

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER



Kitty
Neale

LOST ANGEL

Hope never dies . . .

Kitty Neale

Lost Angel

AVON

For Shelley Blofeld.

Thank you, darling, for giving me two beautiful great-grandchildren and for making my grandson so happy. I hope your marriage will go from strength to strength, and though distant, you will always be able to see us as a part of your family.

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Chapter 1

Battersea, South London, September 1940 Nine-year-old Ellen Stone woke to the incessant wail of the air raid siren. Neighbourhood dogs were already howling and Ellen's stomach churned with fear as she flung back the blankets.

'Come on, get a move on,' her mother, Hilda, shouted, 'and don't forget your gas mask.'

Ellen's thin legs wobbled as she reached out in total darkness to fumble for the light switch. With the blackout in force, and the windows covered to prevent even a chink of light escaping, her bedroom looked gloomy in the dim glow of a bare lightbulb. Ellen pushed her shoulder-length dark hair aside as she thrust bare feet into her shoes, and then, grabbing the hated gas mask, she ran downstairs.

'Hurry up,' her mum urged.

They stumbled down the garden to the Anderson shelter, but could already hear the heavy, uneven throb of bombers flying across London.

'Oh, Mum,' cried Ellen.

'I know, love, I know,' she consoled, closing the shelter door behind them. 'Don't worry. They're probably going for the Surrey Docks again. Now hold the torch so I can light the oil lamp.'

With hands shaking, Ellen did as she was told, and though her mum was a tiny woman, less than five foot tall, she leaned on her strength. With light brown hair, small dark eyes and a thin face that ended in a pointed chin, her mother was like a pretty mouse in appearance, yet there was nothing meek in her demeanour. She could be soft and kind, but woe betide anyone who crossed her.

'There, that's better,' Hilda said in the glow from the oil lamp.

They sat on the camp bed, but Ellen jumped as a loud barrage of gunfire sounded, relieved when her mum put an arm around her shoulder, saying, 'They're ours, love. It's those huge banks of anti-aircraft guns they've set up in Battersea Park.'

'I...I'm still scared, Mum.'

'I know, and this can't go on. We need to get you out of London, but I don't fancy this evacuation lark where you'd be sent off to strangers. I've sent a letter to my old friend Gertie, asking if you can stay with her for a while.'

'But...but what about you? I don't want to go without you.'

'Your gran and granddad won't shift and I can't leave them. You'll be fine with Gertie and you'll love it on her smallholding. She's even got chickens.'

There was the sudden shriek of stick bombs falling, along with the clatter of incendiaries as they landed on roofs and pavements. This was followed almost immediately by a loud boom, and another, so many that Ellen lost count as the ground shook beneath them. She was deafened by the noise, terrified, her mum now hunched over her like a shield.

All sense of time was lost, but then came a strange stillness, a hush before more noise – this time the dull thud of walls collapsing. 'Mum, I can smell burning.'

They sat up to hear the crackle of flames and swiftly her mum moved to douse

the oil lamp, a tremor in her voice. 'The...the gas mains may have been hit, but it's all right, we're safe here. I think it's over now, but we'll have to wait for the all-clear. I can't light the Primus so we'll just have a drop of water.'

Fumbling in the dim light, her mum poured water from a bottle into tin mugs and, throat parched, Ellen drank it greedily. 'Thanks, Mum.'

They sat, ears alert, dreading another wave of bombers until at last, after what felt like another hour, the all-clear tone from the siren sounded.

Tentatively they left the shelter, only to stand almost paralysed with shock at the sight that greeted them. Their house, along with every other in the street, had been destroyed, crushed, and all that remained were piles of rubble.

'Oh, no, no,' Hilda gasped.

The landscape appeared vast, alien, and at first beyond Ellen's comprehension, but then she realised why. It wasn't just their street that had been hit; it was the next one and the one beyond that, the area now a huge open mass of destruction. Dust was thick in the air, along with the smell of gas and smoke. Fires burned and Ellen was dimly aware of the distant sound of bells clanging as fire engines rushed to the scene. Yet still she and her mother stood, dazed and unmoving.

Gradually more people appeared, covered in dust like them, and it was only then that Ellen's mother seemed to come to life.

'Mum! Dad,' she cried, grabbing Ellen's hand to drag her forward. They stumbled over rubble, disorientated, both soon coated in filth, until at last Ellen thought they might be in what had once been the next street. Even though she knew what to expect, a sob caught in her throat. It was gone, like theirs...her grandparents' house was gone.

