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Opening Extract from...

AN ORPHAN'S WAR

Written by Molly Green

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MOLLY GREEN has travelled the world, unpacking her suitcase in a score of countries. On returning to England, Molly decided to pursue her life-long passion for writing. She now lives and writes in Kent. Following her debut novel, *An Orphan in the Snow*, this is the second book in a series set in Liverpool during the Second World War.

Also by Molly Green

An Orphan in the Snow

An
Orphan's
War

MOLLY
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For the five nurses who were killed on 10th September 1940 when a bomb completely destroyed the Nurses' Wing at St Thomas' Hospital (I have changed their names in the novel).

To all Dr Barnardo's children during the Second World War who were the inspiration for this series.

Lastly, to all those who served in the RAF's Coastal Command.

Chapter One

Liverpool, September 1939

Three days after war was declared, Maxine Grey walked slowly down the aisle, her fingers nervously gripping her father's rigid arm, towards the man she had promised to marry – her best friend, Johnny Taylor. In spite of the bad luck she'd warned him it would bring, Johnny had turned at her entrance, and now he gave her his wide smile and a cheeky wink. She knew it was meant to reassure her, but if anything it made her more conscious of the huge step she was taking. The strident notes of 'Here Comes the Bride' from the organist almost took her by surprise, making her pause, her ears hum. She pulled in a deep breath to slow down her heartbeat. Her father gave her a quick glance and patted her hand.

She could hear the swish of the satin-like material of her dress; feel it catch at the back of her legs with every stride. It had taken her a month of evenings and half-days off from the hospital to make the simple cream dress which swept the floor, and the little matching cropped jacket, from a McCall's pattern – the same amount of time Johnny had given her when he'd persuaded her they should get married. There was definitely going to be a war, he'd said,

and it would probably come sooner rather than later. She swallowed. How right he'd been.

Another step, then another, and another. She took a deep breath but the scent of the flowers left over from last Sunday's service was cloying and she pulled her stomach in tight to stop herself from feeling faint. A final step. She'd reached him. Her father nudged her forward and a little to the right where Johnny stood waiting for her, watching her every movement. His smile had faded now as if it had finally dawned on him too that this was a serious event. How different he looked in his grey suit. Older. Not like her Johnny.

Her fingers reluctantly left her father's arm and she was alone. But of course, she wasn't alone. Johnny was here. They were going to be married. Every bride was nervous on her wedding day, so her mother had said when they'd shared a pot of tea that morning. It was to be expected. She wasn't to worry. Johnny was a good boy. He'd always look after her, her mother had said.

'Johnny's who we always wanted for you, Maxine. Your dad's so happy. He can die in peace knowing he's left you in good hands.'

It was no secret that her dad had a dicky heart. Oh, he probably had another year or two left, Dr Turnbull had assured them – maybe more – but he'd encouraged the family to enjoy as much time together as possible. And now she was leaving him in the hands of her mother who constantly fussed over him, making him feel closer to death's door than he probably was.

She took her place next to Johnny, her shoulder only inches away from his, and tried to draw his easy confidence into her own body, now taut with the thought of the unknown.

As the vicar started to address the congregation, Johnny turned towards her and Maxine noticed the same concerned expression he'd had only a few weeks ago, when they were sitting on their favourite park bench feeding the pigeons.

'I've got something to tell you, Max,' he'd said then. 'I'm joining the army. I think I can be of use with my medical training.'

At his words her heart had turned over. Johnny. If anything should happen to him . . . She daren't think further.

'So what say you and I get hitched?' He'd coated the words with a mock-American accent. It had taken her completely by surprise. Yes, she loved him. More than anyone in the world. He was the one she'd run to since she was a little girl, right from when he and his parents had moved next door but one. Being a boy of eleven, he hadn't wanted to be bothered with an eight-year-old, and a girl at that, but she'd badgered him until he'd sometimes nodded and allowed her to accompany him when he went off bird-watching, or climbed trees in the nearby woods. Best of all she loved it when he'd take her down to the docks. She'd hand over her pocket money to Johnny and they'd go a couple of stations on the 'Dockers' Umbrella', the overhead railway which followed the seven miles of docklands. She could have watched the ships come and go for hours, her eyes stretching all the way across the Mersey. Luckily, he was every bit as fascinated and would tell her where the ships had come from and where they were going.

He'd always been her teacher and her 'bestest' friend, as she used to call him when she was a child – sometimes still did, to make him laugh – but her lover? She'd never once thought of him in that way, and had suddenly felt almost embarrassed when he'd made his proposal.

'You've been watching too many cowboy films,' she'd

answered, trying to make light of his clumsy proposal, not wanting to hurt him by saying she didn't think she loved him in the way a wife should love her husband. She saw his face drop.

