

DINEY COSTELOE

*The
Married
Girls*



Chapter 1

The evening sun lay heavy on the fields as Billy Shepherd called goodbye to his parents and took the footpath back to the village and home. Home was no longer Charing Farm, where he'd been born and brought up, but Blackdown House on the edge of the village of Wynsdown. As always, his heart quickened at the thought of his beloved Charlotte waiting there for his return, she and his two children, three-year-old John, named for his grandfather and known as Johnny, and baby Edie, just three months. Every day he walked across the fields to his parents' farm, working with his father as he had ever since he'd left school, and every evening he retraced his steps to find them all waiting.

'I'm home!' he called as he paused in the back porch to take off his boots. The kitchen door opened and his son erupted into his arms.

'Daddy, Daddy, you're back. I done you a picsher. Come and see.' He tugged at his father's hand, trying to pull him to his feet.

'I'm coming, Johnny, I'm coming,' laughed Billy, 'just let me get my boots off. Mummy won't want muddy boots in the kitchen, will she?'

'Mummy's in with Edie. She's giving her some milk. She told me to stay in the kitchen and wait for you.'

‘Well, here I am,’ Billy said as he got to his feet. ‘Now, show me your picture.’

They went together into the kitchen, always the warm centre of the house where the range burned, summer and winter. The kettle was singing softly at the back and Billy, opening up a hotplate, pulled it across, ready to make tea the moment it returned to boiling.

Johnny went to the table and picked up a piece of paper lying amid some crayons. ‘Here it is, Daddy,’ he said proudly, thrusting the paper into Billy’s hand. ‘It’s Mummy and you in the garden.’

Billy perused the two stick figures standing by three huge daisy-like flowers under the rays of a large yellow sun. ‘So it is!’ he agreed warmly. ‘It’s a lovely picture, Johnny. We’ll have to put it up on the wall.’

One wall of the kitchen was already covered in similar pictures, for Johnny was nothing if not prolific. Johnny looked up at it.

‘There isn’t room,’ he said.

‘We can always take down one of the others to make room,’ Billy said.

‘But I don’t want to.’

‘No, I can see that,’ agreed Billy. ‘We’ll have to talk to Mummy about it, see what she thinks, yes?’

Johnny nodded.

‘Good lad,’ smiled Billy. He made the tea and leaving it to brew, said, ‘Let’s go and see how Mummy and Edie are getting on, shall we?’ He took his son’s hand and together they went upstairs to the nursery.

Charlotte was changing Edie when Billy tapped on the door, saying, ‘Can we come in?’

‘Course you can,’ she cried. ‘We’re just finishing, aren’t we,

THE MARRIED GIRLS

darling?’ She looked down into the sleepy face of her daughter. ‘Here, have a cuddle before she falls asleep.’ She got to her feet and passed Edie into Billy’s arms.

‘She’s always asleep,’ Johnny remarked. ‘Why does she sleep all the time?’

Charlotte laughed. ‘Because babies do, darling. They need lots of sleep.’ She gathered Johnny into her arms and gave him a hug. ‘Edie won’t sleep so much when she’s big, like you.’

She looked across at Billy, holding his daughter close against him, his face against the fluff of her hair, and her heart turned over with love for him. Her Billy, so strong and yet so gentle. She was glad that little Johnny looked so like him, his fair curly hair springing in an untidy halo about his head, his eyes a velvety blue. He’d had blue eyes when he was born, and Charlotte had been afraid that they might change as he grew from a baby to toddler. Over the first months they had altered, but remained blue, deepening to almost navy, just like Billy’s.

‘I went to see the vicar this afternoon,’ she told Billy later as, with both children safely tucked up in bed, they sat down at the kitchen table to eat their supper. ‘To sort out Edie’s christening. He would like it to be part of a service and suggests a fortnight on Sunday – that’s a service of Morning Prayer. That way anyone from the village who wants to can be there. I said it sounded fine to me, but that I’d ask you.’

Billy shrugged. He wanted his children christened, but he was not a great church-goer and was happy enough to leave the actual arrangements to Charlotte. ‘Sounds all right to me, as long as it suits Mum and Dad.’

‘I’ll take the children over to see them tomorrow and ask, then I can confirm to the vicar. He wanted to know who her godparents were going to be.’

‘And what did you say?’

‘I said we were going to ask Clare and Caroline to stand as godmothers,’ Charlotte said, ‘but we hadn’t chosen a godfather yet.’ She smiled across at Billy. ‘Who would you like as her godfather?’

‘Don’t know,’ said Billy. ‘Who do you think? What about your uncle Dan?’

Charlotte had thought of Uncle Dan too. He and his wife, Naomi, had taken Charlotte into their home when she arrived in London as a refugee from the Nazis, in 1939. They had looked after her and helped her adjust to her new life in an foreign country. They had lost touch with each other during the Blitz, when Charlotte had been evacuated to Wynsdown, but after the war they had been reunited and Dan had been proud, as her foster father, to give Charlotte away when she married Billy in Wynsdown village church.

