

I

3 September 1939

So it had started!

The months of speculation were over and they were at war again.

Annie Webster turned off the wireless and walked into the garden, needing to be alone for a few moments. The tension of waiting for this announcement, knowing it must surely come, had been unbearable. There wasn't a sound anywhere and the streets were empty. A lone dog gave one short bark and stopped, as if it too sensed the enormity of the news. It seemed as if the whole country was holding its breath, wondering what the future would bring. The silence was eerie and rather frightening.

She closed her eyes briefly in an attempt to stop the tears that were threatening to spill over. She had tried so hard to dismiss the talk and hold to the belief that this would never happen, but she couldn't do that any more. The war was a reality now and she would have to face up to it just like everyone else. An overwhelming feeling of sadness swept over her, and for a brief moment her shoulders slumped. Then she straightened up again. This was not the time to indulge in despair and self-pity, because if the last war was anything to go by then there was a long hard struggle in front of them.

She lifted her face to the warmth of the sun and felt it

caress her. The air was clear and almost sparkling without a cloud in the sky. How could this perfect day be marred by such terrible news? With a deep sigh, she opened her eyes again as she heard her family coming out of the house. No one spoke, they were each lost in their own thoughts.

An unearthly wailing cut through the stillness and made them look at each other in alarm.

‘Air-raid sirens,’ Bill, her brother-in-law, told them.

Still they didn’t move, but everyone’s face was tilted up towards the sky. Watching, waiting. They scanned the clear sky, looking and listening for any sight or sound of aeroplanes, but nothing happened. In a short time the all clear sounded.

‘Just trying them out, I expect,’ her mother said softly.

Then all was quiet again and Annie let her thoughts drift. How good life had been in the last sixteen years since they had moved out of the slums of London into these two lovely houses in Roehampton, designed by Bill. The hardship and poverty they had endured seemed like a bad dream now.

‘Two wars in our lifetime,’ her mother whispered. ‘I never thought it would happen again.’

Those few spoken words, cutting through their thoughts, seemed to snap them out of their daze. Her sister Rose bent down and scooped up her youngest child; a beautiful little girl now three years old.

‘Why does everyone look so sad, Mummy?’ she asked, reaching out for the comforting arms of her father.

‘Nothing for you to worry about, Kate.’ Rose gave her daughter a kiss and handed her over to her husband,

while their ten-year-old son, James, stood by his mother, silent for a change.

‘Let’s all go inside and have a nice cup of tea.’ Her mother turned and walked briskly towards the kitchen.

Annie smiled for the first time that day. A cup of tea was her mother’s remedy for all ills – the kettle was constantly on the boil. They trooped after her dutifully, knowing it was useless to refuse.

‘Where’s Paul these days?’ Annie’s mother asked her, obviously trying to steer the conversation on to normal lines. ‘Have you broken up with him?’

‘No, he’s been away for the past couple of months.’

‘What doing?’ Bill asked.

‘I’ve no idea. He was very secretive about it, but he said he’d be back soon.’

‘Why don’t you marry the poor bloke?’ Charlie, her brother, asked.

‘I don’t want to. I know I’m twenty-eight, but I’m waiting for the right man.’ She loved Will and Charlie, her two brothers, dearly, but they still considered her the baby of the family and were always trying to give her advice.

Rose laughed. ‘You’re a fine one to talk about marriage, Charlie. You’re twenty-nine and Will’s thirty-two, and neither of you is showing any signs of settling down yet. You like your freedom too much.’ She looked pointedly at her two brothers and rolled her eyes, making everyone laugh.

It was a good sound on such a gloomy day.

Annie slipped her arm through her brother-in-law’s, and grinned. ‘I’m still looking for someone like Bill.’

‘Ah, then you’re out of luck. He’s the only one in existence,’ Rose said.

Annie watched the way her sister’s dark eyes lingered on her husband. Rose and Bill had a blissful marriage, and Annie wanted one like it and wouldn’t settle for anything less.