'You do love me, don't you?' As if he'd read her mind, he'd grabbed both her hands and planted a firm kiss on her lips, then grinned at her. 'You always said you'd marry me when you grew up.'

'It's what children say to one another.' Maxine had bitten her lip. 'Why don't we wait and see what happens. If there really *is* going to be a war—'

'Not "if" but "when",' Johnny had said, his grin fading. 'And if the worst should happen—'

'Don't say it!' Maxine jumped up. 'Don't tempt fate.'

'We have to be realistic.' Johnny took hold of her hand and gently pulled her back onto the seat again. 'If it does, then at least you'll get a pension as a soldier's widow. And if we start a family – which I'd love more than anything in the world – you'll be glad of the extra money for the baby.'

She couldn't answer. Didn't want to think beyond Johnny becoming a soldier. He was closer to her than her own flesh and blood. Mickey had never taken any interest in her whatsoever, even though there was only thirteen months between them. That was the trouble. Johnny was the brother she'd never had.

For a moment neither had spoken. Then he'd taken her chin in his hand and turned her face towards him.

'I love you so much, Max,' Johnny said, his voice thick. 'Right from when you were a snotty-nosed kid. I'd do anything for you – you know that. And because I'm older you've usually left me to make the decisions – so I'm making *this* one for you. You'll make me the happiest man in town

and the envy of all the lads if you say yes.’ He looked at her, his eyes the colour of the conkers they used to play with. ‘Maybe this will help make up your mind.’ He drew from his pocket a small navy blue velvet box.

And then she knew. Before he’d even flipped open the lid on its little spring with his thumb, she knew she couldn’t turn him down. He was quite the dearest man on Earth. If there was a war and he died she’d never forgive herself for not making him happy by telling him she would be honoured to be his wife.

The emerald had shone back at her, as though to reinforce her thoughts.

She hadn’t the heart to tell him that emeralds were considered to bring bad luck.

‘Do you, Maxine Elizabeth, take John Laurence to be thy wedded husband?’

The words rang in Maxine’s ears and she gave a start, pulling herself out of the past and back to the church where she was getting married. Forcing herself to be calm, she repeated the words of the vicar as though in a dream, her voice low and trembling. She felt the brush of Johnny’s hand, and when he said his vows she realised he wasn’t quite so assured as he made out. Twice he stumbled on the words and sent her a rueful smile, but when it was over he grasped her hand and they stepped to the back of the altar where they signed the register.

She looked down at her signature. Strange how it was still Maxine Grey. But it would be the last time. From now on she would be known as Mrs Maxine Taylor. And on letters even worse – she would be Mrs *John* Taylor.

Would Maxine Grey be gone forever?

* * *

‘Now we’re married you won’t have to work anymore.’

Maxine regarded her new husband with astonishment. Breaking away from the small party the two sets of parents had given them had proved more difficult than she’d imagined, but now they were in a comfortable bedroom in The Royal Hotel, which Johnny had chosen for their first three nights together. He’d already had his call-up papers and would be leaving in four days. Maxine’s mind whirled with events that were racing ahead. He’d never mentioned her giving up work before. She hadn’t even thought to discuss it as she’d never imagined marrying him. During this past month she’d seen very little of her fiancé to talk about such matters, what with making the wedding dress in every spare moment she’d had from the hospital. Now that war had been officially declared she’d naturally assumed she’d carry on and finish her training.

Her mother had wanted her to become a nurse ever since she’d watched her bandaging her dolls one day and talking to them in a wise and encouraging seven-year-old voice.

‘You’re a born nurse,’ her mother always said.

At sixteen Maxine knew she wanted to teach, not nurse, but her father had insisted she stay on at grammar school for at least another year to give her time to make up her mind. When she was eighteen and told her parents she had applied to the teachers’ training college in Cambridge which specialised in teaching young children with no fathers, her mother put her foot down.

‘It’s a more important job to heal the sick,’ her mother told her. ‘Your father and I have set our hearts on you becoming a nurse . . . and one day, when you’re higher up in the hospital, you’ll catch the eye of a nice doctor – or even a surgeon,’ she laughed. ‘I can’t wait to help you arrange the wedding.’ She giggled like a young girl. ‘You’ll be set for

life . . . and one day we'll be able to look forward to our first grandchild.'

Maxine couldn't answer. Her mother gave her a sharp look. 'I know you'll always make us proud, my dear, and always do the right thing.'

Maxine felt a shudder of despair. Her mother had already planned every important aspect of her life.

'We're going to do everything in our power to see that you're trained in the best hospital,' her mother went on. 'We've decided you're going to The Royal Infirmary, right here in Liverpool, so you can come and see us regularly. You'll make us so proud.'

