

## SEASIDE BLUES

“Promise me you’ll still go to Margate, Mabel. You know the boys love the sea. I’ve booked our favourite guest house.” They were John’s last words before he left to fight in France.

She had kept her promise but felt so guilty being in Margate while he faced danger, especially as this place held such poignant memories for them. She couldn’t visit the pier without remembering John’s straw hat blowing into the sea when he’d knelt to propose to her. She couldn’t pass the Fish Bar without recalling his laughter as she gulped her first oyster. And she couldn’t sit with the boys on the beach without imagining them shouting wildly as they tackled their father at football. Maybe, she could have taken the boys somewhere new but she saw how excited they were to be back in their regular room and having cuddles with Mrs Groves, the cook.

She met holiday friends on the beach and around the shops, like her, women alone with young children. They talked schools, the latest fashions and coping with the shortages, mention of war news avoided, difficult family questions unasked. Maybe, Margate could provide comfort after all.

On their first walk to the beach, a photographer had handed her a card, a link to the picture he’d taken of them. The next day she was able to purchase a postcard copy that she could send to John.

That evening, she waited till the boys were asleep before looking closely at the postcard picture.. She wanted to send John their love but not show their sadness without him. Somehow, perhaps breathing Margate’s sea air and after those chats with friends, she appeared more relaxed than she felt. And she was pleased to see the boys were smiling, enjoying their ice cream cones and looking smart in their new summer clothes. John would be proud of them.

Mabel found a pencil and wrote *Wish You Were Here*, in very big letters, addressing the card to John’s Regiment. She must post the card immediately. They always had the right stamps at reception and William, the night porter would ensure it caught the late collection. She checked the boys were still sleeping, and leaving their bedroom door ajar, went downstairs.

“Oh, Mrs Fox,” William said, looking away from her as he picked up an envelope on his desk. “This telegram has just arrived for you.”

Mabel stiffened, dropped the postcard, not needed now, and took the dreaded brown envelope without a murmur. Backing into the nearby breakfast room, she closed the door. No one must hear her scream. But scream she would, to the limits of her voice. Taking a deep breath and with hands shaking she tore open the envelope.

GIVEN LEAVE. ARRIVING MARGATE 11 TOMORROW. SURPRISE BOYS. JOHN

Mabel slumped into a chair and sobbed.