'Mum! Dad!' Hilda yelled, falling to her knees as she frantically dug at the rubble. Ellen ran to help, their hands and fingers soon bleeding, yet still they dug.

'I told them,' Hilda sobbed. 'I told them to use their shelter, but they just wouldn't listen and preferred to crawl under the table. Mum! Dad! Can you hear me?'

For a moment they paused, listening, praying to hear voices, but there was nothing. They began to pull at the rubble again, but then hands reached out to drag them away.

'Come on, you've got to stand back,' an ARP warden said. 'It's too dangerous and the heavy rescue teams are here now.'

Exhausted, they were led from the devastation and not long after a mobile canteen arrived. They were given cups of tea, a woman saying sympathetically, 'Are you all right?'

'My parents, they're under that lot. I've got to help,' Hilda gasped, about to move forward again.

'You won't be allowed past the cordon. Leave it to the rescue teams. They know how to assess the risks, how to find people buried under rubble; it's best if you stay out of the way.'

The vast area was a hive of activity now, firemen, policemen, ambulances, heavy rescue teams, ARP wardens, but all Ellen could think about was her beloved gran and granddad. She was aware of other people around them, women and children crying, but she felt strange, remote, the sounds coming as though from a distance. She swayed, a rushing sound in her ears, and then, as her knees caved beneath her, Ellen knew no more.

Hilda was reeling with grief. It had been a dreadful twenty-four hours and she was almost on the point of collapse, yet she had to hold herself together for her daughter's sake. Her only relief was that Ellen wasn't hurt; the fainting fit a combination of shock and nervous exhaustion. She was still whey-faced, her blue eyes bruised with pain; her daughter, like her, was grieving.

It had been hours before her parents were pulled from the rubble, both dead, and for the rest of her life Hilda knew she would never forget the night-marish sight of their broken bodies. Now she had the funeral to arrange, and even though her friend, Mabel Johnson – whose house was outside the bombed area and untouched – had taken them in, Hilda felt so alone. If only Doug was here; but at the outset of the war her husband had enlisted in the navy. He was on a ship, somewhere at sea, and, with so many naval losses being reported, she feared for his safety.

'Here, get that down you,' Mabel said, her kind, round face soft with concern as she handed Hilda a cup of tea.

'Mabel, I've lost everything. My home, furniture and, until you all rallied round, we only had the filthy clothes we stood in.'

'You'll be found somewhere else to live, but in the meantime didn't you mention once that your mum had a sister? I expect you'll want to go to her.'

'She died years ago, Mabel, and after that her husband and son moved away. They didn't bother to keep in touch with us and I've no idea where they are.'

'Until you're re-housed you're welcome to stay here,' Mabel said soothingly. 'With my Jack away fighting in this bloody war and both my boys evacuated to Devon, I've got plenty of room.'

'Thanks, it's good of you.'

'Don't be daft. We've been mates since we were nippers and I know you'd do the same for me.'

'I still can't believe my parents have gone. All I've got left of them is this necklace, Mum's chain and crucifix. She always wore it, swore by it, but...but a lot of good that did her,' Hilda said, once again overwhelmed by grief.

Mabel let her cry for a while, but then said, 'I knew your mum well, although...I didn't know she was religious.'

'She wasn't really, well, not a churchgoer. The necklace was my grandmother's, passed on to Mum when she died. For some reason she used to say that wearing it made her feel as though Gran was watching over her.'

'Who knows? Maybe she was.'

'She's dead, Mabel. My dad too. What was the point of believing in a daft cross and chain?'

'From what you've been told, they didn't suffer.'

Hilda nodded and, though thankful for that, she still felt lost, bereft. She clutched the chain, her mother's face still so clear in her mind, and then slowly fastened it around her neck.

'That's it, girl. Sometimes we all need something to cling to, something that gives us a bit of hope.'

'I don't think this necklace has some sort of mysterious power. I'm only wearing it because...because it was hers...' And with those words Hilda broke down again. She was a grown woman, a wife and a mother, yet now her parents were gone she felt

lost. They had always been there for her to run to – had always loved her unconditionally. Now, without them, she felt so alone.