At that moment there was a brief knock on the kitchen door and Paul strode in. The shock of seeing him hit Annie with such force that she leapt to her feet with uncharacteristic clumsiness and nearly sent her cup flying. He was in air force uniform and sporting a pair of wings on his chest.

She opened her mouth but nothing came out.

Paul laughed. ‘Not like you to be lost for words, Annie.’

‘Well, what the blazes do you expect?’ she managed to say at last. ‘You might have told me what you were up to.’

‘You haven’t wasted any time, Paul,’ Annie’s mother remarked.

‘Well, it was clear that the war was coming, and as I already had my commercial pilot’s licence it seemed the sensible thing to do.’

‘Sensible?’ Annie couldn’t believe she was hearing this. She’d met Paul at a dance in Richmond four years ago and she knew he could be impulsive, but she hadn’t expected him to do this. ‘Why couldn’t you wait until war had actually been declared before joining up?’

‘The country is going to need pilots and I want to be in at the beginning.’ Paul ran his fingers gently down her face. ‘I can’t sit on the sidelines, you must see that.’

‘I do,’ she admitted, as the shock began to recede. This was typical of Paul and she should have expected it. He had been totally absorbed in his flying lessons over the last year, but she’d put that down to the fact that his older brother, Reid, was already a pilot. She had never met him but from the snippets of information she’d been given he appeared to be a steadying influence on Paul. She thought too about Paul’s parents. They were a lovely couple and she knew it would upset them terribly to have him going to war. However, it was done now. She tipped her head on one side and studied the cut of his uniform. ‘You look very dashing.’

He gave a self-conscious grin and shuffled uncomfortably at her compliment, then he turned his attention to Bill, who was still holding his daughter in his arms. ‘You were in the navy last time, weren’t you? A captain, I believe?’

Bill nodded grimly.

‘They’ll be after you – ’

‘No!’ Rose said sharply. ‘He’s too old this time.’

Annie watched a rare moment of panic flit across her sister’s face. She tried to propel Paul out of the kitchen but he wasn’t going to move. It was not the time to discuss this. They all needed a few hours to let it sink in that they were at war again. Decisions had to be made, but not until they’d had time to adjust and absorb the implications. Over the last few weeks many people had declared that Germany didn’t want war with Britain, and she’d tried to believe them, but if you looked at the turmoil in Europe it was hard to delude yourself.

‘How old are you?’ Paul persisted.

‘Forty-seven in December.’

‘That won’t matter. They’ll be desperate for men with your experience – ’

Annie tugged at Paul’s arm, anxious to get him away. She could almost hear the thoughts of the people sitting around the table – troubled thoughts – things they would rather not face at the moment. They were well aware that their lives were going to change dramatically, and seeing Paul in his uniform was bringing home to them what this war would mean for their family. Will and Charlie, her brothers, were young enough to fight, and Bill . . . well, he shouldn’t have to go through that again. The Great War had claimed a generation of young men and she didn’t dare think about the horrors this one would inflict on them.

‘Come on, let’s go out somewhere.’ She dragged Paul through the door before he could stir things up any more. He was a charming but immature young man, and seemed quite oblivious of everyone’s concern. The prospect of another conflict was not something to look forward to, and the awful thing was that men like her brother-in-law would be dragged in to fight for the second time in their lives.

‘I wanted to talk to Bill,’ he complained as she hustled him towards the car.

‘Paul Lascells,’ she said sharply, ‘you were upsetting everyone, especially my sister, with all your talk about Bill going back in the navy.’

‘Rose?’ he exclaimed. ‘You can’t upset her; she’ll be rolling up her sleeves and getting stuck in. She’ll be in the thick of it.’

Annie shook her head sadly. She was very fond of Paul but he seemed more like ten years younger than her,

instead of two. Was it any wonder she knew she didn't want to marry him?

'My sister loves Bill very much,' she explained patiently as Paul started the car and headed for Richmond Park. 'Rose does have feelings, you know.'

