

4 May 1942

Alma Braithwaite is dreaming of her brother, Duncan. His face is just below her own. He's picked her up in his strong, safe hands and is whizzing her through the air as if she's still only three years old. He's looking up at her, his eyes narrowed against the brightness of the sky, his teeth white and pointed in his open, laughing mouth. She can hear her own giggles, rippling through the calm of the summer garden.

Duncan's hands tighten on her waist. Urgency seems to be creeping into the situation.

'Alma! Alma!' It isn't the giggles that are making her shake, it's someone leaning over her, rocking her backwards and forwards. What's going on? Duncan isn't usually so violent. 'Wake up!'

A thin, harsh wail finally penetrates the dream, dragging her back into the present as it intensifies into an ear-splitting shriek. The air-raid siren! Curls – Jane Curley (whose hair is so straight you could darn stockings with a single strand) – is almost on top of her, pulling at her shoulder. 'Wake up! They're coming! The enemy's at the gate!'

'All right, I can hear you,' she says, sitting up and pushing Curls away. 'Get off!'

'They're going to hit us!' screams a voice from the other end of the room.

'Don't be stupid!' shouts someone else. 'They're not interested in us. Why would anyone want to bomb a girls' school on the edge of Exeter?'

'It's obvious,' says Curls, who's now leaning over the end of her bed, rummaging in the pile of her possessions on the floor.

‘They’ve always known about our existence. Goldwyn’s girls and Goldwyn’s brains are a major threat to their future plans.’

A switch clicks on and light floods the room, dazzling Alma. A high-pitched, reedy voice calls from near the door, ‘Hurry, girls! Hurry!’ It’s Olive Oyl, Miss Rupin, the housemistress, all tight and flustered. A long plait hangs down her back over her dressing-gown.

After the first serious bombing raid ten days ago, all the beds in Merrivale, the boarding house, were brought downstairs to the large hallway, close to the front door, so the girls would be ready for a quick exit. There are nineteen of them, and they’ve been squeezed in, side by side, the headboards backing up against the walls. You can do somersaults over the beds, from one end to the other, without touching the floor. The girls thought it great fun at first – there were bets on for the fastest round – but as the days have dragged on, and they’ve had to remake their beds every night, struggling to tuck in the sheets, finding shoe polish on their pillows, they’ve started to guard their individual spaces more jealously.

Still half blind from the sudden light, Alma crawls to the end of her bed, aware of urgent movements around her as everyone jerks into confused action. There should be a pile of sweaters, shoes and gas masks at the end of every bed, ready for emergencies, but not everyone has been conscientious about checking them regularly.

As the wail of the siren fades it’s replaced by the sound of engines. The approaching aircraft are low in the sky – they must have come in beneath the radar, which explains why the siren was so late – a low grey mumble that increases steadily, expanding into the dark spaces of the night, reverberating through Alma’s bones.

‘They’re going to pass right over us.’ Miss Daniels, the matron, appears behind Miss Rupin, wearing a black Burberry coat over her pyjamas and tartan slippers. ‘Follow me, girls. Quickly!’

Alma crams her bare feet into her outdoor shoes and shoves her head into her sweater. She can’t find the sleeves. Where’s the

hole for her head? Where should her arms go? Nothing is in the right place. She can't co-ordinate her movements. She's in darkness again. She can't find the way out. Her stomach, her breathing, the air around her are vibrating with terror.

'We're running out of time, girls!' shouts Miss Rupin. 'Just grab anything you can!'

Alma's head finally emerges and she forces herself to breathe normally. She twists the sweater round and slides her arms into the sleeves.

Miss Rupin has her hand on the front-door handle, turning it—
'No!' shrieks Miss Daniels. 'The light.'

'I nearly forgot!' Miss Rupin's voice is cracked with panic. She switches off the main light, plunging them all into darkness again, and opens the door. Everyone scrambles for the exit, falling over each other in the confusion, tumbling out in a disorganised mass.

Alma's friends, Curls, Giraffe (more conventionally known as Marjorie) and Natalie, are waiting for her. They make a dash for the door, the last to leave, but Natalie suddenly stops, her eyes round in the white of her face, her red hair, black in the darkness, standing up as if she has had an electric shock. 'My gas mask!'

'Leave it,' snaps Miss Rupin.

But Curls, who never obeys rules on principle, darts away. 'I'll get it!'

'No!' screams Miss Rupin. She's too late. Curls has gone.

'We can't wait,' calls Miss Daniels. 'You'll have to catch us up.' She leads the other girls down the steps to the garden. Alma, Giraffe and Natalie hover uncertainly by the door, not sure whether to obey Miss Daniels or wait for Curls. Alma puts her hands over her ears and shuts her eyes, visualising the bombs falling through the darkness above her, but then changes her mind and removes her hands, afraid that she will miss the whistle of their downward flight and not know where they're falling.

The air around them is thick with the sound of Luftwaffe engines and Luftwaffe propellers, hiding the sound of the Luftwaffe bomb-bay doors opening.