Chapter 2

Bombs continued to rain down on London, and Hilda soon lost count of the number of times they had to flee to Mabel's air raid shelter. The funeral had been dreadful and she'd barely managed to get through it. So many of her parents' friends had been there, people like them who had lived in this neighbourhood all their lives. Now they were watching it crumbling around them as more and more houses were destroyed. Those whose homes remained refused to leave the area, stoically saying that the Luftwaffe weren't going to chase them out, but Hilda had found it hard to listen to. If her parents had left Battersea, they'd still be alive. She had to get Ellen to safety and was still waiting to hear from Gertie, but the thought of parting with her daughter was almost more than she could bear. With her parents gone and Doug away, Ellen was all she had left.

Hilda stood in the queue now, there to beg for accommodation again, and when it came to her turn she said, 'Please, you must have something?'

'We're doing our best, Mrs Stone. We've got so many families to re-house and at least you've got temporary accommodation with Mrs Johnson.'

'My daughter's in a dreadful state. Her nerves have gone and she needs the stability of her own home again.'

'She should be evacuated.'

'Don't you think I know that?' Hilda snapped. 'I'm waiting to hear from a friend and if she'll take her in, my daughter will be sent to Somerset.'

'Perhaps you should go with her.'

Hilda stared at the woman, mouth agape, yet as her words sunk in, they gave her food for thought.

'If you ask me, it would be the ideal solution,' the woman continued, 'or you could try some private landlords. I'm afraid you aren't a high priority, Mrs Stone, but if anything becomes available, we'll let you know. Next, please!'

Dismissed, Hilda moved aside, her place quickly taken by the next person in the queue. It was hopeless, she thought, dejected as she made her way back to Mabel's.

'How did you get on?' Mabel asked when Hilda returned, footsore and downcast.

'It was a waste of time. I think you'd have to be kipping on the street before they'd help. Oh, I shouldn't moan, Mabel. I know there's worse off than me.'

'Yeah, you're right. Pat Randle got re-housed – not that it was much, just a couple of rooms – but within a week she was bombed out again. It's terrible, Hilda, and I live in dread of this place being hit.'

Hilda didn't say it, but she too lived with the same fear. It broke her heart to pass through the streets where she and her parents once lived, the area a vast, ugly bomb site now, and Mabel was right, the same thing could happen to this house, to this street, and they'd be homeless again. Was it any wonder that they were all so jumpy and Ellen a bundle of nerves?

'You're miles away, Hilda.'

‘Sorry, I was thinking about Ellen. If I don’t hear from Gertie soon, I’ll have to think about having her evacuated.’

‘It’d be for the best. I know your mum used to take you to play with Gertie, but after what came out later I wouldn’t fancy sending my kids to her.’

‘Don’t be daft. Gertie wouldn’t hurt Ellen, she loves children, and I’d rather she went there than to strangers. Mind you, something the housing officer said has set me thinking.’

‘About what?’

‘She suggested that I go to Somerset too.’ 11

‘What! But you’re a Londoner. You’d go mad living in the sticks.’

‘At one time I might have, but now I’m not so sure. The thought of being away from these bombing raids, of a bit of peace and quiet, is more than tempting.’

‘When this war started everyone said it’d be over in five minutes, but they were wrong. Families have been torn apart, mine included. Jack’s away fighting, my kids are miles from me and...and now you’re going too.’

Hilda was shocked to see tears in Mabel’s eyes. She wasn’t usually an emotional woman; more the take what life throws at you and get on with it type.

‘I’m only thinking about it, Mabel. I haven’t made my mind up yet.’

The air raid siren suddenly wailed and Mabel jumped to her feet. ‘Oh, sod it, not again.’

They hurried to the shelter, Hilda’s forehead creased with worry. ‘I hope Ellen’s all right. I wish I’d kept her at home now.’

‘She had to go back to school sometime, and, if you ask me, it’ll do her good to play with her friends again. Stop worrying. She’ll be fine.’

They sat down, Hilda’s heart racing with fear and her hand clutching the crucifix. Whenever she was frightened or deep in thought it was something she seemed to do automatically now and impatiently she let it go. It couldn’t help her, just as it hadn’t helped her mother, and she was just being silly.

Tense, they listened for the sound of bombers, but heard nothing and less than an hour later looked at each other with relief when the all-clear sounded. Back in the house Mabel immediately put the kettle on the gas.

‘I don’t know about you, mate, but false alarm or not, I could murder a cup of tea.’

‘I hate it being rationed. How are we doing?’

‘We’ve got enough and, anyway, I use the same tea leaves twice to stretch them out.’

‘Yes, I know. Sometimes I can see through the tea to the bottom of my cup.’

‘You cheeky mare. Still, it’s nice to hear you sounding a bit lighthearted again.’