'You two are more like mother and daughter instead of sisters,' Paul remarked drily. 'I've never been able to work out why you're so close.'

Annie thought back to their childhood; her sister, being the eldest, had shouldered the whole burden of the family. Rose was very intelligent and had been made to leave school at eleven because they couldn't teach her any more. Although she had won a scholarship to a secondary school, she hadn't been able to take it up because they were so poor. That was when her old teacher Grace Trenchard and her husband, John, had taken over the job of her education in their spare time. A smile of remembrance touched Annie's face as she thought of those two dear people. Thank heavens they had moved out of London to Yorkshire a short time ago. They should be safer there.

She turned her attention back to Paul, who was waiting patiently for her to speak. 'I was a very sickly baby, and Mum was too busy with a large family to be able to give me much time. I wouldn't be alive today if Rose hadn't looked after me,' she explained quietly. 'I owe her more than I could ever repay. We all do.'

Paul shot her a sideways glance. 'I didn't know that. I've obviously misjudged her.'

'Everyone does. On the surface she appears tough and emotionless, but that's merely a façade, she can be hurt just like anyone else.'

He reached across and took hold of her hand. 'I'm sorry. I know you had a tough time when you were a child but you've never told me much about it.'

That was true enough, she hadn't, and perhaps it was time she did. 'Well, we came from the roughest street in Bermondsey. As a child Rose fought and studied until she was able to get into university. It was a very hard time for her but she never gave up, and eventually qualified as a solicitor.'

'Ah, now I'm beginning to understand the love and respect you all have for her, but to be honest I find her rather frightening at times. She is a formidable character,' Paul said, as he drove through the gates of Richmond Park. He slowed down so they could enjoy the beauty of the open parkland.

'Good job she is like that,' Annie told him with a hint of sadness in her voice. Her sister hadn't had any doubt that there was going to be another war and was already training with the Women's Voluntary Service, ready to help when necessary. 'We're going to need people like her if we are to survive another war.'

'I'm sure you're right. What are you going to do?' he asked, changing the subject. 'There won't be much call for a fashion editor until this lot's over.'

'No, you're right.' She sighed deeply, hating the prospect of leaving the job she loved. She'd started on a popular women's magazine at the age of sixteen and had worked her way up over the years, and she found her work as fashion editor interesting and fulfilling. Rose had tried hard to persuade her to go to university but Annie hadn't wanted that. She didn't have her sister's passion

for learning and had been more interested in going out to work. She had always been good at art, English and languages, so when her application for a job with the magazine had been successful, she'd jumped at the chance. Rose had argued that Annie should make the most of her talents by continuing her education; but she wouldn't be swayed, and she was glad she hadn't because her time with the magazine had been very happy. It was going to be an awful wrench if she had to leave all her friends, especially Chantal Dean. Chantal came from Paris and, after marrying an Englishman, had made her home in London; and when he'd died suddenly she had stayed on. Annie smiled when she thought about the friendship she'd formed with Chantal; they spoke French all the time, and Annie had spent her annual holidays in France with Chantal for the last five years. Now all that was going to change; like Paul she doubted if she could stand on the sidelines either.

'Join the WAAF,' he suggested. 'The school you went to in Roehampton was excellent, and with your aptitude for languages you should be able to get an interesting job. You never know, we might be able to wangle a posting to the same place.' He grinned boyishly. 'It could all be jolly good fun.'

He doesn't know what he's talking about, she thought wearily, but said nothing. Let him keep his enthusiasm for a while longer. Reality would catch up with him soon enough. But he was right and her grasp of French and German might be useful. Because of Chantal her French was fluent and she spoke it as easily as English; her German was quite good because she'd loved languages

and her teacher had encouraged her enthusiasm, but she didn't speak it nearly as well as French. All she needed was some practice, though . . .

Paul stopped the car in a spot where the tranquil scene of Richmond Park was laid out before them, the magnificent trees casting shade for the deer to rest under or munch contentedly on the lush grass. He turned and took her face in his hands. 'Before we get swept up in this conflict, will you marry me?'

