We'll Meet Again

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Chapter One

Saturday 7th September 1940

Sheila stood and looked at the pile of rubble, her mind and body so numb she could not think, could not cry, could not even move. Her home, which had stood near the corner of Mile End Road and White Horse Lane, was gone. She couldn't take it in.

The day had started out so well too. Although it was the beginning of September, it had been more like midsummer with the blue, cloudless skies and the sun beating down on a population making plans for the evening. Her friend Janet, who worked alongside her at Morton's general store in Hackney, had suggested going to a dance – they both loved dancing – and they had, between customers, been deciding what to wear. Being wartime, there wasn't much choice, but whether the evening would be as warm as the day and they could wear summer frocks or if the going down of the sun might bring a chill to the air and they would be better in a skirt, blouse and cardigan was the gist of their conversation, not Hitler and his bombs.

'Bert will call for me and we'll meet you outside,' Janet had said. 'Chris will come too, won't he?'

'I expect so. He'll be at the football match this afternoon, but he'll be back by the time we leave off. I'll call on my way home and ask him.'

Sheila had known Christopher Jarrett since schooldays, as she had Janet and Bert Harris, and they often went about as a foursome. Whether Chris would end up being her permanent boyfriend, she didn't know. He was good-looking with his fair hair and blue eyes, and she liked him a lot but was that enough? Ma said they were both young and there was plenty of time to find Mr Right, which had made her laugh because Ma had married Pa when she was only seventeen and theirs had been a true love match.

She had just finished serving a customer when the air raid siren went, but apart from looking up from adding up the lady's bill, she took little notice. At the beginning of the war, that banshee up-and-down wail had driven them all to the shelters as soon as they heard it, but they had become blasé about it now and only went down to the basement when they heard aeroplanes overhead and the uneven drone of their engines told them they were German. Sheila and Janet saw no reason to panic. There had been raids before, a few bombs dropped here and there, but nothing to what the airfields around the capital and the south coast had endured, and in due course the All Clear had sounded and they went on working with hardly a pause. At going home time, they might see a bomb crater where once a house or shop had stood, and houses with windows and doors blown out, and they might wonder about casualties but, so far, that had been all.

This Saturday was different. Almost before the siren had stopped its wailing, they heard the drone of aeroplanes and had gone to the shop door to see the sky filled with a mass of bombers, too many to count. An ARP warden had cycled up the road

blowing a whistle and shouting, 'Take cover! Take cover! It's going to be a bad one.'

'Down to the cellar, you two,' Mr Morton had said, coming up behind them. 'And don't forget your gas masks.'

Even as they turned to obey, they could see the bombs leaving the aircraft and spiralling earthwards. Grabbing their gas masks and handbags they had clattered down the stone steps into the basement, normally used to store stock. There among the shelves and boxes a space had been cleared for a few chairs and a table on which stood an oil lamp and some matches.

Mr and Mrs Morton had followed them down a minute or two later. He was carrying a canvas bag of money taken from the till, and she had a flask and some mugs. They sat drinking tea and listening to the thuds and bangs, feeling the earth shake and speculating on what was happening above them. 'I'm worried about Mum and the kids,' Sheila had said, trying not to sound scared when an extra large bang made the table rock and they saw the walls bulging. Miraculously they settled back without crashing down. 'I hope they're all right.'

'They'll be in a shelter, won't they?' Janet said.

'I hope so. The kids might have been out playing, but they'd have run home when the siren went, I expect.' Sheila's family was a large one, each sibling a little less than two years younger than the one above. At seventeen Sheila was the oldest, then Charlie, not quite sixteen, who worked at the docks with their father. The rest, five of them, were still at school. Mum had refused to let them be evacuated with the rest of the school, saying if they were going to be killed, they might as well all die together. 'Pa and Charlie will be at work.'

'Where does your father work?' Mrs Morton asked.

'At the Commercial Docks, in the office. But he's a part-time

fireman, so he might have to go on duty. Charlie works down there too, as a messenger.'

'My pa's in the Merchant navy,' Janet told them. 'He's at sea.'

'I don't envy him that,' Mrs Morton said.

'He said he'd rather drown than be shot or wounded in the trenches, and besides, the sea is the only life he knows. It's great when his ship comes in, we have a grand time, going out and about.'