Maxine's heart had plummeted. Her mother's dream wasn't *her* dream. But they'd been so good to her, sending her to grammar school when they could ill afford it. Yes, she'd won a scholarship but it hadn't paid for many of the books, nor the uniform, and the shoes that had to be Clarks. The trouble was that Mickey had turned out to be the biggest disappointment to her parents, although her mother would never admit it. She doggedly went to visit him in prison every month, her head rigid in front of the gossiping neighbours, who apparently knew before she did that her son was in for multiple burglaries. *Now she's pinning her hopes on me*, Maxine thought.

Her first year as a probationer had been a shock. She'd been sick so many times at the sight of blood and frightful injuries, shouted at by many of the senior staff, complained about by some of the patients, but she'd gradually learned how to handle it – well, most of the time, anyway. She'd cried often, wishing she'd stood up to her mother, but the worst was over now, so the other nurses had told her when she'd been tempted to pack it all in. Now she was about to start her second year she was looking forward to continuing her studies and

taking her finals, knowing she'd be needed, what with the war on. So why did Johnny think he could wave her nurse's training to one side? He, of all people, knew what a commitment she'd made.

'Give up my training, do you mean?' she demanded. 'When I've worked so hard.'

'Well, I suppose it wouldn't hurt to finish it,' Johnny said, his eyes fixed on hers. 'But there's no need to continue when you've got your certificate.'

'Johnny, why does being married have anything to do with my nursing?'

'Because you're my wife, and I don't want you working. What would the lads say? "Can't support your wife, Johnny-boy?" No, I'm not having that.'

'I'm not interested in "the lads" and what they think,' Maxine flashed. She tried to keep the bubble of irritation pressed down. 'We're talking about *me*. My parents nearly killed themselves to pay for my training. Think what a waste that would be. What am I supposed to do all day long? It'd be different if we'd been married longer and I had a child to look after.'

'We can easily remedy that right away.' Johnny gave an exaggerated wink, but if anything it made her even more cross. It wasn't a joking matter and she knew she must stand firm. 'You could help your mum . . . especially as your dad isn't well,' he continued. 'That's where your nursing will come in handy.'

'Mum wouldn't want that at all. She prides herself on looking after Dad. I'll be much more valuable in the hospital when the wounded start coming in.'

'We'll talk about it some other time.' Johnny took the last drags of his cigarette as though it was the end of the conversation as far as he was concerned. He was sitting on the edge of the bed and reached over to stub his cigarette into the

ashtray on the bedside table. ‘Come over here, Mrs Taylor.’ He spread his arms.

‘No, Johnny, it’s too important. We’ll talk about this right now.’

‘Let’s not spoil our first night, Max.’ Johnny looked across at her, his brown eyes afire with anticipation. ‘We haven’t got much time together.’

Maxine hesitated. If she let this go, she’d be paving the way for him never taking her seriously – that his needs and wants were more important than hers. That his decisions didn’t invite even discussion. A little voice reminded her that she had, only a few hours ago, promised to love, honour and obey him, but she shook it away. She took a deep breath and forced herself to speak calmly.

‘Johnny, I know *most* women leave work when they get married, but this is different. The war’s started. We don’t know how long it will last, but I want to do everything I can to help – the same as you. Everyone who can will contribute something. Mum’s even talking about organising knitting circles to make socks for the soldiers.’

Johnny opened his mouth to speak but she stopped him.

‘What do you think would have happened in the last war if all the women had stayed at home – married or not? They set to immediately. Servants who’d never been out in the world learned to drive and do all sorts of things that were considered men’s work. And spoilt rich girls who’d never lifted a finger equally rolled up their sleeves, and one of the things they did successfully was nursing – even going to the front.’

‘Max—’

‘I can’t . . . *won’t* give up my nursing,’ she flung at him. ‘It’s not fair of you to ask me. If you felt that strongly, you

should have made it clear *before* the wedding – and I may have thought twice about marrying you.’ She ignored his shocked expression. ‘There’s no point in any further discussion. I’m carrying on working and that’s that.’

‘Don’t let’s quarrel, Max, especially not tonight of all nights.’

She hesitated. It was their wedding night, after all. Slowly, she walked towards him, her smile only an echo of his sudden happy grin.

Jones at the hospital had warned her the wedding night would be painful, but it wasn’t the physical pain that had hurt so much. Maxine had lain awake through the early hours, every muscle tense as she relived what should have been the culmination of their love. But Johnny had been silent throughout and she’d been too embarrassed to say anything. Afterwards, he’d simply kissed her on the forehead, rolled over and gone straight to sleep. Was this normal? Or was it because she’d stuck up for herself and it had clouded any words and gestures of love he might have given? She thought of all the happy times they’d spent together when they were children, but did she really know him now they were both grown up?

She closed her eyes and an unwelcome thought flashed across her mind. Had she made a terrible mistake? She sighed and turned over, hugging her pillow. Maybe things would look different in the morning.