She can hear cries of terror from the girls ahead of them, cut off abruptly as if someone is afraid the noise will betray their position. As if the Germans above them have some kind of radar that can pick up human voices.

'I've got it,' yells Curls, a few seconds later, and she's there beside them in the dark.

'You foolish girl,' snaps Miss Rupin, who has waited for them.

Alma can feel Curls at her side, her head close, fizzing with suppressed excitement.

'Olive's scared,' shouts Curls into Alma's ear.

So am I, thinks Alma, thinking of her mother and father, probably at home, sleeping an exhausted sleep before setting off very early in the morning for the hospital. Will they wake up and hear the sirens? Will they make it to their shelter?

ii

They run. The four girls, with Miss Rupin close behind, throw themselves down the steps and through the garden, following the cries of the girls in front of them. Giraffe takes the lead, her long legs easily negotiating obstacles, stopping every few seconds to allow the others to catch up. There's a moon, but Alma's had her eyes closed and they haven't adjusted to the darkness. She looks down at her feet but can't see anything, and she's running blind, her hands in front of her, not knowing exactly where she is. There must be hundreds of machines up there, thousands, millions, miles deep, an unstoppable wave of predators, wider than the whole of Exeter. The thunder of the engines, like the roar of a shapeless, nameless monster, booms over and around the school, making it impossible to think clearly.

Alma thinks she might be whimpering. She's aware of her throat quivering, her mouth falling open, but she can't hear

anything. However hard she tries to control her voice, it's linked to the inside of her head and has a mind of its own.

'Move in single file and follow me,' shouts Miss Rupin, who has somehow managed to get ahead of them.

'It's too dark,' cries Alma. 'I can't see.' She loses her footing and stumbles into the sharp branches of a shrub. The rose garden! She pulls away, but finds herself hopelessly entangled.

'It's all right,' she whispers to herself. 'You can do this.'

But hysteria is making her hands shake so she can't manipulate them and she's struggling to think clearly. She has to run. She can't run: she's stuck.

She pulls viciously and thinks she hears a rip, but still can't break away. She starts to claw at the branches, aware that she's tearing the skin on her hands, but unable to feel anything. 'Help!' she cries. 'Help me!'

'Stand still,' says a voice by her ear.

It's Curls. Immediately Alma stops moving, almost crying with relief now that someone else is telling her what to do. She can feel Curls's hands running rapidly round her sweater, searching for the place where it's attached. One at a time, Curls eases the wool from the thorns, bending the branches round and hooking them back into each other so they won't swing round and reattach themselves.

There's a series of shrieks ahead.

'Don't worry,' yells Curls. 'They've probably bumped into the corner of the science lab.'

Or each other, or more rose bushes.

'You're free,' says Curls. 'Are you OK?'

Alma nods, then shouts, 'Yes!' as she realises that Curls can't see her.

'Come on,' says Curls. 'Run like the wind.'

Miss Rupin's thin, penetrating voice reaches them from ahead: 'Hold hands with the girl in front of you and the girl behind you.'

And then, unexpectedly, they can see. Flares are dropping from the sky on miniature parachutes and the whole of the area

is bathed in a brilliant, artificial, greenish daylight. The aircraft, the birds of prey, are becoming visible and separating into individuals, their wings filling the sky. Nazi strangers are up there, thinks Alma, placing Goldwyn's School in their sights, moving the levers that open the bomb bays, laughing to each other as they send the bombs on their way, having fun—

There's a loud thud from somewhere very close.

'Run!' scream Miss Rupin and Miss Daniels, at the same time.

The newly completed air-raid shelter in Top Meadow is ahead, the gaping hole of the entrance unfamiliar but inviting. The boarders throw themselves down the ramp with relief, tumbling in on top of each other. Miss Daniels slams the door behind them.

iii

There's a surreal pause, as if they've fallen through the ground into a black, bottomless pit where time is suspended and the world has stopped. It feels as if everyone is holding their breath.

The building of the shelter was only completed two days ago and this is the first time they've used it. On previous raids, the girls were led by Miss Rupin and Miss Daniels along the darkened road to the nearest street shelter where they sat for hours, their feet in water that was leaking from a damaged mains pipe. They would never have made it there tonight. This bombing is different from anything they've experienced before.

It starts again, more terrifying in the shelter than outside because the sound is magnified, booming across the roof, echoing in all directions. Every bomb seems to be exploding directly above them or just outside the door, threatening to split them open and burn them up. Alma curls herself into a tight ball and stuffs her fists into her ears, but nothing can stop the

IO

reverberations. She tries to think about the people out there, those whose homes are going up in flames, the ones who didn't get to a shelter on time, but her thoughts keep returning to her parents. Are they in a safe place?

'Don't think about it,' she says to herself. 'There's nothing you can do.'

A wavering light cuts through the darkness and one or two of the girls give a ragged cheer. Miss Rupin has found a torch.