This was the third time he'd asked her, but her answer was always the same. 'No, I'm sorry.'

He looked crestfallen. 'I hoped you might change your mind now things are different.'

She took hold of one of his hands. 'I wouldn't marry you just because you're going to fight in this war. I like you and enjoy being with you, but in all honesty I can't say I'm madly in love with you. I've never let you believe I feel anything but friendship for you,' she reminded him.

'I know but I keep hoping you'll change your mind.'

'Please don't hold on to false hopes,' she told him gently. 'I wouldn't dream of marrying unless I felt sure it would last.'

He sighed sadly. 'You are the kindest, most gentle girl I've ever met and I love you very much, but I know you don't feel the same way about me.'

'I'm sorry, Paul.' Oh, Lord, how she hated hurting him like this, but she knew in her heart that it just wouldn't work. In fairness to him she had tried to finish their relationship several times, but he wouldn't hear of it and just kept coming back.

'Hey! Don't look so upset,' he exclaimed, kissing her on the nose. 'I understand, but I'm going to keep on

trying. In the meantime will you still be my girl? I'll need a glamorous picture to stick up by my bunk,' he joked, obviously trying to hide his disappointment.

'I'll get our fashion photographer to do a special one for you.' He looked so pleased with that suggestion, and this was one small thing she could do for him.

'Great.' He started the car again and headed out of the park.

'What does your brother think about you joining the air force?' she asked, changing the subject.

'He wasn't too pleased. He's joined up himself and I think he was hoping I'd run the family engineering business while he's away.' He drove slowly through the gates and then accelerated towards London. 'But I'm not going to let him have all the fun!'

She wondered how it was possible for two people to look at the prospect of war so differently. She was sad, apprehensive and worried about the future. So apprehensive in fact that she'd rushed out still wearing the old blue cotton frock she wore around the house, but he sounded as if he was looking forward to it.

'You're back early.'

Wally, her stepfather, was alone in the kitchen, a cigarette smouldering in the ashtray and a newspaper spread out on the table. 'Where's Mum?' Annie asked as she came in.

'She's babysitting for Rose. Bill's taken her out for the evening. I think they want a bit of time alone together.' He folded the paper up and tossed it on to a spare chair.

'Do you think Bill will get called up again?' She didn't

know why she was asking that; he would be one of the first to go. Her insides clenched with worry. This family, like every other one in the country, was about to be torn apart.

‘Well, he’s in the reserves and I think he was contacted a few weeks ago, but he hasn’t said anything to Rose. He was hoping this war would never happen, I expect.’

‘So were we all, but we were fooling ourselves.’ Annie sat down and shook her head sadly. ‘Why did this have to happen again, Wally? We’ve been so happy but now our lives are going to be disrupted, and all because of one man’s lust for power.’

‘It’s crazy, I know, but we’re in it whether we like it or not.’

She smiled sadly and patted his hand. ‘At least you’ll be safe this time.’

‘I’m not sure any of us are going to be safe, Annie. This is going to be a very different war.’ He dredged up a smile. ‘Anyway, why are you back so soon?’

‘We ended up in London, and Paul’s all excited, but I’m afraid I couldn’t share his enthusiasm.’ They’d gone to Piccadilly and it had been crowded with people discussing the outbreak of war. Paul had caused a great deal of interest in his uniform but she knew that very soon it would be a normal sight.

‘Thought he might be.’ Wally looked at her speculatively. ‘You going to marry him?’

‘No. He’s asked me to again but I just don’t feel it’s right.’

Her stepfather lit another cigarette. ‘He’s a good boy, but I think you need a stronger man, otherwise you’ll lead him a merry dance.’

Annie gave him a playful swipe. 'Are you saying I'm difficult to live with?'

