



As George approached, Spud shot up from the pile of dirty straw he was lying on and backed trembling into the corner.

'It's all right, boy. It's only me. Here you go.' George set the lid on the ground and sank down beside him. Giving his hands another quick wipe, he pulled the envelope out of his pocket and turned it over. The flap hadn't been sealed properly on one side. He wavered for a moment, then, poking a finger into the gap, slowly, surely he worked it free. Hands shaking, he slid out the piece of flimsy white paper inside. As he unfolded it, a ten-bob note fluttered out and landed in his lap. He gasped. What was Charlie doing sending Bill Jarvis a whole wodge of money like this? He picked it up and stared at it, then turned his gaze back

to the letter. It was dated Monday 2 September. Four days ago.

He took a breath and began to read:

Dear Mr Jarvis,

*I'll be finished with my training at the end of this week. I was hoping to get a pair to come and see George, but it looks like they'll be sending me off up to fight the Terries just as soon as I'm done.*

*This may be the last time I can write for a while - I'm expecting to be kept pretty busy up there - so I thought I should send you some more money for his keep. Hopefully it'll be enough to take him over for the time being. And I've got a bit more put by for him too, if the worst happens...*

*Well, it's light's out now so I'll sign off, but if you could pass a message on to George for me I'd be grateful. Tell him I love him. And tell him to be sure and keep the promise he made. He'll know what I mean.*

*And thank you again for agreeing to take him in. It means a lot, being so close to each other, even if I haven't managed to get across and pay him a visit yet.*

*Yours sincerely*

*Charlie Penny*

George dropped the letter and slumped back against a bale of prickly straw. It felt like someone had punched a

hole in his stomach and filled it full of stones. *'If the worst happens'* He knew what that meant. It meant Charlie being shot down over the sea and drowning; or crash-landing and his plane exploding in a ball of flames. Or else his parachute not opening properly and . . . The old familiar tightness gripped his chest. He did what Charlie had showed him, taking deep breaths, holding them for a count of five and blowing them out again slowly until it began to fade.

He couldn't let himself think like that. Charlie was relying on him. That's what the promise was about, wasn't it? Why Charlie had asked Bill Jarvis to remind him.

He slipped his hand in his trouser pocket and pulled out the ring. As he held it up, a sliver of light from a knot-hole caught the letters engraved on it, making them pulse with a sudden gold fire:

*Together Always*

It was what Mum and Dad had promised each other on their wedding day: Charlie had told him that when he'd given the ring to him, the day he'd left for his basic training – nearly a year ago now. George closed his eyes and let the scene come flooding back.

They were on the platform at Liverpool Street station, waiting for Charlie's train to leave. It was crowded out with all sorts: city gents in suits and bowler hats striding off to work; soldiers kissing their wives and sweethearts

goodbye; crocodiles of evacuee kids following their teachers, each with a gas-mask box strapped across their chest, a luggage label tied to their coat and a small suitcase or pillow-case with their belongings in it, clutched in their hand – all of them being sent off to live with strangers in the country.

By rights George should have been one of them, but he'd refused to go, saying he'd only leave London if he could be close to Charlie. And in the end Charlie had caved in and arranged for him to stay with their neighbour, old Mrs Jenkins, until he could find a place for him near the airbase – though it'd taken a lot longer than either of them had thought.

As the crowds milled around them, Charlie looked down at George and frowned.

'It don't feel right leaving you, Georgie, but you understand, don't you? I've got to do my bit to try and stop old Adolf, or life won't be worth living.'

George bit down on his lip and nodded. He was trying his best to be brave but it was hard . . .

'Good lad. I'll write once a week, and come back and see you every leave too. And don't go giving Mrs Jenkins any grief, will you? It's good of her to take you in.' He glanced back to where their elderly neighbour stood at the entrance to the platform and raised a hand.

A whistle shrilled. Doors slammed. People began to shout their farewells.

Charlie ruffled George's hair. 'Nearly time, Georgie. Here, look. I've got something for you.' He fished a small

leather-covered box out of his coat pocket and lifted the lid to reveal a pair of gold rings nestled against each other on the black velvet cloth inside.

George frowned.

Mum and Dad's wedding rings. The coppers gave them to me after the accident. I didn't tell you before cos, well, I thought it would upset you.' Charlie blinked and puffed out a breath. 'But I reckon you're old enough now.' He picked up the smaller of the two rings and showed George the inscription. Then, pressing it into his hand, he fixed him with a steady gaze. 'Keep it safe, George, and I'll come back to you, whatever happens.' He took the second ring out of the box, slid it on to the middle finger of his right hand and tipped it towards George. 'D'you swear?'

George curled his fingers round his ring and touched it to Charlie's. 'I swear!'

Charlie nodded. He drew in a breath and pulled George to him, holding him tight; so tight one of his buttons spiked George's cheek. But it didn't matter. Nothing mattered except Charlie staying safe.

The whistle sounded again. Charlie pushed him gently away. 'I'd best get going. Don't forget now, Georgie.' He held up his finger so the ring caught the light. Flashing George a quick smile, he picked up his bag and jumped on board the train. As he turned round to wave, there was a sharp hiss of steam and a juddering clank. The train lurched forwards and the crowd surged towards it, blocking him from view. By the time George had managed to elbow his way up to the front, it was too late. The train had

already left the platform and was snaking away out of sight down the track...

Something wet and whiskey nuzzled the back of George's hand. He blinked and lifted his head. A pair of brown eyes shone back at him from the gloom.