'It was in my dressing-gown pocket,' she says between the explosions, as if amazed by her efficiency. The pool of light spreads outwards, like the beam of a lighthouse, friendly and reassuring, wavering at the edges as Miss Rupin's hands shake. Everything outside the light diminishes into uncertainty.

The new shelter is surprisingly spacious, with plenty of room for the nineteen girls, Miss Rupin and Miss Daniels. It's built from concrete blocks, with wooden benches round the edges, and the ground is covered with duckboards to protect their feet from the bare soil. Alma, Curls, Natalie and Giraffe find a place on a bench and huddle together.

There's a lull in the bombing, and in the unexpected silence, they can hear breathless sobbing from someone outside the range of the torch.

'My dear,' says Miss Rupin, 'you mustn't worry. We're all safe here.'

It's Miss Daniels, who is trying to hide her distress, muffling the sound with her hands. 'Bubble and Squeak,' she gasps between sobs.

'Oh, no!' cries one of the younger girls.

The girls stare at the hidden shape of Miss Daniels in the darkness. They all know her two black-and-white cats. Bubble has a patch of white on the right front paw; Squeak has a patch on the left.

'They weren't in my room when the siren started. I would have gone to look for them, but there was no time. I couldn't jeopardise the safety of the girls.'

Alma thinks about the cats out in the darkness, interrupted in their search for mice, paralysed by fear, their black heads pressed to their paws, their eyes huge with terror. There's no provision for pets. It's not right.

Miss Rupin moves the torch into her left hand, letting the beam move erratically upwards towards the roof of the shelter. She fumbles in her pocket and produces a piece of paper, neatly folded into four. Everyone watches as she opens it and spreads it out, shining the torch down so she can read it. 'I need to take the register,' she says. 'We must make sure we haven't lost anyone.'

There's another violent thump, a rush of falling stones or bricks outside. Alma grabs Natalie and Curls at either side of her.

Miss Rupin waits for a few seconds until the shaking subsides and the wailing grows calmer, then starts to call out names: 'Rosemary Atkinson.'

'Present, Miss Rupin.'

'Joy Dickson.'

'Present, Miss Rupin.'

The routine is comforting, as mundane as if they're back in the lower-fifth room with their form mistress, Miss Davies. She sits in the high wooden chair behind her desk, on a flowery cushion that she made herself with material left over from her bedroom curtains, and always recites the names as if they're morsels of food rolling around her mouth, some sweet, some sour. She peers over her half-moon glasses to check that the right girls are answering as they wait for the first bell, the signal to walk in an orderly fashion to the hall for Assembly. As they go down the stairs, the girls peep through the windows at the men from Exeter prison in the gardens, digging and planting potatoes in the desecrated flowerbeds.

But now Miss Rupin is shouting. Now she's shining her torch round to identify the girls who are too terrified to speak. And every time there's another detonation outside,

she has to wait for the echoes to die down before she can hear anything.

Someone starts to giggle loudly.

Miss Rupin stops. 'Is it entirely appropriate to be laughing?' she says.

'I'd rather go to my grave laughing than crying,' says a loud voice.

It's Curls, of course. Nothing will silence her. She'll be laughing at the end of the world, egging everyone on to destruction and mayhem.

A chill spreads through the shelter. 'That wasn't the right thing to say,' says Rosalind from the upper sixth, her voice prim and self-righteous.

'Nobody's going to die,' says Miss Daniels.

A younger child starts to snivel. Mary, probably, from the upper third. She's been driving everyone mad by crying every night since she arrived last September. She's homesick; she wets the bed (Matron takes care of that, but someone has to get up to go and fetch her); her friend's house in Plymouth has been bombed; her father is in a submarine patrolling the Channel; her mother hasn't written for a whole week.

A prolonged series of ear-splitting explosions drowns her wailing and brings an end to the register.

'Do you think we should light the storm lanterns?' says Miss Daniels, in a brief lull.

'Yes, yes, of course,' says Miss Rupin.

'She forgot,' says Curls, in Alma's ear. 'Olive Oyl's slipping out of control.'

Using the torch, Miss Rupin distributes boxes of matches to the three sixth-formers. The older girls, who were given instructions a few days ago while the shelter was being built, take it in turns to light each lantern. Rosalind goes first. Her hands are shaking as she struggles to ignite the match, scraping it across the rough edge of the box too cautiously at first. But once it's alight, she places the flickering flame by the wick of the hurricane lamp

and holds it until it has almost burned down to her fingers. The oil from the base creeps up and takes hold, settling into a steady flame. Rosalind screws the glass back on and hangs the lantern on a hook screwed into the centre of the roof. The space fills with a soft, intimate glow. The other two girls repeat the procedure.

‘There,’ says Miss Rupin. ‘It’s almost cosy.’ Some of the whimpering subsides.

‘What’s behind there?’ asks a girl, examining a curtain that has been set up at the far end of the shelter.

‘It’s an Elsan closet,’ says Miss Daniels.

There’s a pause. ‘What’s an Elsan closet?’ asks Natalie.