'Not at all,' he laughed, ducking as she aimed another gentle blow at him. 'I just mean you wouldn't be happy with a man unless he was strong-willed and decisive. Any man you marry will have to have a firm hand.'

'Meaning?' She propped her elbows on the table, rested her chin in her hands and looked at him thoughtfully.

'Well, you've got more of Rose in you than you realize, and you know what trouble Bill had with her . . .' He stopped and began to chuckle.

'You're digging yourself into a hole, aren't you?'

'Don't look so innocent,' he said laughing, 'you know darned well what I'm talking about. Let's change the subject, before I get myself into real trouble.'

Annie laughed, reached across and gave him a hug. He'd been a good stepfather to all of them and she loved him very much.

'When's Paul going back?'

'Tonight.' Annie's smile was wry. That was the first time Paul had ever been eager to leave her. He hadn't been able to contain his impatience to get back to his beloved aeroplane – a Hurricane, she thought he'd said.

'He's got a brother, hasn't he?'

'Yes, Reid, he's about three years older than Paul.'

'What's he like?' Wally asked.

'I've never met him, but Paul seems to be in awe of him, and I suspect that's the reason he wanted to learn to fly.' Reid had always been out working or away when Annie had visited the Lascellses' home, so she couldn't help being a little curious about him.

'He's a pilot as well then, is he?'

‘Yes. He’s got his own aeroplane he uses for business. One of those Lysanders.’

‘I feel sorry for his family having both sons as pilots. They’ll be just like we were last time, eager to get into it, and convinced it won’t last long.’

‘And will it, do you think?’ All the talk in London had been about a short war, but she didn’t believe that. Gas masks had been issued, plans to evacuate children were well under way already, and the government wouldn’t be doing that if they didn’t believe there was danger.

‘I’m not a fortune teller,’ he grimaced, ‘but Hitler’s a powerful man and Germany has been rearming for years.’

‘Are we prepared?’ she asked.

‘Nowhere near. When Chamberlain came back from his visit with Hitler and waved that bit of paper saying there wouldn’t be a war, it lulled some into a false sense of security.’

‘When you look back you can see that it was unwise to believe anything Hitler said, or signed, wasn’t it?’ She for one had held on to any slight indication of hope. She knew there were many like her.

‘It’s easy to be wise with hindsight but I think there are a few politicians who never trusted Hitler’s word.’

‘It wasn’t worth the paper it was written on, was it?’

‘No.’ Her stepfather gave a tired smile. ‘Let’s hope they don’t attack too soon. We need time to get ourselves sorted out.’

Her mother walked in just then and the expression on her face was troubled.

‘Has Bill been recalled, Marj?’ Wally asked his wife.

She merely nodded and poured herself a cup of tea. ‘Bill has asked George to leave his London home and live

with Rose and the children while he's away. He'll be happier knowing Rose's father is there to look after them.'

'That should liven things up having them both living in the same house.' Wally said and chuckled.

Annie couldn't hold back her own smile of amusement. Rose was George Gresham's illegitimate daughter and had inherited his explosive temper; he loved her and his grandchildren dearly. He wouldn't need much persuading to come and live here. Annie admired her mother so much for the way she had forgiven Sir George Gresham. She'd been in service to the Gresham family as a young girl and George had taken advantage of her. When Marj had become pregnant she had been thrown out and ended up in Garrett Street with Tom, the man who took her in. It must have been a terrible choice for her mother but the only alternative had been the workhouse. Tom was a brute and Rose took the brunt of his drunken rages in an effort to protect the younger children. When he'd been killed in the last war none of the children he'd had with Marj were very sorry, including herself. Then just after the war, Wally had moved in as a lodger, and about a year later Wally and her mother had married. It was a good marriage and they were still happy together.

Annie went to bed then, her mind churning away. What was this conflict going to mean to her and those she loved? Her two brothers Charlie and Will were bound to join up, but what about her sisters, Flo and Nancy? They didn't see them very often now as they had families of their own and had drifted away, but they were in London. There was also another brother, Bob, but Annie hardly remembered him. He'd run away to sea when she

was little and ended up in Australia. They had a couple of letters a year from him, but she doubted she'd ever see him again.