'There's the All Clear,' Mr Morton said as the steady wail penetrated the walls of the cellar. It was six o'clock. They made their way up the steps behind him. Something had fallen against the cellar door and he could not open it. It looked as though they were trapped but by dint of much shoving and pushing, he opened it far enough for them to squeeze through. Treading on broken glass, they stood and surveyed the scene. The shop window had blown in and glass, vegetables and daily papers were scattered everywhere. It was one of the display shelves that had fallen and blocked the cellar door; tins of foodstuffs, flour and bags of precious sugar which had been stacked on it were strewn over the broken glass. The shop door was lying out on the pavement.

Over to the south-east, flames reached above the roof tops, casting the sky in a pinkish orange glow, suffused by smoke and grey-brown dust which hung in the air and blotted out the sun. Everyone was coming out of their houses and shops and standing about mesmerised, many were coughing on the dust.

The warden they had seen before came cycling back. His clothes were so covered in dust they were a dirty brown colour, as was everything about him including his face. 'Any casualties down here?' he asked.

'No. Where did they hit?' Sheila called out to him.

'The docks,' he said, dismounting to answer her. 'Everything

down there is a shambles. The West India docks are alight from one end to the other and the timber stacks are burning on the Commercial docks. There's rum, oil and molten pitch from the tar factory running all over the road. Ships and barges are on fire on the river. There are bits of blazing wood flying all over the place and starting new fires. You can't get near it. God knows how the firemen will deal with it.'

'I must get home,' Sheila said, turning to Mr Morton. 'Mum will be out of her mind.'

'Go on then. You too, Janet. Me and the missus will clear up here. Thank God tomorrow's Sunday.'

Sheila thought she knew every inch of every road in the district. It was her home, had been her playground, was where she worked, but it was a nightmare trying to find her way round blocked-off roads, rubble spilling into streets, and a cityscape changed almost beyond recognition. The nearer she came to home, the worse it was. And then she had stopped, transfixed.

This street of rubble had once been a row of terrace houses. Now you couldn't tell one from the other. Stones, bricks, bits of wood, broken roof tiles, twisted water pipes, smashed furniture, scraps of cloth and shattered glass were piled up like some giant bonfire. 'Mum,' she murmured, unable to take it in.

'Sheila. Sheila Phipps.' The voice was almost against her ear, but it hardly penetrated her confused brain. 'Sheila.'

She turned to face Bob Bennett. He was in his thirties, wearing an armband that told everyone he was ARP and a tin hat on which was stencilled 'Air Raid Warden'.

'Mr Bennett. Where's Mum? And the kids? And Pa? Where are they?'

He put his hand on her shoulder. 'Your mum and the children were at home when it happened.'

'Under that?' She nodded towards the rubble that had once been their house.

'I'm afraid so. It got a direct hit. They wouldn't have known anything about it. The rescue squad got them out. They were taken to the school to be made ready for identification and burial.'

'All of them? Every single one?'

He nodded. 'Annie was still alive when we dug them out, but she died on the way to hospital.'

'Oh.' She was too numb to shed tears. She felt as dry as the dust that lay thick over everything. It was still very warm but she felt cold as ice and could not stop shivering. She found her voice with a monumental effort. 'And Pa? And Charlie?'

'We haven't seen either of them. They'd be at work, wouldn't they?' Since the beginning of the war, they had been working longer shifts and free Saturday afternoons had become a thing of the past. Bob, who worked in a munitions factory when he wasn't being an Air Raid Warden, was working every other Sunday.

'Yes. They'd be due home at half past six, except Pa is in the AFS.'

'He'd be putting out fires then?'

'I suppose so. P'rhaps Charlie stayed with him.'

'Very likely. You can't stand here, you know. You need to report to the Rest Centre to register as homeless. The WVS will give you a cup of tea and a bite to eat and find you some clothes and a bed for the night.'

'I don't want to rest. I want to see Mum and my brothers and sisters.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'Very well. I'll take you.'

He took her to the local school where the bodies were laid on

the hall floor in rows, covered with sheets. If the rescuers knew who they were, they were carefully labelled, though in some cases, they could not be identified. Sheila, following Mr Bennett up and down the rows, thought she must be in the middle of a terrible nightmare. He stopped and bent to read a label. Then slowly drew the sheet back from the face.

Mum looked so peaceful, serene almost. Usually she was dashing about cooking, washing, sweeping up and shouting at one or the other of them for not tidying away their things or getting under her feet, flapping at them with a damp tea towel while wisps of auburn hair escaped its pins. Now she slept a final sleep and the lines of worry had gone from her face and she looked like the beautiful woman she had been on her wedding photograph. No wonder Pa had fallen in love with her.