‘It’s a lavatory,’ says Curls, and everyone giggles.

‘They’re full of tar,’ says Giraffe. ‘They put them in bombers. My uncle is an observer in a Lancaster and he says you can’t use them. The splashes make you all black.’

‘Well,’ says Alma, with a shudder, ‘there’s no way you’d get me on that.’

‘You may not have a choice,’ says Curls. ‘Needs must.’

‘If Giraffe’s uncle is anything like as tall as Giraffe,’ says Elizabeth, from the Upper Fifth, ‘it’s no wonder he has trouble with the tar.’

‘He’s taller,’ says Giraffe. ‘I’m only a girl.’

Alma’s thoughts return to Miss Daniels’s cats. She’s trying desperately to banish a vision of Squeak. He’s lying on his back, his white paw stained with blood, crushed by a piece of fallen masonry, his eyes wide and glazed, his handsome whiskers torn off in the blast.

‘This shouldn’t be happening,’ says Natalie. ‘I’m an evacuee. I came to Exeter to be safe.’ She was sent away from the London Blitz. ‘I want to go home – it can’t possibly be any worse there than it is here.’

‘Buck up, Nat,’ says Giraffe, who has never been known to show fear. She’s so used to pounding down the hockey pitch towards girls half her size that she believes she’s invincible. ‘It could be worse. We could be dead.’

‘Someone needs to tell Hitler,’ says Curls. ‘Stop the war immediately. Natalie wants to go home.’ A nervous giggle spreads among the girls.

iv

Alma squeezes closer to Curls, Giraffe and Natalie in the corner by the door. They should have brought blankets. They’re shivering with cold and fear. ‘You were so fast asleep when the air-raid warning went off,’ Curls says to her, ‘I nearly couldn’t wake you.’

Alma tries to smile. ‘I was dreaming,’ she said. ‘I thought the noise was just me laughing.’

‘Laughing? Was it entirely appropriate at a time like that?’ says Curls.

It’s impossible to know which sounds are bombs and which are anti-aircraft fire, as though the guns have been set up on Top Meadow, directly above the shelter. Lines of detonations crack over their heads, as if someone is running over the grass. A machine gun? Are the Huns flying so low that they can fire at any sign of life on the ground?

An engine shrieks. A plane is diving towards them – it’s going to crash, right on top of them— Alma hunches her shoulders, bracing for the moment of impact, shrivelling into herself. A huge blast shakes the shelter. Another and another. The lamps sway violently and two go out. The girls scream and grab each other.

‘Mummy!’ shrieks someone.

‘Stay in your seats,’ shouts Miss Daniels. ‘We haven’t been hit.’

These could be Alma’s final moments. She must think deep thoughts. But what about? Her brother Duncan? Her parents? Her friends? The future life that she might never see? How can she? If she hasn’t seen it, she doesn’t know how to think about it.

15

‘Tally-ho!’ yells Curls.

What’s the matter with Curls? Why isn’t she scared like everyone else?

Someone is reciting the same words over and over, only audible between the blasts, too indistinct to identify. Like a Catholic with a rosary, although this is unlikely, as Goldwyn’s is strictly C of E – nobody’s given a choice in the matter: it’s decreed from on high. It sounds as if it might be Miss Rupin, but it can’t be her because everyone knows she’s an atheist.

The smell of damp concrete pours out of the walls, mixed with the tang of freshly dug earth, and thick, oily fumes from the lamps.

Another explosion.

Another.

In the pause between the explosions, a different banging starts up, sharp and regular.

‘There’s someone at the door!’ says Giraffe.

Everyone freezes. They look at each other in horror.

‘They’ve invaded,’ shrieks a tiny girl from the lower fourth, who is wrapped up in a yellow blanket that she must have yanked off her bed and brought with her. ‘They’re parachuting in!’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ says Miss Daniels. She goes to the door and opens it.

From her position near the door, Alma can see out, past the woman standing outside with two children. The sky is bright orange and a wall of fire fills the horizon. Exeter is burning. She tries to work out where her house in Norman Road would be but it’s too difficult. There are no familiar landmarks. Her parents probably aren’t there anyway. They’ll be at the hospital.

Everything looks wrong. Merrivale, the boarding house, isn’t where it should be. It’s windy – she doesn’t remember the wind when they dashed to the shelter – and everything seems to be on the move. The air is filled with smoke and sparks. She can hear glass breaking, bricks creaking, buildings collapsing—

Miss Daniels pulls the family in, slams the door shut and the dim dust of the shelter surrounds them all again.

Alma turns to Curls. 'Did you see?' she said.

Curls nods. She pauses, then brightens. 'Cable to Mr Hitler. Wrong date STOP Fireworks are November STOP May is apple blossom and bluebells.'

Alma wants to cry.

v

The woman and the two children stand just inside the door, transfixed with terror. Miss Rupin goes over and puts her hand on the woman's arm. 'Come and sit down,' she says. 'It's all right. You're safe now.'