Thoughts of the war crowded her mind again. What were Hitler's plans, and would this country be given the time it needed to mobilize and arm properly? These were all questions no one could answer at this time.

2

December 1939

Annie shivered and pulled her collar up to shield herself against the cold wind. They had been at war for three months and nothing much was happening. Many were calling it the phoney war, but there wasn't anything *phoney* about it for the poor devils now under Nazi rule.

She shivered again, not caused by the cold this time, but because, as she turned the corner and saw the outline of their house in the gloom, she'd had a brief vision of Germans marching along the road. It was a frightening thought but it couldn't possibly happen, she told herself sternly; they had won the last war against all the odds and they would do the same again. They had to!

When she thought about the terrible losses suffered in the Great War it made her feel sick. Of course, she had only been little but she had still been aware of the grief and terrible loss of young lives. Pray God that this one would not be so bad.

The Germans seemed to be an unstoppable force, but they *had* to be stopped, and that was going to need a supreme effort from everyone, including herself, so she was going to have to make a decision soon.

She opened the back door, pushed aside the blackout curtain and stepped quickly inside. Then she stopped in surprise; it was empty. The kitchen was always alive with

activity at this time in the evening, and her mother would normally have a cup of tea ready for her as soon as she walked through the door. This was an unusual break in the routine so it was obvious something had happened. Without a moment's hesitation she hurried into the garden and through the special gate in the fence. She knew where they would be.

Her mother, Wally, George and her brothers were in Rose and Bill's kitchen; when she saw their serious faces her insides clenched with apprehension. 'What's happened?'

Annie's mother handed her a cup of tea. 'Will has enlisted in the Fleet Air Arm.'

'And I'm going into the RAF,' Charlie told her proudly.

Annie gave her brothers a startled look. It wasn't like them to be parted, they were more like twins than brothers. 'Why aren't you going into the same service?'

'No way!' Charlie held his hands up in horror. 'I don't like the sea, I want to keep my feet firmly on solid ground. We're both going to be aircraft mechanics but I will be on an airfield while Will is tossing about on an aircraft carrier.'

'But why didn't you wait until you were called up, like Bill did?'

'If we'd done that, Annie,' Will explained patiently, 'we wouldn't have had a choice. You know how mad we've always been about engines, and by volunteering we've been able to go into the branch of the service we want. I wouldn't have been able to get into the navy if I'd left it much longer.'

They were right, of course, and it was time she made

her own mind up about what she was going to do. 'When are you leaving?'

'We're all going at the end of the week,' Bill told her quietly.

This was it, then. Bill and Will in the navy and Charlie in the air force. Nothing was ever going to be the same again. Annie went and slipped her arms around Bill's waist, gave him a hug, then did the same to her brothers. 'You all take care,' she whispered.

Bill smiled. 'We will, and you never know I might be given a nice desk somewhere.'

Annie looked up at him hopefully. 'Is there any chance of that?'

His smile was wry. 'There's always a chance.'

Annie sat down, not sure that her legs would hold her much longer. She knew, as well as Bill did, that the chances of him being given a shore job were remote. This was a triple blow. She had known it was going to happen but had clung on to the foolish hope that her family would be spared. She looked into Rose's eyes, but they told her nothing. Her sister would accept the inevitable and fight for her family, as she had done all her life, but she would not let anyone see her fears.

'Hey! Why the long faces,' Charlie reprimanded. 'The sooner we all get stuck into this war, the sooner it will be over.'

'Quite right.' Bill put his arm around his wife's shoulders and grinned. 'We don't know where any of us will be at Christmas, so I suggest we have one hell of a party before we leave.'

There was a chorus of approval and everyone roused themselves from their gloomy contemplation of the

future. By the time they'd finished their planning it was clear that this was going to be the best party they'd ever thrown, even if the reason behind it all was a sad one.

