bumping into someone so hard he had to grab her to steady them both.

'Sorry. I wasn't looking where I was going.' As he let go, she looked up at the man, who was righting his cap now. She'd seen him outside the church hall earlier with two lads. It was rare for her to look up at a fellow, because she was tall for a woman. Her husband had been shorter than her.

'That's all right. No harm done.'

He smiled, but the smile was forced and she could see that like her, he was upset about something. The town hall clock struck the hour just then and they both stopped to look down at it over the sloping rows of rooftops.

'Sunday School won't be out for another half-hour,' she said, thinking aloud.

'I saw you taking your daughter there,' he said. 'She looks like you.'

Norah smiled. 'Yes. I hope she doesn't grow as tall as me, though. It's a disadvantage for a woman. I've seen you outside the church a few times with some lads. Your sons?'

'Yes.'

'They look a fine, healthy pair.'

He smiled, his eyes shining with love. 'They are.' As the wind whistled round them, he shivered and rubbed his gloved hands together briskly. 'Best to keep moving in weather like this.'

'Yes.'

'I'll walk back into town with you, if you'd like a bit of company.'

She nodded and he fell into place beside her.

'I don't really need to meet my lads,' he said after a while. 'They're old enough to come home on their own. But we're living with my cousin for the time being and I like to get out of the house as much as possible, to give her a bit of time with her own family. My wife died last year, you see.'

It seemed easy to confide in him in return. 'My husband died early in the war, so I've been on my own for a while. I live in Varley Street at the moment.' She sighed. 'It'll be a wrench to leave it.'

'You're moving?'

'I was living with my parents, but my father's just died. Mum and I can't manage the house on my wages so she's going to live with my sister and I'll have to find lodgings for me and Janie.' She saw him glance at the black armband, which was all the mourning she could afford.

'I'm sorry.'

She shrugged. 'I'll manage. You have to, don't you?'

'You've no other relatives who can take you in?' It was the usual solution.

'No. One sister's taking Mum and the other already has her husband's father living with them.'

There was still ten minutes to go when they arrived back at the chapel, so they walked past it by unspoken consent.

'Shall you look for a house of your own now?' she asked to make conversation.

'I've not decided what to do, yet.'

She shivered and dug her hands into her coat pockets. 'Winter's coming on fast this year.'

'Aye. I'm not fond of the cold weather, not in a town anyway.'

By the time they got back, the scholars were coming out of Sunday school. He waved his sons over, said goodbye and left her.

Nice man, she thought, then forgot him as Janie came out, talking earnestly to another little girl. Janie always had a best friend to cling to, didn't like to do anything on her own. She was a pretty child, and healthy looking, which always pleased Norah.

This was what mattered. Her daughter. Somehow, she'd find a way to make a decent life for the child. Maybe she could take in sewing and work on it in the evenings to earn a bit extra—if they found lodgings with enough room for her sewing machine, that was. The places she'd looked at so far offered only a tiny bedroom and limited access to cooking facilities. She'd have to sell everything to live in such a small place, which upset her. And she hated the thought of living in another woman's house, having to ask to do anything! Absolutely hated it.

*What can't be cured must be endured*, she reminded herself for the umpteenth time, and took Janie's hand, forcing back the unhappy thoughts and talking as cheerfully as

she could manage. Janie had been very close to her granddad and was taking his death and the coming move very badly, clinging to her mother and crying for the slightest thing.

Norah was trying to be patient, but it was hard when she was grieving and upset herself.