But the woman doesn't take any notice of her. 'Our house —' she cries, her voice high-pitched and harsh, only certain words clear enough to understand '— on fire — burning — all our things — everything — everything—'

The two small boys are wearing dressing-gowns over pyjamas, their feet in wellington boots. They stare into space with blank, confused eyes, their hair tangled, as if they've only just woken up, their faces pale and streaked with dirt.

They're like Bubble and Squeak, thinks Alma. Bewildered, not understanding what's happening.

Miss Daniels approaches the woman. 'It's Mrs Shriver, isn't it? You helped on the cake stall for the fête last year. Do you remember me?' She holds out her hands for the two boys. 'Come along,' she says. 'You come and sit over here.' They stare at her, not moving, as if they don't understand that she's being kind.

'My husband!' cries Mrs Shriver. 'Where is he?'

There's a tense silence. A bomb explodes somewhere not far away and it's impossible to say anything for a while.

‘He wasn’t with you when we opened the door,’ says Miss Rupin, in a dry voice.

‘Where is he? I must find him!’ shrieks Mrs Shriver, throwing herself at the door, fumbling with the catch.

‘No,’ says Miss Rupin, trying to pull her away. ‘You can’t possibly go outside again. Nobody could survive out there.’

They struggle for a few seconds until Mrs Shriver stops resisting and crumples. ‘It’s all gone,’ she says. ‘There’s nothing left. We only just made it to the Morrison shelter. My husband said it was too dangerous to stay there – the flames were spreading—’

Miss Rupin leads her to the wooden bench and sits down next to her. ‘Everything’ll be all right,’ she says, putting an arm round her soothingly. ‘You’ll see . . .’

But everything won’t be all right. Nothing will ever be right again. It’s not just Mrs Shriver’s things that have all gone. Alma’s glimpse outside when they opened the door has shown her that the landscape has altered. Places are missing. All her possessions were in Merrivale. They must have been blown away into thin air. She tries to remember what she owned, what really mattered to her, but she can’t recall a single item.

There’s another blast and the last lantern swings wildly. The flame flutters for a few moments and dies. Thick, impenetrable darkness surrounds them once more.

‘Can’t we light it again?’ asks Natalie, her voice strained and thin in the ensuing silence.

Miss Rupin has a torch. Why doesn’t she use it?

‘It might be better to wait for a while until the bombing has stopped,’ says Miss Daniels. ‘We don’t want to risk fire.’

‘Keep calm and carry on,’ says a solemn voice.

‘Oh, shut up, Stephanie,’ says another.

‘That’s what it says on the posters,’ says Stephanie. ‘Are you suggesting Mr Churchill doesn’t know what he’s talking about?’

Curl’s voice comes out of the darkness, clear and sweet and strong. ‘Ten green bottles, hanging on the wall . . .’ There’s a piercing quality to her voice, a clarity that makes it impossible to ignore.

It echoes through the space and fills the air around them. Alma joins in on the ninth bottle, Natalie and Giraffe on the eighth.

Curls is a musical prodigy, a pianist, but all four girls study music and are used to singing together, familiar with folk songs and madrigals, accustomed to three-part harmony.

Eventually most of the others sing with them.

By the time they've reached two bottles – ‘ “And if one green bottle should accidentally fall” ’ – Miss Rupin has managed to turn on the torch again and two of the hurricane lamps have been relit. The air is once more filled with the murky comfort of fumes and half-light.

When there are no green bottles left, they start all over again with ten. Round and round, on and on, until everyone, even Miss Rupin, even the two small boys, joins in.

vi

They remain in the shelter long after the sound of the bombers has faded. Nobody wants to open the door to see the damage. Most of the girls doze, propping each other up on the wooden benches.

‘Are you awake, Alma?’ It’s Natalie, propped against Alma’s left shoulder.

‘Yes,’ whispers Alma, even though she isn’t entirely.

‘It’s not fair. My parents said the Jerries wouldn’t bomb Exeter. That’s why they sent me here. So I would be safe. My uncle Billy and auntie Jean from next door were killed – they had to dig them out – but they weren’t like real people any more, just grey, with their clothes all torn. The bombs missed our house, but the ARP wardens wouldn’t let us go back in because it wasn’t safe. You could hear Frannie, the baby from three doors down, screaming . . .’

19

Alma tries to listen – she wants to be sympathetic – but she can feel her eyelids drooping. She snaps awake once or twice, and on the last occasion, she realises that the heavy breathing in her ear is coming from Natalie, so she stops resisting and sleeps.

They're woken by loud thumps on the door. 'Is anyone in there?' A man's voice, loud and authoritative.

'Yes,' cries Miss Rupin, jumping down from her place on the bench. She staggers and takes a few seconds to stabilise herself before scrambling to open the door. 'We're all here.'

They emerge blinking into the pale light of dawn, barely able to recognise their surroundings. Merrivale has taken a direct hit. The front ivy-clad walls have gone, and the upper floors are open and exposed, a bedraggled skeleton dripping with water from the firemen's hoses. It has taken on the form of an ancient ruined monastery. The orange sky over Exeter outshines the rising sun.