‘D’you think they’d come down?’ she wondered. ‘It’d be lovely to see them all.’

‘Why don’t you ring them and ask?’

Charlotte beamed at him. ‘You’re right! I’ll phone as soon as we’ve finished supper. But,’ she continued, ‘that’s not my only bit of news. After I’d seen the vicar, Mrs Vicar asked us to stay for a cup of tea.’

During the war, the evacuees from London, uncertain of how to address Avril Swanson, the vicar’s wife, had called her Mrs Vicar. The nickname had stuck and now most of Wynsdown used it and despite the closeness that had grown up between them over the years, Charlotte never called her anything else.

‘She was telling me all about Caroline’s wedding,’ she went on. ‘Caroline’s coming down to live at the vicarage for three weeks before her big day. Anyhow, we were sitting in the

vicarage kitchen drinking our tea when Mrs Bellinger arrived. She'd come to see Mrs Vicar and was absolutely bursting with news.'

'So, what's up?'

'Her son, Felix, rang last night. He's got engaged and he's bringing his fiancée to meet his parents in a few weeks. She's called Daphne.'

'Are they pleased?' Billy asked.

'Difficult to say,' Charlotte said. 'Of course she'd come to tell Mrs Vicar. She wasn't expecting me to be there, so really all she said was that Felix had got engaged and would be coming down soon. I got the impression it was a total surprise, that she and the squire weren't sure what to think. They don't seem to have known anything about her. Anyway, I brought the children away, so's she could talk to Mrs Vicar properly.'

'It's probably a good thing,' Billy said now as he pushed his empty plate away. 'Squire's not getting any younger and Felix should be coming home to take over some of the responsibility for the estate. He's been away too long.'

'I don't think I've ever seen him,' Charlotte said. 'He's hardly come home since I've been in the village.'

'Well, you haven't missed much,' said Billy dismissively. Billy had only a distant interest in Felix Bellinger. Though they had grown up in the same village, the ten-year difference in their ages had meant that Billy was still a child when Felix had left his boarding school in Sherborne and gone up to Cambridge; and the only time their paths really crossed was just before the war when they rode to hounds with the local hunt.

During the war, Felix had been a fighter pilot in the RAF, scrambled night after night to take on the bombers coming in waves across the coast heading first for the RAF bases and

later for London and other major cities. Miraculously, to the overwhelming relief of his parents, he had survived. So many others in his squadron had not and when peace broke out, he didn't want to return to Somerset to vegetate, as he put it. He knew he would miss the buzz, the excitement and the camaraderie of the RAF, so he'd signed on again and been posted to an air base in Germany. More recently he returned to work at the Air Ministry in London. He had been home on leave for a few days once or twice, but apart from when he was out riding with his father, he was seldom seen about the village.

'They'll be so pleased that he's coming home, even for a short visit,' Charlotte said. 'I wonder what this Daphne'll be like?'

Billy laughed. 'Charlotte Shepherd! You're getting as bad as everyone else in this village! Always wanting to know everyone else's business.'

'I am not,' Charlotte replied hotly. 'But if Johnny was bringing home a fiancée, I bet everyone would be watching to see what she was like.'

'Johnny's only three,' said Billy, still laughing. 'We'll worry about that when the time comes! Now,' he went on, 'I've got news for you. Jane phoned today and says she's got a few days off, so she's coming home for the weekend. Mum's asked us all over for Sunday dinner. I said yes, OK?'

'Of course,' said Charlotte. 'That'll be lovely.' She was fond of her in-laws, though she still didn't feel she knew Billy's sister, Jane, very well. She was a nurse and lived in Bristol. On occasional weekends she caught the bus home to visit, but her life was in the city now and they hadn't become close. In truth, Charlotte found her rather opinionated, always ready to give advice whether it was asked for or not. She had

THE MARRIED GIRLS

been pleased when they'd asked her to be Johnny's godmother but seemed to think it gave her the right to tell Charlotte how to look after him and Charlotte found her very wearing.

Still, she thought, Johnny'll be pleased to see her and it's only for half a day. I can bite my tongue for that long!

When Charlotte had left the vicarage, Marjorie Bellinger took the chance of having a heart-to-heart chat with Avril Swanson. Avril was the only person Marjorie felt she could confide in. As the wife of the squire she felt she had a position to maintain in the village, and couldn't open her heart to just anyone. Gossip was rife in such a small community and she didn't want her family to become the latest topic of conversation. Everyone would soon know about Felix's engagement, but they needn't know of his parents' doubts about his choice of bride. Avril, however, was different and Marjorie knew that anything she told her would go no further, or at least no further than David. The vicarage was never a source of gossip.

