

A Penny a Day

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Extract

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Chapter One

Bridge End, near Southampton, December 1952

‘Goodness me,’ Ruth Hodges said, opening the envelope that had just arrived in the post. ‘It’s a wedding invitation!’

As her husband Dan glanced up from his breakfast, Sammy came down the cottage stairs, shepherding his little half-sister, Linnet, ahead of him. Tall like his father, but as slender and fair as his mother had been, he had just finished his National Service in the RAF and would soon be returning to complete his apprenticeship with Solly Barlow, the Bridge End village blacksmith.

Ruth turned to him, her face alight with pleasure. ‘You’ll never guess what, Sammy. We’ve had an invitation to Rose Budd’s wedding, in Portsmouth.’

‘Rose Budd?’ Dan said. ‘That’s Frank Budd’s eldest girl, isn’t it?’

‘Well, you ought to know – you’re the one who used to live near them,’ she told him, laughing. ‘Yes, she’s getting married to a chap called ...’ she scanned the invitation ‘... Kenneth Mackenzie. Sounds a bit Scottish, doesn’t it? Did you know any Mackenzies round April Grove way, Dan?’

He shrugged. ‘Not that I remember. How about you, Sam?’

‘Well, since I only lived there for a year or two, when I was about seven’ the young man grinned, ‘I only *just* remember Rose. She never had much to do with me – it was her brothers,

Tim and Keith, I played with most, and that was when we were all evacuated out here at Bridge End. There's another sister too, isn't there? I seem to remember a baby.'

'That's right. Maureen. She came to our wedding – she was about six, so she'll be twelve or thirteen now. And Rose is in her twenties – there was a big gap between them.' Ruth helped Sammy to a plate of fried eggs and bacon and poured some cornflakes into a bowl for Linnet. 'Well, it'll be good to see them all again. It's a couple of years since Jess and Frank last came out to Bridge End to visit all their friends here, and I don't know how long it is since we saw the boys.'

'Are we all invited?' Dan asked, wiping the last piece of fried bread round his plate. 'Sam and Linnet as well, I mean?'

'Of course we are! You will come, Sammy, won't you? It's in January. A cold time of year for a wedding, I must say.'

'Am I going to be a bridesmaid, with a long pink frock and a bunch of flowers?' Linnet asked. There had been a wedding in the village church a few weeks earlier and Linnet, whose best friend had been given this honour, had longed for it ever since.

Ruth smiled and shook her head. 'I don't think so, sweetheart. I expect Rose will have Maureen, and maybe some other friends or relations. She doesn't really know us that well, after all.'

'I dunno really why we're being invited,' Dan observed, getting up from the table. 'It's not as if we've been all that close friends. I know Frank and me were mates for years, even before me and Nora went to live in April Grove, and Jess was good to us when times were hard, what with Nora being poorly and Sam left on his own too much. But I'm surprised they've asked us, all the same.'

'Well, we did invite them to our wedding,' Ruth pointed out. 'And they always look us up when they come out to Bridge End. I wonder if they've asked anyone else from the village? It'll be nice if there's a few of us to go together.'

‘I’d like to go,’ Sammy said, giving Linnet a piece of his bacon. ‘It’ll be good to see some of the April Grove people again. There’s Mr and Mrs Vickers, they were good to me too, and the Chapmans and all the others. Even Micky Baxter,’ he added with a sly look at his father.

Dan snorted. ‘Micky Baxter! I’ll be surprised if he’s not in prison by now. I always thought that’s where he’d end up – it’s where he ought to have been years ago,’ he added, his thick eyebrows coming together in a dark frown. ‘I don’t suppose he’ll be at this wedding, anyway.’ He went over to the back door and unhooked his working jacket. ‘Well, I got to be going. Me and Solly have got a lot of work on, with the Hunt busy again. You’d better make the most of this demob leave of yours, Sam, because you’ll be hard at it once you start down at the forge again, I can tell you.’

He gave Ruth and Linnet a kiss each and went out. Silver the parrot, who had been peacefully dozing on his stand near the range, lifted his head and observed that he was a teapot, short and stout, but nobody took any notice and he went back to sleep. Ruth poured Sammy another cup of tea.

‘It’s nice to have you back home. Are you looking forward to starting work again at the forge? It’ll be a bit different from being in the RAF.’

Sammy buttered a piece of toast and gave half to Linnet before answering. Then he said, ‘I’m not really sure, Auntie Ruth. I’ve done such different things in the RAF. I knew I wouldn’t be doing any blacksmithing, of course – not much scope for that on an airfield! – but I didn’t expect to learn so much, and get so interested in it all. I know I’ve got to finish my apprenticeship, but I’d really like to go on working with electronics.’

Ruth stared at him doubtfully. ‘You mean mending wire-
lesses and things? Don’t you need a lot of training for that?’

‘Not wirelesses so much, no. It’s radar I’ve been working with mostly. And I’ve had the training, in the RAF. That’s

what National Service can do for you, you see – it can give you a trade.’

‘But you’ve already got one.’

‘Blacksmithing – I know. But honestly, Auntie Ruth, do you really think I’m cut out to be a blacksmith? I mean, look at me.’ He stretched his arms wide. ‘I’m just not built to be a blacksmith. It’s hard, heavy work—’

‘Your father says you’re good at it. You’re wonderful with the horses, and you can do lovely wrought-iron work.’