Alma and her friends cling to each other, dazed and confused. Fires are burning wherever they look. Everything seems alive, groaning with the effort of remaining upright, teetering on the edge of collapse. Even the school buildings that are still standing seem to be hovering, testing their balance, unsure of their foundations. Walls are disintegrating, collapsing with a sudden roar, tumbling down on top of existing piles of rubble. Sparks flash from exposed cables, white cinders, driven by a strong wind, rain down like a blizzard.

'This is nothing,' says the ARP warden, an elderly, exhausted man. A rim of thin hair, blackened by soot, peeps out from under his helmet. 'You should see the centre of the city. High Street, Sidwell Street, South Street. They're all burning. Bedford Circus has been wiped out.'

'What about Paris Street?' asks Miss Daniels. 'My sister lives there with her children.'

He shakes his head. 'Can't say, I'm afraid. Everyone's out there fighting the fires. Students, fire-watchers, Home Guard, ambulance drivers. They've sent crews from Taunton and Torquay to help.'

There's a statue, not far from the entrance to Merrivale, that dates back to the founding of Goldwyn's in 1905 – a young schoolgirl with cherubic cheeks, ringlets and a very fetching floppy hat. It's still standing at the side of a mountain of charred bricks, miraculously undamaged.

Miss Daniels wanders away from the group of girls. She starts to call in a high, baby-like tone. 'Bubble, Squeak! Here, boys . . .'

'They can't possibly be still alive,' says Natalie.

Miss Rupin goes over to Miss Daniels and puts an arm round her. She talks to her softly for a while and walks her back to the group.

'She's crying again,' whispers Giraffe.

'So she's human, after all,' says Curls, but no one laughs.

'Come along,' says the ARP warden. 'We need to get you out of here. Follow me.'

He leads the boarders along a pathway through the rubble, between teams of men and women with shovels. The girls pick their way over broken glass and criss-crossing hoses, concentrating more on keeping their balance than working out where they are. 'Single file,' says the warden. 'As quickly as you can.'

They stumble after him, over stray bricks, shattered window frames, distorted cutlery, shards of crockery that must have been blown out of the kitchen in a fountain of exploding china and metal.

'Wait!' cries Miss Rupin. 'We must leave a message.'

'Not now,' says the warden. 'It's not safe to stay here.'

'The head won't know if we've survived,' says Miss Rupin. 'Parents will turn up.'

'We can deal with that later,' says the warden. 'It's more important to preserve human life than get messages to relatives.'

Mrs Shriver runs to the front of the line of girls and grabs the ARP warden by the arm. He stops. 'Please,' she says. 'My husband. I've lost my husband. Do you know where I can find him?'

The warden shakes her arm off. 'I'm sorry, madam,' he says. 'You'll have to wait. We must get these children to safety.'

'Children!' says Giraffe, who is about two inches taller than the warden. 'He thinks we're children.'

'It's less insulting to you than to us,' says Felicity, a sixth-former who's walking behind them. Alma has to agree. The sixth-formers wear skirts with blouses instead of the shapeless gymslips that the rest of the school have to endure and it's rumoured that one or two of them possess a pair of silk stockings. They're almost grown-up. Three sixth-formers left last term before their exams so that they could join the Wrens.

Mrs Shriver falls back, weeping softly, and Miss Daniels, treading delicately in her slippers, has to take her arm to make her carry on. Her two sons follow mutely, their pyjamas streaked with dust, their faces expressionless.

They walk for some distance, past burning homes, amazed by the gaps in a street where single houses have been plucked out in their entirety, leaving their neighbours intact. Eventually they reach a house at the end of a long road. Leaving them all on the pavement, the warden opens the gate, walks up the garden path and rings the doorbell. A woman in a flowery dressing-gown opens the door. 'Oh, you poor things,' she says immediately, coming out to them, examining them one by one as if she's searching for someone in particular. 'You must come in.'

vii

The boarders are led into a large drawing room with a pristine cream carpet and several large sofas. Nobody has the energy to speak. Exhaustion has soaked into them, like cold, numbing water, leaving them with no further resources. Alma's jumper feels inadequate after the journey here, too flimsy for the cool of

early morning, damp from the water that hangs in the outside air. A blister has started to form on her right little toe, where the shoe's rubbing against her bare skin, lacking the protection of a sock. They seem to have been walking for ever.

'I'm Mrs Mayfield,' says the woman in the flowery dressing-gown. 'Now, you just make yourselves comfortable in here for the time being until we sort out where you're going to go.' She stops in surprise when she sees Mrs Shriver. 'Helen, what are you doing here?'

'We've been bombed,' says Mrs Shriver, in a flat voice. 'We've had to leave our home.'