'That is your Mum, isn't it?' Mr Bennett queried, though he knew the answer very well.

She nodded without speaking. He covered the face again and went on to the next and the next. They were all there, except Charlie: Dickie, Dorrie, Maggie, Bobby and little Annie, who had only this term joined her brothers and sisters at school. Tonight the school was a morgue.

'We found them all huddled together,' he said. 'Your mother was lying on top of them, trying to shield them. Of course she couldn't, but it was brave of her to try.'

'I should have been there,' she said dully. 'I should have been with them. Ma said we'd all die together.'

'She couldn't have known that, could she? What with your father and Charlie and you all at work.'

'I expect she thought if there were raids, they'd be at night when we were all at home. I don't know what Pa is going to say. He doesn't know, does he?'

'We've sent someone to find him. Now, are you ready for the rest centre?'

'I ought to go and look for Pa.'

'Leave it to us, my dear. You can't go into that inferno and he wouldn't want to lose you too, would he?'

'No, I s'pose not.'

He took her to the South Hallsville school which had been utilised for bombed-out families. They were lying on mattresses all over the floor. Some were asleep, some crying, some staring in bewilderment, unable to take in what had happened to them. Some women were breast-feeding babies, others nursing minor wounds; those with more severe injuries had been taken to hospital. The children's reactions were as diverse as the adults about them. They cried, they laughed, they dashed about shouting and pretending to be aeroplanes with arms outstretched. Some, who had lost parents, sat huddled in corners looking petrified or weeping heartbrokenly. At the end of the assembly hall, a couple of tables had been set up and here Civil Defence and the Women's Voluntary Service worked side by side, taking names, suggesting places to go for the night, handing out tea and sandwiches.

Mr Bennett took her to one of the tables and introduced her, then left. He looked exhausted but Sheila knew he wasn't going home, not yet, not until he had accounted for everyone on his patch. He had a list of the occupants of every house and business for which he and his men were responsible and he was duty-bound to match bodies and survivors against his list.

'Sheila Phipps, that's your name, is it?' the lady in the WVS uniform queried.

'Yes.'

'Your address?'

She told her, told her the names of her mother and siblings, of

her father who worked at the docks and her brother who worked in the same office as a messenger. She heard her voice but it didn't seem to be her voice; it seemed far away, like an echo. This nightmare must surely end soon and she would wake up in her bed and the sun would be shining again and her mother would be bustling about getting breakfast, singing as she did so. Ma had a lovely voice. Thinking of that was her undoing. The ice melted and swamped the dryness in her mouth. Tears welled in her eyes and rained down her cheeks.

'Oh, you poor dear,' the woman came round the table and took the girl into her arms. 'There, you have a good cry. Don't mind me.'

After a couple of minutes, the weeping stopped as suddenly at it had begun and Sheila's back stiffened. For the first time in her life she felt hate, hate for Hitler and everyone who fought for him, hate so intense her fists were balled. If she met a German now she would kill him with her bare hands. 'I'm worried about Pa,' she said, stuffing her handkerchief back into the pocket of her dress. 'This will break his heart.'

'Have you got any relatives or neighbours you can go to until your father comes?'

'No.'

'Then you'd best stay here. He'll find you here. There are buses coming to take everyone to a place of safety. He'll be notified where you are. There's tea and sandwiches, nothing hot, I'm afraid, and a blanket and pillow. Find a spot and try to rest.'

She sat wrapped in a blanket, with her back to a wall, seeing, in her mind's eye, what it must have been like for Mum and the little ones with bombs falling all around them. They would have been terrified, huddling together for comfort. They had been poor, but Mum kept a spotless home and she and Pa made sure they were

clothed and well fed. Not until now, when it had all gone, did she appreciate that. The tears started again but this time they were a silent stream making a furrow down her grubby face.

'I feel so sorry for that poor kid,' Bob Bennett told his wife, referring to Sheila. He was dog tired but satisfied that he had accounted for every one on his patch, dead or alive, all except Charlie Phipps. 'It's bad enough losing her mother and her brothers and sisters, but now I've got more bad news for her. She's stuck in that school all alone.'

'Poor thing,' June said.

'I was thinking, do you think we could have her here for a bit? Would you mind?'

