Letters from the lighthouse - pages 65 to 73

Questions are at the end of the chapter.

# LEND A HAND ON THE LAND

‘Breakfast is for time-wasters. We’ve got work to do,’ Queenie announced the next morning.

She’d woken us so early it wasn’t yet light, and we were standing in the post office, washed and dressed and bleary-eyed, wondering what the heck was going on. After a restless night considering Sukie’s note, I decided to speak to Queenie as soon as I could. First, though, we simply *had* to eat.

‘Don’t worry, we can eat breakfast in two minutes flat,’ I reassured her.

‘Less than two minutes,’ added Cliff.

But there was no sign of breakfast. Not even a cup of tea. Queenie, I decided, was in league with the enemy. No one British would starve children like this. As for time-wasting, I wasn’t sure how she’d tell: the clock on the wall above the counter said ten past two, and was as dead as a doorknob.

Yet, despite my reservations about Queenie, the shop itself looked normal. Rows of pigeonhole-type shelves to hold mail lined the walls. On the counter sat enormous weighing scales, and a box displaying hair combs for sale. It was the sort of place that sold anything and everything. The stock stood at the very front of the shelves, hiding the empty space behind. There were tins: shoe polish, peas, pilchards. Packets of soap flakes, dried beans, broken biscuits by the bag, and – I gulped hungrily – a glass-domed cake stand. On it were currant buns, yesterday’s at least by the looks of them. As Cliff ambled over to inspect the buns, I seized my chance.

‘I need to talk to you, Queenie,’ I said, dropping my voice. ‘About my sister. She’s got a boyfriend and I think they might’ve been planning to run away and—’

‘Good grief!’ Queenie interrupted sharply. ‘Don’t tell me Gloria is sending *her* here too?’

‘What?’ I was confused. ‘No, I didn’t mean—’

‘All right, one each,’ she called to Cliff who, having lifted the dome off the cake stand, now had Queenie’s full attention.

I wanted to ask her what she’d meant about Sukie – it was an odd remark to make about a friend. But the buns took over. True to our word they didn’t last two minutes.

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That morning I started my delivery job. In daylight, Budmouth Point looked prettier than I’d supposed – it wasn’t a *dump* like Esther had said. There was a school, a church, a baker’s shop, rows of little white cottages set into the hillside. Most of the larger houses were on the main street, which ran steeply down to a harbour. Beyond it, perched at the end of a long, cobbled wall, was the lighthouse.

I was to take groceries and post to those who, for whatever reason, couldn’t collect it themselves. Cliff, being younger – and weedier – was to help serve customers in the shop. Queenie made him wear an apron that fell to his ankles, while I had to carry a leather delivery bag. She told us that though today was our first day she’d expect us to be as quick as the Jenson boys had been because customers shouldn’t be kept waiting.

Before I went, she gave me two extra bits of advice. The first was: ‘Ignore people if they stare. It’s the Budmouth way. I’ve lived here all my life and they still gawp at me like I’m an intruder.’

I wondered if it had more to do with her sweaters.

‘And,’ she added, ‘if you’ve ever reason to be on the beach, don’t go past the last groyne.’ She meant one of those wooden fence things that ran out into the sea.

‘Why not?’ Cliff asked.

‘Quicksands. They’ll swallow you whole before you’ve a chance to even scream. It’s a far worse death than drowning in the sea, so people say.’

Cliff’s eyes went owl-wide. ‘Wow!’ As he turned to me, I guessed what he was about to ask.

‘No, we’re not going down there. Don’t even think about it,’ I told him very firmly.

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Delivering was surprisingly hard work. By the end of the first day my calf muscles ached like mad, but it was a great way to get to know the layout of the village. At supper – bread and dripping, only one slice each – Queenie told me I was indeed as fast as the Jenson boys. Then she left us to clear away, so I didn’t get the chance to ask about Sukie.

After we’d done the dishes, and were up in the attic by ourselves, I decided to show Cliff the coded note. We were sitting cross-legged on my bed. It was dark by then and the torch batteries were on the blink, but we could just about see the numbers and letters on the page. Cliff bent over the note eagerly, though it gave me a bad feeling, seeing it again, because I was sure it had something to do with Sukie’s disappearance.

‘Tatty, isn’t it?’ Cliff remarked.

‘It got wet in the air raid,’ I explained. ‘What d’you think it says?’

‘It’s not another love letter, is it?’ he said, holding it at arm’s length.

‘It’s a funny sort of love letter if it is,’ I remarked.