The girls stand in awkward groups on the wooden floor around the edge of the room, fearful of venturing on to the cream carpet in their soiled shoes. Ash drifts from their coats and settles on to the floor. One or two, crushed with tiredness, lower themselves to the floor. Alma experiences an urgent longing for their lost worlds of sleep, those last dreams where they were all wandering separately, untroubled. She looks at Curls, Natalie and Giraffe, and all four of them sink to a sitting position against the wall.

'You remind me of my two girls,' says Mrs Mayfield, coming over to speak to them. She's talking unusually fast, as if she's lost control of her thoughts and the words are struggling to keep up. It needs concentration to follow what she's saying. 'They were both at Goldwyn's, you know, although it was a long time ago now and they were day girls. You probably wouldn't remember them. Sylvia and Francesca, they were called, Mayfield. Of course, they're both grown-up now. In London, doing important work, the details of which they can't possibly reveal to their mother. Coping with circumstances like this every day of their lives.'

Mrs Mayfield's face crumples briefly as if she's going to cry, then straightens itself.

'Now, come along,' she says. 'Take your shoes and coats off and sit on the sofas. You'll be much more comfortable there.' She

helps some of the younger ones to shrug off their coats and leads them towards one of the large wide sofas. They climb on with her help and sprawl awkwardly among the enormous cushions.

‘Do you know?’ she says, talking faster and faster, her voice cracked and brittle. ‘Nobody ever sits in here any more. My husband and I were wildly extravagant when we first bought the house, buying all these sofas, but we were always entertaining then. We had such a social life, you wouldn’t believe it – parties, committee meetings, play-readings, family get-togethers. How strange it all seems. And now we have a use for them again. It’s simply splendid that you’re all here – so much more important . . .’ She doesn’t exactly stop talking, but her voice fades.

Giraffe rolls her eyes at Alma. ‘She’s nuttier than Miss Rupin,’ she whispers.

‘Will they send us home?’ asks a girl with black plaits hanging down the sides of her white, pinched face. Maisie. Lower fourth.

‘We won’t have a choice,’ says a girl in a navy jumper. Gwyneth, also lower fourth. ‘If the school’s been bombed.’

‘It can’t possibly be as bad as all that,’ says Mrs Mayfield, recovering some of her earlier volume. ‘I’m sure some of the buildings are still all right.’

Miss Rupin appears in the doorway. ‘They didn’t get the whole school,’ she says, her voice even thinner and squeakier than usual. ‘Plenty of the buildings are still standing. Latin lessons will proceed as normal.’ It’s probably an attempt to lighten the mood, but it doesn’t work. They’re all too worn out to notice.

There’s room on the sofas for all the girls, who squash up together, sinking gratefully into the warmth and comfort. The adults take the armchairs. Mrs Mayfield gazes around with satisfaction. ‘If only I’d realised,’ she says. ‘This is exactly what the room was designed for. I’m so thrilled that I can be of use to you all. Now, the kettle’s been on for ages, and we must have a cup of tea.’ She’s talking more easily, getting control of her voice.

‘Rosalind,’ calls Miss Rupin. ‘Sylvia, Felicity.’

The three sixth-formers climb wearily off their sofa. 'Would you like us to come and help, Mrs Mayfield?' says Rosalind.

Mrs Mayfield's face lights up with pleasure. 'Well, thank you, girls. This is the spirit that proves we're fighting for something worth preserving. Come with me into the kitchen and we'll sort everything out.'

After a while, the girls return with cups of weak, milky tea and biscuits arranged attractively on plates. They offer them round.

Mrs Mayfield follows them in beaming. 'Well, you've obviously done this sort of thing before.'

Sylvia smiles. 'We're used to it. We do volunteer night shifts with the WVS, making tea for the soldiers in their mobile canteens.'

'Tuck in everyone,' calls Mrs Mayfield. 'Carrot biscuits. I made them myself for the evacuees, but this is just as good a cause. There should be enough for one each. Only half a teaspoon of sugar each, though, I'm afraid.'

The younger girls help themselves to the biscuits shyly, checking first with Miss Rupin and Miss Daniels to see if it's permitted. One or two hang back, obviously desperate to take one, but knowing they must mind their manners.

Alma's hands are hurting. She's amazed to discover deep scratches from the rose bushes across the palms. How could she possibly not have noticed the pain?

Curly sees the cuts. She gets up and goes over to Mrs Mayfield. 'Do you have anything for my friend's hands?'

Mrs Mayfield comes over immediately and assesses the situation. 'I have a first-aid kit,' she says. 'We'll soon fix that.' She fetches a little tin – white with a red cross on the front – and takes out a bottle of iodine. She pours some on to a wad of cotton wool and dabs at the scratches. Alma gasps with pain and blinks back tears.

'Sorry,' says Mrs Mayfield. 'But if it doesn't hurt, it won't heal.' She puts gauze over the worst scratches and wraps a clean

bandage round Alma's right hand. 'There. That'll soon feel better, I think.'

Alma smiles carefully.

Mrs Mayfield suddenly sees Mrs Shriver, who's leaning against a wall, her arms locked round her waist, bent over as if she has stomach-ache. 'Helen,' she says, 'are you injured?'

