

## **The Last Letter**

**by Christopher Peter**

*My dearest Lizzie – this may be the last time I ever write to you ...*

Lizzie gripped the yellow paper with hands she fought to hold steady, while she felt her mother trying not to look at her. Before reading she glanced up and noticed, with eerie clarity, the twinkling swirls of dust caught in the sunlight that shafted down through the drawing room window. She realised that, more than anything, she wanted to stay in this moment; this fragile peace before her life fell apart.

*I don't have long to write. Captain Harkes will be making us turn in very soon. At least I can say goodbye to this wretched trench tomorrow. I think last time I told you how homely we'd made it. But that was before it rained for three days non-stop and now the mud is a foot thick and my feet hurt all the time. Even the rats look desperate now. The thing is, we're to go over the top at dawn ...*

Her eyes flicked up from the page to the hard rectangle propped up against the clock on the mantelpiece. The telegram had arrived yesterday, but she had refused to read it. She needed his words again, one last time; for him to be real, even if for just one more day.

*We lost Tom yesterday. He only poked his head up for a moment, and a bloody Hun bullet got him. He fell down like a great floppy rag doll, right in front of me. I thought he was joking around at first, and I'm ashamed to say I kicked him. I can't believe I'll never hear his laugh again. How can it happen? Twenty years old and he's just gone, just like that. The night before he was telling me about his girl back home. They were planning to open a shop together when the war was over. What will she do now?*

Why was he talking about Tom and that girl? What did it matter? What about *them*? She looked up again, and this time caught her mother's eye, and wished she hadn't. Once, Lizzie had loved her mother's face – so lovely and calm; it had always made her feel safe and secure. But what had once seemed serene now struck her as merely blank, rigid. Unfeeling.

*It got me to thinking, Lizzie, about us ...*

Us? Yes, there had been us. His dark brown eyes looking at her – into her – like no-one ever before. Running through the rain, shouting and laughing and arguing about who had forgotten the umbrella. The feel of his arms, his cheek on that day the train took him away. The crowds who cheered like people possessed – how could they have been so callous? Could they not see? And Mother. That smile on her face – the one she thought Lizzie hadn't seen.

*Our engagement made me happy. I loved how you looked, how you laughed. It made me feel twenty feet tall. You told me your dreams, you gave yourself to me so willingly, everything. And me, a lad of twenty-one, a fool who knew nothing.*

She was burning up, then freezing. So near the bottom of the page now – this single sheet of thin, mean paper.

*The thing is, Lizzie, we go over the top tomorrow. It's at times like this that we must speak the truth, to say what ought to be said, in case ...*

The room swam around her. She tried to control her breathing but it swelled and roared in her ears. Just one more line, one more tiny piece of him, and then ...

*Lizzie, I do love you. And so I must be plain with you. You have bound yourself to me, even though I never deserved you, and so I must tell you now*

Stupidly she flipped over the paper again, but of course there was no more. She read the last sentence again, then laid the letter carefully on the chair beside her. She felt oddly detached, as if floating on the other side of the room; looking at this pathetic and ridiculous girl who must be about to scream or wail or just stop breathing, and wondering idly which one it would be.

‘Lizzie ...’ her mother began, holding out one pale, elegant hand. White as ice.

Lizzie stood up, very slowly. ‘Why did you open the letter?’ she asked quietly.

‘The envelope was not written in his hand. They found the letter you see, after ... after the explosion ...’

Lizzie tried to block out that word. ‘And where is the rest? There was more, wasn’t there?’

‘They never found the last page.’

She swallowed hard; bitter bile scorched her throat. ‘You hated him.’

‘No, Lizzie, I ...’

‘Don’t lie to me mother, not now. You were always against us. But ... but I can forgive you, because it doesn’t matter any more. Because he loved me; loved me to the end. You were wrong about him. Weren’t you?’

Her mother looked up, frowning; then down at the carpet. ‘Yes.’

‘He’s – he’s a hero now, isn’t he?’

‘Yes, my dear.’

The tears took her suddenly, heaving up so violently that she almost stumbled to the floor. She ran, and wished she never had to stop.

Alone in the drawing room, her mother sat completely still. Then she reached under her shawl and pulled out a stained, crumpled piece of paper, and read the pitiful words again.

*that I must release you. I can’t lie to you any longer. Please forgive me, Lizzie. Please don’t think badly of me, though the engagement be off. You will understand I think, one day. I could never love you enough, not like you loved me. I am so sorry*

Lizzie’s mother screwed up the paper, rose and threw it into the hearth for the flames to devour. Then she walked slowly from the room and closed the door.