'No, go and fetch her. I'll make up a bed in the spare room. I don't suppose she's got any night things.'

'No, only what she's wearing.'

He finished the bowl of soup he had been drinking, found his tin hat and his gas mask. 'If the siren goes again while I'm gone, make sure you go into the shelter.'

'Surely it won't go again tonight.'

'You never know.' He kissed her cheek and went out again.

He was only at the end of the road when the siren sounded again. He hesitated, wondering whether to go back to June, but then carried on, driven by the need to speak to Sheila and, somehow or other, try to comfort her. There were so many tragedies being enacted this night, the wonder of it was how stoical everyone seemed to be. It was shock he supposed, it had numbed their senses, but what of the morrow when reality dawned? All these people bereaved and homeless. And children like Sheila Phipps, who was still a child for all her seventeen years, left orphans. What was to become of them all? The authorities seemed to have

concentrated on the need to deal with the dead, not the survivors.

There was pandemonium in the school as some of the survivors of the first bombing tried to find shelter from the second and others elected to remain where they were. Bob helped to settle everyone down in the corridors away from flying glass and then went in search of Sheila. She was sitting huddled against a wall, a cold cup of tea and a curled-up sandwich on a plate beside her. She didn't seem to be aware of her surroundings.

He bent to touch her arm. 'Sheila, I've come to fetch you. We'll give you a bed for the night. Up with you.' He helped her to her feet.

'Will Pa find me?'

'I should think so.' He said no more as he led her out of the school and into the road, just as the bombers arrived again. They could not see them for the haze of smoke and dust but they could hear them. 'Let's hurry,' he said. 'We've got an Anderson shelter in our garden. June will be in there.'

'We didn't have a garden so we couldn't have one.'

'I know.'

They could hear bombs whistling down and ducked every time, but they were not close and all they knew of them was the explosion as they hit the ground a little way off and then a wall of dust, smoke and flame added to what was already there. Searchlights were sweeping the sky and ack-ack guns were firing, at what they could not see. They were running now, in too much of a hurry to talk, for which he was glad. The middle of a street in an air raid was not the place to impart bad news. He kept that until they were safely in the Anderson shelter in his garden and his wife was pouring tea from a Thermos for them. Anderson shelters, though only made of curved corrugated iron, were supposed to withstand all but a direct hit. They were damp and airless, and

flying debris – stones, bits of masonry and broken glass – rattling on the roof didn't help already shattered nerves.

He watched her as she sipped her tea. She was a pretty girl, with thick auburn hair inherited from her mother, hazel eyes and a softly burgeoning figure, although swollen red eyes and the tears drying on her pale cheeks did not enhance her appearance.

'Sheila,' he said gently, putting his cup down and leaning forward. 'I am afraid I have more bad news for you . . .'

'Pa?'

'Yes, I'm afraid so. He was with a bunch of fire-fighters, pumping water onto a burning warehouse, when the wall collapsed on them. There were no survivors. I'm sorry.'

She was silent for a minute digesting this, then she said flatly, 'He's gone too. I hope there's a heaven, I hope somewhere, up there, he and Mum and all the others are together.'

'I'm sure they are.'

'And Charlie?'

'I don't know what happened to him. According to the people I spoke to from his office, Mr Phipps sent the boy home when the siren went, telling him to look after his mother and brothers and sisters. The last they saw of him he was cycling up the road hell for leather.'

'He wasn't in our house?'

'No. He may have gone into a shelter somewhere and will turn up later. Of course, he could have been injured and sent to hospital. We'll find out in the morning.' He knew that there were bodies and bits of bodies that would never be identified, but he kept silent on that score.

It was dawn before the bombing stopped, the sound of aircraft faded, the guns went silent and the All Clear sounded. They straightened stiffened limbs and left their shelter. Apart from the

crackle of fires, the heat of which they could feel half a mile away, everywhere was eerily silent. Bob's house was undamaged, apart from one broken window, and they lost no time going indoors.

'I'll make some breakfast,' June said. 'Then we can go to bed and try and get some sleep.'

'I'll have to go out again,' Bob said. 'I might be needed.'

'Needed or not you'll stay and have something to eat before you go,' June said. 'I've got a bit of bacon and I can fry some bread.'

'I must go and look for Charlie,' Sheila said.

