



BY KATE THOMPSON

# War And Peace

Could anything heal the friendships that had fractured under the strain of the Occupation?

**F**ebruary 1944 and Grace La Mottée, Jersey's chief librarian finds herself the centre of the island's quiet resistance. Can she restore peace to the war-torn island?

**T**he voice was high and indignant. "My mum says that your mum's a Jerrybag."

"Well, my mum says it was your mum what painted a swastika on our house."

"Well, if your mum weren't a traitor she wouldn't have a swastika on her house, would she?"

As chief librarian at St Helier Library in Jersey, Grace La Mottée was used to disturbances during children's story-time, but nothing as vitriolic as this.

"Girls, girls," she protested, putting down the copy of *Treasure Island*. "I think we have enough drama in the story without adding to it, don't you?"

At her stern words, eight-year-old Kitty Bradshaw and her former best friend Peggy Moisan fell silent.

Grace continued the story and her young audience lost themselves once more in the tale of buried treasure.

At the end her young patrons gathered up tattered cardigans and filed out of the library reading room.

"Kitty and Peggy, will you stay back?" Grace called.

The two girls traipsed over, all surly scowls and scabby knees.

Grace took their hands in hers.

"Girls, you know I adore you both and I hate to see you fighting."

The pair refused to look at each other.

"Come on," Grace coaxed with a smile. "We're already living alongside the enemy, we don't need to make enemies of each other, surely?"

Kitty glared at the parquet floor.

"I'm not allowed, Miss La Mottée. My mum says I'm not to talk to Peggy for as long as her mum's friends with a Jerry soldier."

Her words cut through the library and Peggy's bottom lip wobbled.

"It ain't my fault."

Sensing she had reached an impasse,

"Get on home now, girls. I don't want you out after curfew, but try to remember how precious your friendship is. Don't let the Germans come between you."

The girls left, and as Grace started shelving the leftover books she felt a deep sadness settle in her bones.

This wretched Occupation. It was February 1944, and in Jersey they'd been living alongside the enemy for three years and seven months.

Three years of fear, boredom, privation, hunger – and now it felt as if islanders were turning on each other.

This once idyllic island was now a place of distrust and spite. She looked around at the beautiful wood-panelled library, its domed stained-glass roof sending scattered diamonds of blue and gold light dancing through the stacks.

Only this place remained unstained. Her very own book-lined palace of dreams. Every week, weary islanders gathered in the library's graceful arms seeking refuge and respite from all the fury of war.

*"Well, it's about to get a whole lot worse for Lily." She pulled a letter out of her mailbag*

Library loans had soared since their uninvited guests' arrival in July 1940. Little wonder. The German authorities had banned everything.

Wireless sets offering news from the BBC were strictly forbidden, the beaches were closed off, even Scouts and tiddlywinks clubs were closed. Only the library remained as a beacon of light.

**T**he door opened and Grace's best friend Bea Rose walked in, fresh from her shift as the island's postwoman.

"Bad day?" Bea asked, looking at Grace's face.

"You could say that. You know Maggie Moisan?"

"The Jerrybag?"

"Bea," Grace chided.

"Sorry. Go on."

"Someone painted a tar swastika on her door. She's blaming her neighbour, Lily, little Kitty Bradshaw's mum."

"But those two are joined at the hip." Bea frowned.

"Not any more, and now the girls are at loggerheads."

"People are reaching breaking point," Bea said despairingly. "I don't think we'll survive another winter."

It had been the most bitterly cold winter of the war, with many islanders dying of preventable disease, forced to scavenge in hedgerows for food or to burn furniture for fuel.

"I feel sorry for Maggie Moisan," said Grace. "It's two years since her husband died – it must be awfully hard on her being alone. I might not agree with it, but I refuse to sit in condemnation of her."

She wiped her soft cloth over the wooden counter.

"Mind you, Lily's husband's been a prisoner of war for three years now, so it's not easy on her either."

Bea's face darkened.

"Well, it's about to get a whole lot worse for Lily." She pulled a letter out of her mailbag and, glancing about to check the library was empty, slid it over the counter towards Grace.

"Bea," Grace said worriedly. "This isn't date-stamped. You are going to deliver this, aren't you?"

"Just read it."

The letter was addressed to the German Commandant.

*Dear Sir. Have the secret field police check the house of Lily Bradshaw. 8 Havre des Pas. I have good reason to suspect she painted a tar swastika on my door and has at least one hidden crystal wireless set under her floorboards.*

"Oh, this is..." Grace gasped.