'It's not me,' says Mrs Shriver, and bursts into tears.

'Oh, my dear.' Mrs Mayfield leads her to a chair and crouches next to her.

'It's George,' sobs Mrs Shriver. 'I don't know where he is.'

'But the children, where are they?'

'They're here. Robin? Jeremy? Where are you?'

The two boys creep up to their mother and Mrs Mayfield sweeps them into her arms. 'My darlings!'

'It's just that George . . .' whispers Mrs Shriver, starting to hiccup through her tears. 'He was with us when we left the house, but now he isn't.'

'You mustn't worry. I'm sure he's safe.'

Curly extricates herself from the tangle of girls on the sofa. Alma pulls herself upright and watches her go over to the two women. 'Mrs Mayfield?'

'Yes, dear?'

'Your piano – it's a Bechstein. Who plays it?'

'Oh – yes,' says Mrs Mayfield, turning around, as if the grand piano might not be where it should be. 'My sons, they play. Well, they used to, until . . .'

'Would you mind very much if I played something? It might help everyone calm down a bit.'

'Goodness,' says Mrs Mayfield. 'What a thoughtful idea. Of course, my dear, if you would like to. It would take our minds off our present circumstances. And it would be glorious to hear it again. My husband plays as well, you know, but he's in a prison camp in Germany. His regiment was taken at Dunkirk. I haven't heard from him for so long . . .'

Curly sits down at the piano and tentatively presses a key. The sound is soft and clear. She adjusts the stool, places her hands on the keys, pauses to think, her eyes looking inwards as she gives her attention to the music, and starts to play a Beethoven sonata. The music is like a song, the melody singing out over the dense chords of the accompaniment. The lower-fifths look at each other and relax a little. Ever since Curly came to the school, four years ago, she has been providing an accompaniment to their lives. They all know the story of how her parents found her, at the age of three, picking out 'Baa Baa, Black Sheep' on a friend's piano. Now she performs in concerts in London. Music lodges itself easily in her memory, so she can play whatever she wants wherever she finds herself.

There are photographs of two young men on the mantelpiece, both immaculately dressed in Royal Navy uniforms with caps set at a rakish angle, their faces showing pleasure and delight in their new status. Alma turns to watch Mrs Mayfield, who is staring at their portraits, tears gathering in her eyes. They must be the sons who played the piano. She has been part of a family of six – one husband and four children. Her husband is in a prison camp, the daughters are miles away in London where bombs fall almost every night, and maybe the sons are dead. How does she keep going? How can she be so cheerful?

There's a loud rap on the door. Curly stops playing. Mrs Shriver leaps up. 'It's George! Someone must have told him where we are.'

But it's the ARP warden. 'I'm sorry, ladies,' he says. 'I'm going to have to move you on. The wind is spreading the fires in this direction and we've been asked to evacuate the entire street.'

'Oh, no!' exclaims Mrs Mayfield. 'Will I have to come too?'

'I'm afraid so, madam. Hopefully, the house will be safe, but we can't be certain.'

For a brief moment, an expression of panic, raw and uncontained, flits across her face. She straightens. 'We really are all in this together, aren't we? Have I time to pack a few bits and bobs?'

The warden hesitates, but nods. 'You might as well. Don't know when you'll be allowed back, or even if . . .' He doesn't want to finish and clearly Mrs Mayfield doesn't want him to say any more. 'As quick as you can, if you please. I have my orders.'

Mrs Mayfield runs upstairs but comes back down with an almost empty bag – just a few clothes thrown in as if she has taken the first things she could find. She gazes round the room looking for inspiration, but it's clear that she has no idea what to take. Alma gets up and goes over to her. 'Take the photographs,' she says, picking up the ones of the boys on the piano. 'Just in case it all goes up in flames. At least you'll have something then.'

'Yes, yes, of course,' says Mrs Mayfield, staring at her without seeing her. 'Thank you, my dear. Such a thoughtful thing to suggest.'

Alma and Curly go round the room with her, pointing out pictures and anything else that might have some value. She puts them all into the bag, hardly aware of what she's doing.

Miss Rupin and Miss Daniels organise the girls into an orderly crocodile. Everyone falls into line obediently, too tired to try to work out what will happen next. Miss Rupin and Miss Daniels take the lead, following the ARP warden along the road, with Mrs Mayfield and Mrs Shriver at the rear. As they head for the outskirts of the city, the roads become less damaged and most of the houses seem untouched, but every now and again a group of men rushes past them, carrying fire-fighting equipment. Eventually, the warden leads them up a garden path and delivers them to another large house.

They're invited into a downstairs room – but Mrs Bates, the owner, is less welcoming than Mrs Mayfield. 'I have to get to work by nine,' she keeps saying. 'It's the evacuees' centre. All those toddlers. They can't manage without me.'

'They might not be there any more,' mutters the ARP warden, but nobody has any inclination to comment.