‘Well, it’s not telephone numbers?’ he said. ‘Or place names?’

I didn’t think so. Really Cliff had no more of an idea than I did.

‘It’s probably just a silly joke she had with one of her friends,’ I decided. Taking the note from him, I hid it at the very back of my sock drawer, though that didn’t stop it troubling me.

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‘You’ve an extra delivery today,’ Queenie told me on Friday, slipping a small package into the bag. ‘Chicken for Mrs Drummond at 4 Salters Terrace. Tell her it’s all I could get, though it might not be right.’

‘That’s at the very top of the village, isn’t it?’ I asked, just to check.

As the week had gone on, I’d got to know my way round the back lanes and cut-throughs. I had the sense Queenie was getting used to us too. Begrudgingly – and rather badly – she’d even started to cook for us. Yet apart from mealtimes, I didn’t see that much of her. She’d either be in the shop or down in the cellar. When I tried asking about my sister, she’d stare at me blankly as if she’d forgotten who Sukie was. Other times, she’d cut across me with some delivery detail or job that needed doing.

That Friday morning was a case in point: ‘Mrs Drummond’ll need to return yesterday’s bacon, all right? Dr Morrison’s housekeeper says she’ll have it on her meat ration, so if you could take it there, please.’

Not wanting to carry it all the way round, I left Mrs Drummond’s delivery until almost last.

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The hill leading up from the village was long and steep but well worth the climb. The view to the sea was spectacular from up here, and I walked the final steps backwards just to savour it. The lighthouse, painted in red and white stripes, looked like something from a fairground. Even without its light on, it stood out for miles against the grey rocks and dark sea. But then, I supposed, that was the idea, which was why recently the German pilots had taken a liking to it.

As they often did when I was tired, my thoughts took a funny turn. Perhaps, like the lighthouse, there were people who were meant to stand out, who were made to be noticed and make a difference.

It brought me *slap-bang* to Sukie.

All week I’d savoured doing the delivery round as a time when my brain went blissfully blank. And yet back at Queenie’s I’d looked at Sukie’s note so many times the paper was wearing thin. It had to be a secret of some sort: why else would it be written in code?

I’d no idea.

My sister had liked raspberry jam on toast, and left long brown hairs in our sink that blocked the plughole. She’d slept late on Saturdays. Turned the wireless up loud when a dance tune came on. But when I thought of her now, it was like there was this whole other Sukie I didn’t know, and it frightened me.

Taking a deep breath, I turned away from the sea. Salters Terrace was easy to spot: it was the last row of stone cottages in Budmouth Point. To my surprise – and dismay – standing outside number 4 was Esther Jenkins.

She was leaning against the wall, one leg tucked up behind her. Her face was blotchy like she’d been crying again. I wanted to ask if she was all right, but she looked so awfully fierce, I didn’t have the nerve.

‘Can you give this to Mrs Drummond, please?’ I asked, hating how small I sounded. I held out the parcel of chicken.

‘Give it to her yourself,’ Esther said flatly. ‘The old witch is inside.’

I stared at her, appalled but a little bit impressed. Then I noticed the suitcase on the doorstep, a school blazer and hat slung across it.

‘Are you staying here?’ I asked.

‘Not if I can help it, no.’ Snatching up her things, Esther disappeared off down the hill.

Mrs Drummond came to the door almost straight away. I recognised her from the village hall the other night; she was the woman who’d stayed with Esther while she cried.

‘That girl is *impossible*!’ she sighed, gazing past me into the street. ‘Where’s she gone? Did you see her?’

‘Umm … she just went off.’ I wasn’t sure what else to say. ‘Here’s your delivery from the shop. And Queenie says can you return yesterday’s bacon?’

‘Right you are. ’Tis a shame to waste it.’ Taking the chicken, she turned to go back inside for the bacon. But something caught her attention and she froze.

‘Listen to that,’ she said, finger raised. ‘Planes.’

I frowned. ‘*Planes?* What, like *aeroplanes*?’

‘German ones, I’ll bet you, on their way to bomb poor Plymouth again.’

Mrs Drummond was right. There, on the wind, was the unmistakable drone of aircraft. A familiar dread grew in the pit of my stomach.

‘I’d better go,’ I said and hurried away, anxious to find Cliff.

Q1. Why does Olive say Budmouth Point is ‘prettier than I’d supposed’?

Q2. Why had the German pilots taken ‘a liking to’ the lighthouse?

Q3. Given what you know about Esther Jenkins, how do you think her relationship with Olive will develop throughout the book?