
WHEN
the WAR
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WHEN the WAR CAME HOME

Books by Lesley Parr

The Valley of Lost Secrets
When the War Came Home

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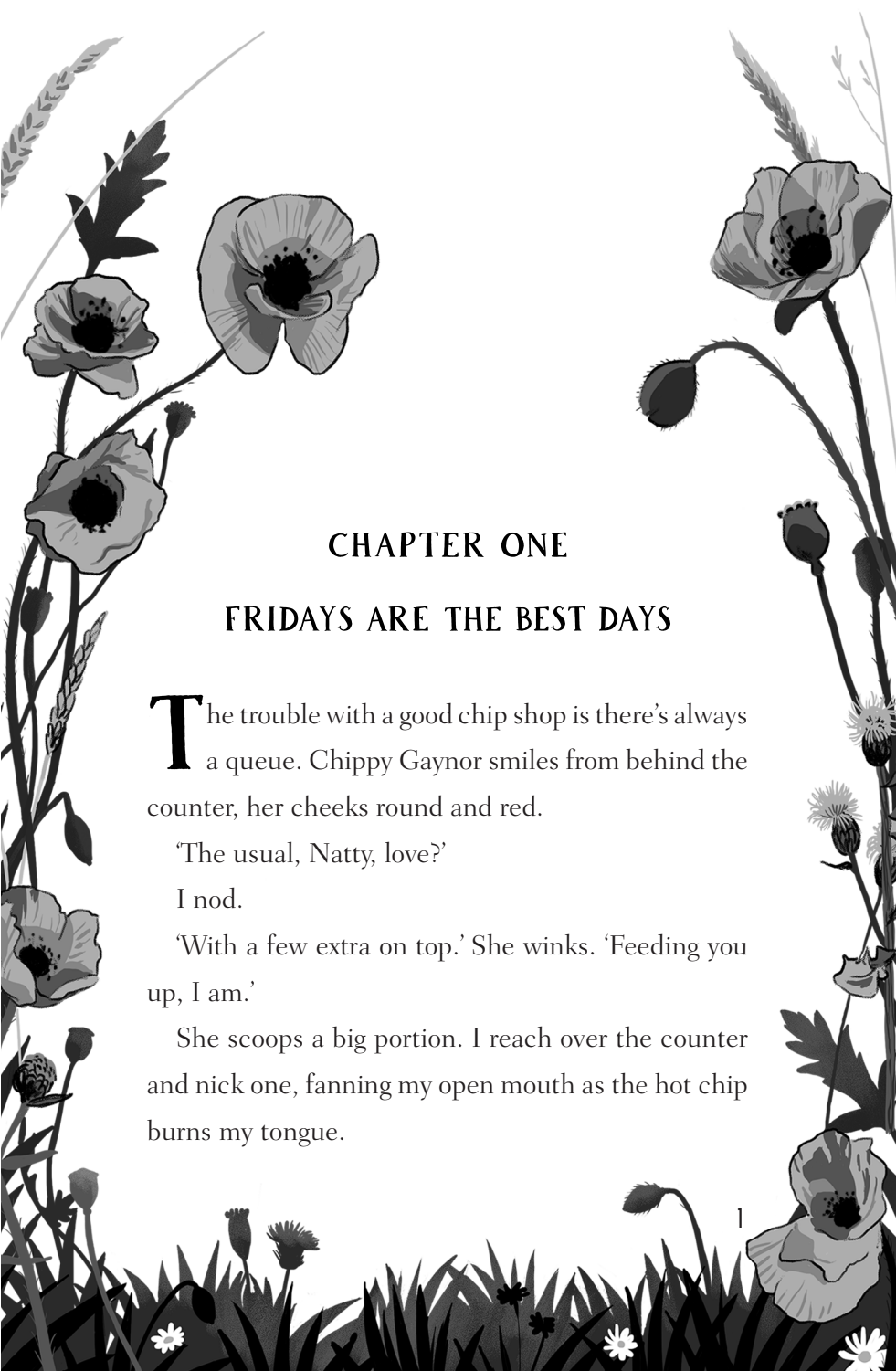
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For Jon



CHAPTER ONE

FRIDAYS ARE THE BEST DAYS

The trouble with a good chip shop is there's always a queue. Chippy Gaynor smiles from behind the counter, her cheeks round and red.

'The usual, Natty, love?'

I nod.

'With a few extra on top.' She winks. 'Feeding you up, I am.'

She scoops a big portion. I reach over the counter and nick one, fanning my open mouth as the hot chip burns my tongue.

'Duw, now there's a swish coat. New, is it?' she says, using tongs to pick up the cod in batter and plonk it on top of the steaming chips.

'Yes,' I say, smoothing my hand over the collar, careful not to touch it with the greasy fingers that picked up the chip. 'For my birthday.'

'Well you're a lucky dab.' She smiles. 'How's your mam?'

'Busy,' I say, thinking of all the extra hours she's worked to buy this coat.

'I know that feeling!' She grins, nodding at the queue. 'Fourpence please, love.' She holds out her plump hand. Chippy Gaynor's whole family is plump; you never go hungry if you have a chip shop. 'Your poor mam though. Gets his money's worth out of those factory girls, Litton does. Slave driver, he is.'