'Not until you've had some rest,' June told her. 'You're all in. Then you can decide what you're going to do.' She put the frying pan on the gas stove and turned the tap. 'Drat it, there's no gas.'

'I'll get the primus stove.' Bob fetched it from the Anderson shelter and set about pumping and lighting it. He put the kettle on it, glad that they had taken the precaution of filling it before the raid; there was no water coming out of the tap. 'Tea first,' he said. 'Then food.'

Half an hour later, having consumed a slice of fried bread, a rasher of bacon and some reconstituted egg, washed down with the inevitable cup of tea, he reached for his tin hat again. 'I'll make enquiries about your brother, if I get the chance,' he told Sheila as he left.

June piled the dirty plates and cups into the sink to wait for the water to be reconnected and conducted Sheila upstairs where she showed her into a small bedroom. On the bed was a nightdress, a toothbrush, a flannel and towel. 'Make yourself at home,' she said. 'The bathroom is the door opposite. There might just be enough water in the tank for a quick wash. I'll wait until you're done.'

Afraid to use the water, Sheila put a dribble into the basin to get the worst of the dirt off her hands and face, then returned to the bedroom, stripped off her clothes and put on the nightdress.

As she did so and climbed into bed, it came to her that those few items of clothing were all she possessed. Her week's pay packet lay unopened in her handbag. She usually gave it to her mother every Saturday evening and was given half a crown back to spend on herself. It made her feel guilty that now she had it all to herself and could perhaps buy a few necessities. That was not the only guilt she felt. Why had she survived when everyone else was gone? She was no better person than the others, no more deserving to live than they did. What sense did it make?

She did not think she would sleep, but she did, only to be woken by nightmares which frightened her so much she dare not go to sleep again. At noon she rose, put on her dirty clothes and went downstairs to the kitchen. June was listening to the wireless while she washed up. The water and gas were back on. Sheila picked up a tea towel to help.

'Some damage has been caused to docks, residential areas and industrial premises,' they heard the newsreader saying. 'So far as is known at present, three churches and two hospitals, including a children's nursing home, have been damaged. Some people were made homeless but they have been removed from the danger area and steps taken to provide them with food and shelter.'

'Good God! Where did they get that from?' June said. 'You've only got to use your eyes and ears and nose to know there was a lot more to it than that.'

'They wouldn't want the Germans to know that, would they?' Sheila said. 'They'd have to tone it down a bit.'

'No s'pose not. We'll get a Sunday paper later, if there are such things, that is.'

'Has Mr Bennett been back?'

'No.'

'I think I'll go to the rest centre and see if Charlie's turned up

there.' It was something positive to do, something to concentrate on, to stop herself thinking too much about Ma and Pa and the others and a bleak future without them. If she let her thoughts wander in that direction she would collapse in a heap. Surely someone had survived?

'You do that, dear. If you don't find him, come back here. Bob might know something.'

The refugees in the school were still stoically waiting for the buses to take them away from the horror. Charlie was not there and her enquiries drew a blank. There were other rest centres in the area and she went round them all. There was no sign of her brother. She decided to trace the route he would have taken to come home from the Commercial docks where he worked, but the nearer she got to the river the worse was the devastation. Some of the fires had been put out, but some still raged. She could feel the heat and smell the sickening mixture of burning tar, rum, oil, sugar and death. It made her gulp for air. How could anything be alive in that? But there were people, wandering aimlessly about like lost souls, picking up bits of debris and dropping them again. But there was no sign of Charlie.

She was stopped by a warden. 'You can't go any further, miss. It's not safe.'

'I'm looking for my brother. He didn't come home last night.'

'He most likely went into a shelter.'

'But he'd have come home when the All Clear sounded, wouldn't he?'

'Tell me his name. I'll keep an eye out for him.'

'Charlie Phipps. He worked with my father at the Commercial dock.'

'I know Mr Phipps.'

'He died.'

'Yes, I know. Brave man he was, didn't think of his own safety at all.'

'But you didn't see Charlie?'

'No. Go on home, I'll let you know if I learn anything. Where d'you live?'

'We were bombed out. Everyone's gone except me. I stayed with Mr and Mrs Bennett last night. They told me to go back if I didn't find Charlie, but I don't like imposing on them. I ought to go back to the rest centre but they are sending everyone away and I don't want to leave without finding my brother.' It was the longest speech she had managed since it happened.

'Go back to your friends. You need friends at a time like this. They'll look after you.'