'Rosie.' Annie looked into the kitchen. It was two weeks since the men had joined up but Rose was obviously preparing for Christmas as if everyone was going to be there. 'Are you busy?'

'No, come in. I've just got to put the last two puddings on to boil.'

Annie sniffed appreciatively. 'It smells wonderful in here.'

'This will be the last chance to have proper Christmas puddings, I think.'

Rose adjusted the gas under the saucepan, and then sat down. 'Once our store cupboards are empty there won't be any more treats.'

'Have you heard from Bill?'

'Yes, had a letter this morning, but he didn't tell me what he was doing. I don't suppose it's allowed.' Rose gave a slight shrug and changed the subject. 'Have you heard from Paul?'

'Had three letters all at once, but I haven't a clue where he is. He might not even be in this country.' The letters had been unusually subdued for Paul, but that was probably because he knew they would be censored before they were sent on to their destination.

'Let's hope some of them can get home for Christmas.' Rose got up and put the kettle on. 'We'll have a cup of tea and some biscuits. You look as if you've got something on your mind.'

Annie laughed. 'You know me too well.'

‘Right, tell me what’s troubling you.’ Rose placed a cup in front of Annie, opened the tin of biscuits, and then settled down again and waited.

‘I’ve left my job.’ It had been a wrench but Annie knew it had to be done. A lot of the people she’d worked with over the years had already joined the forces and the magazine was being produced with a skeleton staff. Chantal had already left to stay with her husband’s relatives in Edinburgh.

Rose dunked a biscuit and nodded. ‘I thought you would. What are you going to do?’

‘That’s what I want to talk about. I was thinking of joining the WAAF.’ She stirred her tea thoughtfully; it wasn’t an easy decision to make. ‘What do you think?’

‘If that’s what you want to do, then go ahead, you don’t have to get my approval, you know. You’re a grown woman now, Annie.’

‘I know,’ she grinned at her sister, ‘but it’s hard to break the habit of a lifetime.’

‘Why the WAAF? Are you hoping to stay near Paul?’

‘No, now he’s in the RAF I’m hoping he will meet someone else. He won’t take no for an answer, but no amount of persistence will make me change my mind.’

‘You’re wise to wait, Annie, don’t take second best.’ Rose poured them another cup of tea. ‘So tell me then, why the WAAF?’

‘Well, I’ve been down to the recruitment office and they were very interested in my languages, and besides . . .’ She cast Rose a sheepish glance. ‘I like the colour of the uniform best. Air force blue is much nicer than khaki.’

‘Ah, well, that settles it, then,’ Rose joked, her eyes crinkling at the corners, obviously amused.

Annie knew it was a shallow reason, but she really hadn’t known what to do. She’d agonized over it night after night, trying to decide what would be the right thing for her. She changed the subject. ‘Are you going to evacuate the children, Rosie?’

‘Not at the moment, things are pretty quiet and we’re not in the heart of London this time. I’d rather wait and see what happens.’

‘Bill told me to make sure you send the children to a safe place if things get rough.’ Rose raised an eyebrow and Annie laughed. ‘I know, you won’t take any notice of me but think about Bill. You don’t want him worrying while he’s away, do you?’

‘That’s sneaky,’ Rose scolded. ‘But you’re right, and I promise to take the children away if it becomes necessary. Dad’s bought a house in Wales and he’s there now getting it ready. Bill said it’s got four bedrooms so we should be able to cram the lot of us in if necessary, and it should be out of the firing line.’

‘Let’s hope it is.’ Annie thought of Rose’s father, George Gresham, with affection. He would make sure Rose and his grandchildren were safe. After their first explosive meeting when Rose had been about sixteen, George had been welcomed into the family. Father and daughter were both strong characters and often clashed but the love and respect between them was obvious.

‘Of course I’ve had a terrible row with Dad about it. He’s been rushing around the country looking for a place for us to hide in!’ Rose was clearly exasperated. ‘We’re