I pay, thank her and rush home, holding the fat, hot packet under my nose, breathing in newspaper and salt and vinegar. Fridays are the best days.

They don't have time to get cold – two doors down, above the ironmonger's and up some narrow stairs, I push open the door to our flat.



Mam's laying the table. There's three plates, one with bread and margarine on, and two glasses. Dandelion and burdock for me, stout for her. Friday night is for treats. No matter how bad things get, it's a tradition in our family. There are flowers in the bud vase in the middle of the table; they're only dog daisies picked from the lane, but they're pretty. Mam says Dad used to do it for her, but I was too small when he died to remember things like that. So now she does it for me and she always makes it nice.

'Chippy Gaynor gave us extra,' I say, kissing Mam's cheek and taking off my coat.

'Lovely.'

'I got the best bit of cod too.'

'Good girl.'

She's not looking at me, but I can see her eyes are red. She sighs as she shares out the chips. She must be tired. Like Gaynor said, Litton is a slave driver. I cut the fish not quite in half and give her the biggest end. She swaps it for the one on my plate as soon as I sit down.

'You're a growing girl. Now, tell me … how was school?'



'Good,' I say. 'We had boiled ham with potatoes and peas.'

She smiles. 'Funny how lessons are never the first thing you tell me about.'

I shrug. 'I'm a growing girl! Arithmetic was hard, singing was easy. We had jam roly-poly for pudding. I had seconds.'

Mam laughs but it looks a bit forced. She folds a piece of bread round some chips and licks the dripping margarine off her hand. 'Natty?' I look up. 'You know how, on Monday, Lorraine Marshall had to go to the doctor?'

I nod.

'Well, as if that didn't cost her enough, Litton docked her wages for the half-hour she was gone. Half an hour! Even after I made up her quota in my dinner break.'

'You never told me that.'

She takes a big bite of her butty so she doesn't have to answer.

'Why are you telling me this now?' I ask. 'You haven't done something, have you?



'Why do you think I did something?'

'Because you always do, Mam.' She'll have stuck her nose in, gone on about workers' rights and fairness and, if she can manage to fit it in, votes for women too. Champion of the underdog, that's my mother.

'Well, Natty, people need to see a doctor if they're ill without the fear of losing money.' She looks at her plate. 'So I called a meeting today, to see what can be done about Litton … and … he sacked me.'

'He *what*?'

She puts down her knife and fork, and rubs her forehead. 'It's just not right how he treats people. He needs to understand how it is for us. For the workers.'

'But you always say he's never had to struggle for anything in his life! He inherited that factory, so why would he listen now? It's pointless.'

'Standing up for what you believe in is never pointless. Especially now. The war is over. It's the twenties, things are changing.'

'But the only thing that changed was you getting the sack.'



'Eat your tea before it gets cold.'

I slowly peel the batter off my fish, not looking at her.

'There's something else,' Mam says. 'But it's going to be all right because I have a plan.' She takes a big breath. 'If we can't find the rent this week, Mr Tipton will throw us out … I … I got a bit behind, see.'

Oh no, not again. I don't want to move *again*.

'How? How can you get behind? You always say a roof over our heads is more important than anything!' I point to the fish and chips. 'Why would you give me money for this if we didn't have the rent?'

Mam's quiet. She's looking at her and Dad's wedding photograph on the cabinet. Friday night supper was something else Dad used to do. That's why. But things have been tight before – why is it so bad this time? Her eyes move to my coat hanging on the hook by the door.

And suddenly I'm furious. But not with her, with myself. If I hadn't stopped outside Nicholls every time we passed, looking up at that coat in the window, if I hadn't grown so fast and always had extra helpings



of school dinners, I'd still be in my old coat. It would have patched. We could have let the seams out again.

'We can take it back,' I whisper, the words scratching over the lump in my throat. 'My coat, we can take it back.'

'It won't be enough, sweetheart.'

'So you picked a fight with Litton, when it wasn't even your fight to have, when you knew we were behind on the rent?'

'Lorraine Marshall's got her girl home with the babies, her being a war widow. But, Natty –' she leans across the table – 'Like I said, I have a plan. We won't be out on the street. I wrote to your Aunty Mary and Uncle Dewi last week.'

'Why?'

'When your dad died, they were good to us. They've always said if we need anything, I only have to ask.'

'Ask for what? Not money! Mam, that's shaming!'

'No, no. Not money. Just a place to stay until I can find a new job—'

'*But don't they live in Ynysfach?*' I drop my fork and it clatters on the plate. Mam winces.



'Yes, love, that's where we're going. I got a letter back this morning.'

I frown. 'And you wrote to them *last week*? But you lost your job today?'

Mam shuffles in her seat. 'I knew it was coming. Litton was just looking for a way to get rid of me.'

'And you gave him one. You knew we were behind on the rent and you still had to make trouble!'

Mam looks at her plate for a few seconds, then pushes her chair back. 'I'm going for a walk.'

'But your food!'

'I'll have it after.'

'Cold?' I say. 'Because there's not enough coal to heat the oven. Lorraine Marshall can look after herself, Mam. What about us?'

She doesn't look at me, just leaves me at the table.

'What about *us*?' I shout after her, but she's gone.

So much for Fridays being the best days.