Her feet dragged as she went back to the Bennett's home. Guilt overwhelmed her. She had no right to be alive. The feeling stayed with her all day, a day of anxiety and misery, of no appetite and endless cups of tea. She hardly paid attention to Bob and June when they asked her, over the evening meal, if she had any other relatives, grandparents, uncles, aunts, people who ought to be informed of the tragedy, who would want to attend the joint funeral, people who might give her a home. Their questions finally penetrated her numbed brain. 'I think my mother had a sister. I believe there was some trouble, I don't know what. They didn't keep in touch.'

'What's her name?'

'Name? Who?'

'Your aunt. We ought to let her know.'

'Oh, Connie, I think. Mum's maiden name was Robins. Don't know if her sister married.'

'Do you know where she lives?'

'Can't say I do.'

'Look, dear, do make an effort,' June said. 'We are trying to help you. I know it's hard, but try and think.'

'I'm sorry. She didn't live in London, I'm sure. I think it was somewhere beginning with a B. Bl . . . something.'

'Blackpool?'

'No. Bletchley, that's it. Bletchley. Just before the war began, I remember Mum saying something about Connie and Bletchley being safer than London, being in the country.'

'Perhaps she was thinking of evacuating the children there,' Bob said. 'She couldn't have fallen out with her sister so badly if she was considering that.'

'No, but she said Connie wouldn't want to know and we should all stay together and Pa agreed. She was nearly right, wasn't she, about everyone dying together? Except me. Why not me too? I should be dead.'

'We'll get the Red Cross onto it,' he went on as if she had not spoken. 'They'll find her.'

'I don't want to be a nuisance to you. I think I should go back to South Hallsville school and be sent away with all the others.'

'You'll do no such thing,' June said. 'You'll stay with us until we can find your aunt.'

'And Charlie.'

'And Charlie,' June repeated, looking at Bob, but he simply shook his head without speaking. 'I've been through my wardrobe and found a few clothes that might fit you,' she went on. 'I think when you're bombed out, the WVS provide you with some clothes. You'll need to go to the school for those. And you'll need a new ration book. The council offices will provide that. You can do that tomorrow. Have you got any money?'

'I've got this week's pay packet in my bag.'

'Good, but that won't go far. You might get a handout too.'

'I don't want handouts. Mum never did that, however hard up we were.' She was indignant. 'I'm not going to start now. I've got a job. I can work.'

'Of course you can, dear,' June said placatingly. 'But this is an emergency, you know. And the funeral will have to be paid for. Did your parents have any insurance?'

'I think they paid into the Prudential.'

'That's something else for you to find out tomorrow. It will keep you busy.'

'But I have to go to work.'

'No, you don't. Bob will go and tell Mr Morton why you can't go in, won't you, Bob?'

'Of course. It's on my way to the factory.' He had no sooner spoken than they heard the wail of the siren.

'Oh, not again,' June said. 'Haven't we had enough?'

'Apparently not,' he said. 'Come on, into the shelter with you.' He reached for his tin hat. 'I'll have to go on duty.'

He saw them into the shelter with a Thermos flask of tea, some sandwiches and an attaché case of essential documents and treasured photos, some knitting and a couple of newspapers. He lit an oil lamp for them and then left, securing the door behind him. They settled in deckchairs with cushions and blankets for another night of terror. June picked up her knitting and Sheila glanced at the newspaper, but she wasn't concentrating and the words didn't make sense.

'What does it say about last night's raid?' June asked above the drone of aeroplanes and the noise of guns and the intermittent crump of bombs exploding.

Sheila obediently turned to the reports; it helped her ignore the noise outside. 'Biggest daylight raid of the war beaten off,' she read aloud. 'Thousands enjoyed the glorious weather and watched their

favourite football teams. Crowds at the greyhound stadium stayed to watch the dog fights overhead. There is no reason whatever for dejection or depression. The RAF is more than holding its own.' She looked up. 'Do you believe that?'

'Well, they can't tell the truth, can they? That would really give Herr Hitler something to crow about. If he thinks he can bomb us into submission, he's got another think coming.'

'You don't think we're beaten?'

'No, certainly not. Did you know Mr Churchill came down to the East End today to look at the damage and speak to some of the bombed-out people? They say he was moved to tears but very upbeat. He'll see us through.'

'I wish I could understand . . .'

'Understand what?'