"Contemptible," Bea finished.



spelled it out, but it was largely known how informers' letters were dealt with by the Jersey Post Office.

Their poisonous contents were either chucked onto the boiler room fire, or the letter was steamed open and those who had been informed upon quietly warned.

"It used to be one a fortnight, now every day there seems to be another," Bea whispered. "Empty bellies lead to loose tongues, I suppose."

"What will you do?" Grace asked.

"That's what I wanted to ask you," Bea replied.

"Leave it with me," Grace said.

The opportunity presented itself two days later when Maggie Moisan returned a library book.

"Hello, Grace," she said cheerfully. "I romped through Rebecca. Any other ideas for a book I can lose myself in?"

"Possibly," Grace replied. "Follow me." She walked into her office, Maggie following, and closed the door softly. She picked up a copy of *War And Peace*.

"This was donated by a grateful islander. I haven't catalogued it yet. Would you like to try it first?"

Maggie picked the book up and flicked through the first pages. As she did so, Grace wordlessly slid the informer's letter across her desk.

One look at her pale face told Grace that it was indeed Maggie who had written the anonymous letter.

"Don't ask how I came to have this, but I thought I'd return it and beg you to reconsider. It isn't who you are, Maggie."

A thousand emotions flitted over the woman's face. Anger melted into confusion and fear. Grace threaded her fingers softly through the older woman's.

"As Tolstoy himself wrote, *Peace cannot be achieved through violence, it can only be attained through understanding.*"

Grace thought Maggie was about to storm out, but then her face crumpled.

"Oh, Grace. I'm so ashamed of myself." She ripped the letter into tiny pieces, her hands trembling.

"I'm just so lonely, and Heinz is a



want this war any more than we do."

"I understand," Grace soothed. "Why don't you take this book and see if you can't make your own peace with Lily?"

"I don't think she wants anything to do with me. Frankly, I don't blame her."

Defeated, she picked up the book. "You won't tell anyone about the letter?" "What letter?" Grace asked.

Maggie returned *War And Peace* two weeks later with a batch of rock cakes made with sugar beet syrup and carrot, as well as a handwritten note.

*I've given him up. I'll stick to books instead of unsuitable men.*

Grace smiled. It gave her an idea.

One blustery February lunch break, she cycled through St Helier on her rusty old bike with hosepipes for tyres, past the scoured faces of the mothers queuing at the Central Market for the last specks, duntrodden in their patched-up coats.

The air was a stew of smells. Manure, asphalt, salt and the stench of something darker – desperation for peace.

Lily Bradshaw was out. She left *War And Peace* on her doorstep with a note. *Hope you find this an enlightening read.*

As she cycled past the downcast German sentry at the docks, his uniform rotting, she couldn't believe her eyes as he glanced about and lifted his fingers in a V for Victory. Maggie was right. The enemy was as desperate for an end to this Godforsaken war as they were.

"Well, until then, the library needs you, Grace," she murmured, heading

Peace came to the island. Three months later, on May 9, Churchill broadcast the news to the nation. Grace sank down onto the library steps in the Royal Square as the extraordinary scenes unfolded. Church bells pealed. Ecstatic crowds sang and laughed.

Wireless sets were pulled from hiding places and placed on window ledges. Girls in red, white and blue ribbons sat hoisted high on young men's shoulders and sang the National Anthem.

Bea called for Grace. Together they walked through the cobbled streets. Turning the corner to the harbour, something drew them up short.

"Pin her down... Get the Jerrybag."

Grace and Bea forced their way to the front of a small crowd and gasped.

Maggie Moisan was on the ground, held down by an angry mob.

"That's enough –" Grace began, but Bea held her back as a defiant woman barged out of the crowd.

"Get your hands off her!" ordered Lily Bradshaw, hands on hips. "Or you'll have me to answer to."

"And you are?" asked the ringleader.

"Her friend. Did no one ever tell you peace can't be achieved through violence?" She looked at Maggie, her face softening. "Only through understanding."

Lily held out her hand and, gratefully, Maggie reached up and took it.

The crowd parted and the two women walked off, Lily putting a steadying arm around Maggie's waist.

"The healing power of books," Grace whispered, smiling.

"What's that?" Bea asked.

"Nothing. Why don't we head back to the library and I'll put the kettle on?"

Together the two friends headed to the library in search of peace. ☺

**The Wartime Book Club** is published on February 15 by Hodder & Stoughton. Kate's podcast, *From The Library With Love*, interviews the