‘I can *design* lovely wrought-iron,’ he corrected her. ‘I did the design for that weather-parrot Dad made you for your anniversary. And I can make it too, because I’ve been taught – but I’m really *good* at what I did in the RAF. And it’s developing so fast.’ His blue eyes were bright and eager. ‘I’m going to find a night school in Southampton or Portsmouth and get some more qualifications, so that when I’ve finished my apprenticeship with Solly, I can get a job in that sort of work.’

Ruth was still looking doubtful. ‘Your father and Solly will be disappointed not to have you with them.’

‘I know. But it’ll be another year or two before it happens, and they’ll have time to get used to the idea. Solly might even decide to terminate my apprenticeship before then.’

‘But then you won’t get your indentures!’

‘I won’t need them,’ he said. ‘Look, I’m going to play fair with Dad and Solly. I don’t want to disappoint them – but you must admit I didn’t really have much say in what I did when I left school, did I? Dad was already working with Solly and he fixed it all up without even talking to me about it.’

‘Well, that’s what a good father does – tries to set his son’s feet on a path that’ll take him through life and bring him a decent living.’

‘I know, and I appreciate it. It’s just that blacksmithing isn’t the right path for me – and electronics is. And if I hadn’t gone into the RAF, I might never have found it out.’

Ruth said no more. She gathered up the plates and took

them to the sink. Linnet scrambled down from her chair and held out her hand to her big brother.

‘Take me for a walk. We can go and see Auntie Jane.’

‘All right,’ Sammy said, standing up. He had grown taller than Ruth would ever have believed possible, so tall that his head almost bumped the wooden beams of the ceiling. ‘We’ll see if she’s doing any baking, shall we? I hope she’s making some of her cheese scones.’

‘Honestly, Sammy!’ Ruth scolded. ‘You’ve only just this minute finished your breakfast. I don’t know what else the RAF did for you, but it seems to have given you hollow legs.’

Sammy grinned and came over to give her a hug. ‘I’ve missed the home cooking. They fed us pretty well, but it’s not like going into a farmhouse kitchen and smelling fresh bread and scones. I’ve got a lot of catching up to do.’ He looked down at Linnet. ‘Go and get your coat and mittens, and that woolly bonnet with the bunny’s ears. It’s cold outside.’ He turned back to Ruth. ‘Are we having the carol singing this Christmas? That’s another thing I missed, being away from home at Christmas last year.’

‘Of course we’re having the carol singing,’ Ruth said, smiling. ‘It was because of you that we started it up again during the war.’

Linnet came back into the kitchen with her outdoor clothes and Sammy buttoned her into the thick coat and helped her pull on the mittens that were threaded on a long string through both sleeves. Then he fitted her bonnet over her dark curls, pulled on his own old jacket, and clicked his fingers at the parrot.

‘Goodbye, Silver, you old wretch. Take care of Auntie Ruth for me while we’re gone.’

‘Sammy, Sammy, shine a light,’ the parrot replied, in the hoarse voice that still bore some resemblance to Sammy’s more adult tones. ‘Ain’t you playing out tonight? Sod the little buggers. It’s a bleeding *eagle*.’

Sammy laughed. ‘You’d never believe I only said that once. I hope you’re not repeating the things he says,’ he added to Linnet. ‘He knows more naughty words than anyone else I’ve ever met, even in the RAF.’

‘I’m teaching him some more nursery rhymes,’ she said, and waggled her hand at the cage. ‘Come on, Silver, say “See-Saw, Margery Dawe”.’

‘Johnny shall have a new master,’ the parrot replied obligingly, then fell silent, scratching his head with one foot as if trying to rack his memory.

‘He shall earn but a penny a day,’ Linnet prompted. ‘Because he can’t work any – any what, Silver? He knew it yesterday,’ she added in disappointment.

‘Sometimes he takes a bit longer to learn something new,’ Sammy said. ‘Come on, let’s go.’

Ruth watched them walk down the garden path and then started the washing-up, her mind drifting back to the time when Sammy had first come to Bridge End, a frightened little boy of eight. It had been weeks before she’d discovered that his mother had died not long before he’d been evacuated from Portsmouth, and months before his father had come out to see him. She remembered the day Dan had arrived unexpectedly on the doorstep. It was almost the first time that she’d ever been cross with Sammy over some scrape he’d been in with little Muriel Simmons, and they’d all got off on the wrong foot. But things had improved after that and now here they were, a family that had seemed complete until Linnet had arrived, almost as unexpectedly as Dan, and made it all perfect.

But nothing was ever quite perfect, she thought, scrubbing egg off the plates. And this idea of Sammy’s, that he might give up working with his father at the blacksmith’s forge and do something quite different – something Ruth didn’t really understand but was sure he wouldn’t be able to do at Bridge End – looked likely to disturb the family life she loved so much, and very possibly upset Dan into the bargain.

Well, that was all in the future and might never happen. There was something nice to think about now – Christmas, with Sammy at home once more, and then the wedding in April Grove. She would have to think about what to wear – her best grey suit with a nice flower in the lapel, probably – and she could make a new frock for Linnet. Her little girl might not be a bridesmaid, but she would still look as pretty as a princess.