'The reason for it all. The world's gone mad and I've lost my whole family because of it.' She tried hard not to weep again, but the tears defeated her. She scrubbed at her eyes and pretended to go on reading the paper, but the words were blurred and made even less sense.

'I can't tell you,' June said. 'But no doubt there is a divine purpose for it all and we must trust in God.'

'Trust in God!' Sheila's voice rose. 'Trust in a God that allows such things to happen?'

'Hush, dear, we are all given free will. It is mankind that has allowed it to happen, not God, and with God's help it will be mankind who puts it right.'

'I wish I had your faith.'

June did not answer that, instead she said, 'Shall we turn down the lamp and try to sleep? You must be very tired.'

Although June turned down the wick to a glimmer, Sheila knew she would not sleep. The cacophony overhead would be enough

to keep her awake, even without the thoughts going round and round in her head and leading nowhere. It ended at last and the All Clear sounded. They emerged and went indoors, not stopping to look at the fresh fires that raged all round them, thankful that they still had a house to go to. They went to bed and this time Sheila did sleep.

Bob returned for breakfast. He was so exhausted, so dirty and smoke-begrimed, he had nothing to say and after swallowing a cup of tea, went upstairs to have a bath and go to bed. He obviously had no news of Charlie or he would have told them. As soon as she had helped June wash up and sweep up the thick layer of dust that had gathered overnight, Shelia set off for South Hallsville school to find out what she was supposed to do to try and put her life together again.

She couldn't believe the devastation, worse than the night before and that had been bad enough. Hardly anything was recognisable: craters where buildings had been, heaps of rubble where streets should have been, flames still flickering among scorched wood, firemen with hoses snaking all over the place, rescue squads digging in the rubble, signs saying 'No entry. Unexploded Bomb', and others on windowless shops saying 'Business as usual'. There were houses with the fronts blown off but still standing, reminding her of the doll's house she had once had where you could open the front to reveal the contents. It had been handed down to each sister in turn and Annie had it now. She stopped suddenly. Annie was no more and neither was the doll's house. She felt the tears returning and blinked hard. She must not cry again, she must not. She must find Charlie.

She was in for another shock when she reached the school. It was in ruins. She was stopped from going closer by a warden. 'That's as far as you can go, miss. Did you know someone there?' He nodded towards the remains of the school.

'I was here the night before last,' she said dully. 'I left.'

'Good job you did or you wouldn't be here to tell the tale. There were hundreds in there. Whole families. The buses didn't come, some mix up about where they were supposed to go.'

'Oh my God.'

She turned away. She had been spared by Providence a second time. But why? Why, of all the people in her neighbourhood, had she been singled out to survive when so many more deserving people, like her parents and siblings, had perished? Divine intervention or something altogether more cruel?

She went to the council offices and was given a new ration card – her identity card was safely in her handbag – and was directed to a building where the WVS were handing out clothes. Taking the bundle she had been fitted out with, one item of which was a black skirt to wear at the funeral, she made her way back to the Bennett's. They had been good to her, but she would have to find somewhere to live soon. The trouble was her brain was moving so slowly, she didn't seem able to rouse herself enough to think properly.

'Sheila!' The voice was a shout that made her look up.

'Chris.' She had forgotten all about him.

'I thought you were a goner. I went to your house yesterday. I couldn't believe my eyes. The neighbours told me you'd all died.'

'Everyone else but me. Dad was killed down by the docks and Charlie is missing.'

'Oh, you poor thing.' He attempted to hug her but she pushed him away.

'Don't make a fuss of me, Chris, you'll only make me cry again.'

'But I want to comfort you.'

'I know. I'm sorry. It's just . . . Oh, I can't explain.'

'OK, but you aren't going to send me away, are you?'

'No. Course not.'

He turned to walk beside her. 'D'you want to come and stay with us? Mum won't mind.'

She thought of Chris's untidy house, all his rowdy brothers and sisters and his scruffy mother who smoked while she cooked, dropping ash everywhere. 'Thanks, but it's all right, Chris. I'm staying with Mr and Mrs Bennett. They've got more room than you have.'

'D'you want to come out with me tonight, flicks or something?'

'No thanks, I don't feel like it. Sorry.'

'Righto.' They had reached the Bennetts' door. 'I'll see you around then, shall I?'

'I expect so.'

She watched him walk away, rueful that she had been so brusque with him, but she couldn't deal with sympathy, she really couldn't. He meant well but that only made it worse.