'Sorry, boy.' He ran his fingers through Spud's fur and gazed at the ring again. He'd make sure and keep it safe, just like he'd promised; then Charlie would be safe too. He swallowed hard. If only he could see him. Wish him luck before his first mission.

A sudden thought flashed into his head. He could go now. What was stopping him? The airbase was only about three miles from here - Charlie had told him that. He'd follow the road into town and ask for directions from there. And he'd take his things too. Because Charlie wouldn't want him to come back here. Not when he told him how awful Bill Jarvis was.

His stomach fizzed with excitement. He tucked the letter and money back in the envelope and stuffed it in his pocket with the ring.

'Stay there, boy, I'll be back in a minute.' Pating Spud on the head, George jumped up and ran out into the yard. He was heading round to the cottage when a winged shadow fell across the ground in front of him. He stopped in his tracks and glanced up, squinting against the sun. It looked like one of them crows Bill Jarvis was always taking potshots at, except bigger. Much bigger. Lucky for the bird Jarvis wasn't around or he'd probably blast it out of the sky

and hang it from a fence post like all the others. He shivered at the memory of the lines of black feathered carcasses rotting in the sun.

When he reached the cottage, he pushed open the door and stepped into the dark, grimy kitchen. His stomach rumbled at the smell of fried onions from last night's dinner. He'd had nothing to eat since then, apart from a bit of stale bread and dripping at breakfast. But there was no time to worry about food now.

He hurried into the passage and up the stairs to the tiny cupboard of a room he'd been sleeping in since he'd first got here, what seemed like a lifetime ago. Yanking his knapsack out from under the bed, he stuffed his spare underwear, pyjamas and identity card inside it.

He was about to go when he spotted the dog-eared cover of the cigarette card album poking out from beneath his pillow. He couldn't leave that behind: Charlie had sent it to him last month for his thirteenth birthday, together with a whole bunch of cards – 'Planes of the Royal Air Force' – to stick inside it. It was the only present he'd got; that and a clip round the ear from Bill Jarvis for being late collecting the eggs.

George scooped up the album and leafed through the pages of brightly coloured cards. There were pictures of a Hawker Hurricane, a Blackburn 'Sku' dive-bomber and a Wellington. Not forgetting his favourite. He stared down at the card showing the Mark I Supermarine Spitfire, then lifted up the album and buried his nose in the pages. The cards gave off the same sweet smell as the tobacco Charlie

used to roll his own. A lump rose in George's throat. He missed his brother so much. But at least he'd see him now. If they let him on to the airbase ...

Sliding the album inside his knapsack, he headed downstairs and back out round to the barn. 'Come on, boy, let's get out of here.' He tied a loop in a piece of old rope, slipped it gently over Spud's head and led him out into the yard.

He paused for a moment to glance about him. He wouldn't miss this place one little bit. He'd had his fill of cleaning out stinky pigsties, shovelling manure and getting pecked to bits by bad-tempered hens. And he never wanted to see another potato as long as he lived. Wherever he went next, one thing was certain; it wasn't going to be a smelly old farm. Giving a quick tug on Spud's makeshift lead, he strode out through the gate and set off in the direction of town.

It was as the crossroads came into view that he saw the pony and cart. They were in the shade of a clump of trees a little before where the track divided. George's heart did a quick somersault. There was no way Jarvis could've got into town and back. Not in that time. But where was he? He glanced about him. There was no sign. He puffed out a breath and tugged on Spud's lead again. The sooner they got past the cart and on to the main road the better.

As they slid alongside it, the pony jerked its head round and bared its chipped yellow teeth.

George froze, then slowly held out a hand. 'It's all right, horsey. It's only us.'

The animal stared at them uncertainly for a moment, then gave a loud snort and went back to munching on a clump of dusty-looking grass at the side of the track.

George and Spud hurried on. They had reached the junction and were about to dash across it when Spud jolted to a sudden stop.

'What is it, boy?' George followed, his gaze down the left-hand fork. And then he saw them too: Jarvis and another man, standing some distance off in the shadows beneath a bank of trees, hunched over what looked like a sack of potatoes. Jarvis had his back to them. The other man, who was a head or two taller, stood side-on, his fair hair and pale, hollow-checked face lit by a shaft of sunlight shining through the branches above their heads.

George's stomach clenched. They had to get out of sight and quick. Clamping a hand over Spud's quivering snout, he yanked him behind a nearby bush and peered back through the leaves.

Jarvis had picked up the sack and was holding out his right hand. The younger man cast about him, as if checking the coast was clear. Reaching inside the heavy-looking black overcoat he was wearing, he dropped a handful of coins into Jarvis's outstretched palm. Jarvis shoved the sack at him with a grunt and began to count the money.

Instead of waiting for him to finish, his companion hoisted the sack over his shoulder and set off at a brisk march away round the bend.

George frowned. Who was he and what was he dressed like that for when it was such a scorcher? Unless ... maybe

he was one of those Home Guard types the postman had mentioned, camped out on some kind of secret training exercise. He shook his head. Whoever he was, he'd got to be desperate, buying a bunch of rotten potatoes off Bill Jarvis.

He glanced back at Jarvis. He was busy pocketing the coins. Any minute now he'd turn round and come marching towards them. His stomach gripped again. Time to get out of here, while they still had the chance.

He tugged on the rope. But Spud stood there shivering, eyes wide with fear.

George pulled on the rope again. Still Spud refused to budge.

'Come on, boy, or it'll be too late.'

As he spoke the words, a shadow fell across them, blotting out the light.

'Too late fer what?'