Marjorie's husband Peter was never one to speak of emotional things and it was a relief for her to unburden her worries to Avril.

'We've never met this Daphne,' she told her. 'We don't know who she is or who her people are. All we know is that Felix first met her during the war and then again when he was posted to the Air Ministry.'

'It sounds as if she moves in the right circles,' Avril said reassuringly. 'I mean, if he met her at the Air Ministry.' She smiled across at Marjorie who looked anything but reassured. 'Marjorie, if Felix loves her I'm sure you will, too, once you get to know her.'

'I certainly hope so,' sighed Marjorie. 'The thing is, we haven't seen Felix himself for nearly six months and that was in London last time he was on leave. He doesn't really talk to us these days.'

'When are they planning to get married?' asked Avril. 'And where? Wherever Daphne lives, I suppose.'

'That's the other thing. They're not having a church wedding at all, they're getting married in London at Chelsea Town Hall. Felix says Daphne isn't close to her family, so it'll only be a small wedding. Peter suggested that they got married down here, but Felix said no, that the wedding would be in the next month and it was easier to arrange it in London where they both live.' She looked across at Avril with a stricken face. 'You don't think... well, I mean... you don't think that they have to... You know, do you?'

'No,' cried Avril, shaking her head even as she'd been wondering that very thing. 'I doubt that very much.'

Marjorie nodded. 'You're right, of course. I expect it's to do with his leave.'

'Well, you're going to meet her very soon,' Avril reminded her, 'which'll set your mind at rest.'

'I don't think it will,' she said to David later as they sat over the remains of supper in the kitchen. 'Poor Marjorie! It's too bad of Felix to spring it on them like this, she's very upset.'

'So, she and Peter have got to go up to London for the wedding,' David said. 'I'd have thought they'd enjoy the trip.'

'Oh, I don't think it's the going up to London that worries them, that's easy enough on the train. No, it's the fact that they'd never heard of this girl before Felix announced that he was going to marry her. Poor Marjorie is afraid that she's in the family way, which would account for all the haste.'

'Well, if she is, she won't be the first to hurry up the aisle to

stop the child from being a bastard,' David grinned ruefully, 'and she surely won't be the last. If it is the case,' he went on, 'at least Felix is doing the decent thing and standing by her.'

'I suppose so,' Avril agreed. 'But there isn't any aisle, it's a register office wedding, and that certainly isn't how the Bellingers thought their only son, well, their only child, would get married. They've hardly seen him since the end of the war, and all the time they've been waiting for him to leave the RAF and come home to help Peter run the estate, but he hasn't. Everything's different and naturally they're disappointed.'

'The war changed lots of things,' David pointed out. 'Duty has become an unfashionable word. People are viewing life differently. Look at the number of divorces there are now. With men being away during the war, some women have found solace elsewhere and when their husbands have come home, they've been less than welcome. And then there are the women who've been widowed and left on their own, struggling to bring up small children; people are morally less scrupulous than they were. They tend to seize the day and damn the consequences, and after what many of them have been through, who can blame them?'

'Don't you blame them?' asked his wife. 'Surely you must think it's wrong.'

'I do think it's wrong,' David agreed, 'of course it's wrong, but I try not to judge people. That's not my job and never has been.' He got to his feet. 'I need to spend an hour in my study before we go to bed,' he said. 'By the way, when's Caro coming down?'

'She'll be here on Friday evening,' Avril answered with a smile. 'I can't wait to see her and discuss all her plans.'

David laughed. 'Well,' he said, 'at least *you've* got a wedding here to look forward to.'

When he'd disappeared into his study, Avril cleared the table and washed up, but as she did so, her mind was far from the dishes in the sink. She was thinking about her sister, soon to marry the local doctor and coming to live in the village.

How lovely it'll be, she thought, to have Caroline so close. Goodness knows, they've taken long enough to get round to it.

It was clear that they'd fallen in love, but Avril had been beginning to despair of confirmed bachelor, Henry Masters, the village doctor, ever coming to the point. But at last he had, and Caroline had finally given in her notice at the London children's home where she'd worked for so long.

Charlotte had been pleased too, when she heard that Caroline was moving down to Wynsdown at last. Though she had only been thirteen when she first met Caroline, as Charlotte had grown up and they'd worked together at the Livingston Road children's home in the latter part of the war, they had become very fond of each other and the twelve years that separated them slipped away to nothing. They had cemented a lasting friendship and Charlotte had been sorely missed by Caroline when she'd moved back to Somerset to marry Billy.

First published in the UK in 2017 by Head of Zeus, Ltd.

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9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781784976125

ISBN (XTPB): 9781784976132

ISBN (E): 9781784976118

Typeset by Adrian McLaughlin

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

Head of Zeus Ltd
First Floor East
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

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