‘I don’t feel lighthearted, Mabel. When I wake up in the morning the first thing I think about is my parents, and they seem to remain constantly on my mind.’

‘It’s early days yet, but it’ll get easier, you’ll see.’

They sat drinking their tea, Hilda trying to keep up with Mabel’s chatter while her mind kept drifting elsewhere – to Gertie and Somerset.

It was an hour later when the door opened and Ellen walked in.

‘Hello, pet. Did you have a nice day at school?’

‘It...it was all right,’ Ellen said, the stammer she’d developed evident. ‘I...I was frightened when th...the siren went off an...and we all had to go down to the basement again.’

‘It was a false alarm and nothing to worry about.’

‘M...Mr Green said th...the school will be closing. He gave us letters to...to bring home.’

Hilda took it, but after what Ellen had just said, she wasn’t surprised by the contents. It was a general letter, addressed to all the parents, saying that the school would be closing at the end of the month. As others had before him, the headmaster also urged that any children still in London should be evacuated. Hilda looked at Mabel, dreaded telling her, but the letter had sealed her decision.

‘I’ve got to get Ellen away from here, Mabel. If Gertie had got my last letter I’m sure she’d have replied by now. I’m going to write to her again.’

‘N...no, Mum. I don’t want to go away. I...I want to stay with you.’

‘Don’t fret, love. This time I’m going to ask Gertie if we can both stay with her.’ Smiling sadly at her friend, Hilda added, ‘I’m sorry, Mabel.’

‘It’s all right, I understand, but I’m gonna miss you,’ she said, a choke in her voice.

‘I’ll miss you too, and doing this blows any chance I’ve got of getting re-housed. I’m beginning to feel like a gypsy with no fixed abode, travelling from one place to another. I just hope it won’t be for long, that it’ll be over soon and we can come back to where we belong.’

‘Yes, mate, you’ll be back,’ Mabel said with a show of bravery now. ‘Once a Londoner, always a Londoner.’

Hilda knew she was putting on a brave front and smiled gratefully. If Mabel broke down she would too, but more tears were the last thing Ellen needed to see. Yes, Gertie would take them in, she was sure of it, and a little time in the country was just what Ellen needed.

It would be hard to leave her friends, especially Mabel, but in Somerset they’d be safe, Gertie’s home providing a haven until soon, she was sure, this dreadful war would be over.

Chapter 3

Ellen was shaken awake when the train pulled into Crewkerne station and climbed bleary-eyed out of the carriage. It was three in the afternoon as she and her mother stood on the platform, a bitter cold wind cutting through their clothes. Only moments later a tall, big-boned woman appeared and Ellen was amazed to see that she was wearing scruffy, brown, corduroy trousers that were tucked into wellington boots, along with a dirty navy duffel coat. Not only that, she was wearing a brown flat cap with her dark blonde hair tucked up beneath it.

‘Hilda,’ the woman cried, her dark brown eyes warm as she strode up to them and her strong features softened by a wide smile.

‘Hello, Gertie,’ smiled Hilda.

‘You look exhausted. Come on, let’s get you home,’ Gertrude Forbes said as she grabbed both suitcases. ‘My goodness, is that Ellen? I can’t believe it.’

‘Of course it’s Ellen. It was her birthday last month and she’s ten now.’

‘She’s so pretty – but has it been that long since I’ve seen you?’

‘Yes, nearly seven years and you’ve been in Somerset for six of them.’

‘Where does the time go? Come on, follow me,’ said Gertie, striding ahead of them now.

‘Blimey, is that yours?’ Hilda asked when she saw a small horse and cart.

‘Yes. Ned’s the only transport I have and I’d be lost without him.’

Hilda eyed the horse warily, but Gertie urged them to climb onto a bench-like seat at the front of the flat cart. She then stowed their cases in the back before heaving herself up beside them.

‘Right, we’re off,’ she said, taking the reins, and with a gentle click of her tongue, the horse moved forward.

Ellen had never been on a horse and cart before and found it strange: the gentle sway, the clip, clop of hooves as they rode along a narrow street. Soon they were passing through a small town and she listened as her mother spoke with Gertie.

‘Thanks for this. Thanks for taking us in.’

‘It’s nothing and I’m sorry it took so long to answer your letters. I don’t get post delivered, and rarely go to the village. It was quite a surprise to find two waiting for me, but awful to hear about your parents. I should have kept in touch with your mother, but when it all came out I wasn’t sure she’d want anything to do with me.’

‘She was shocked, but you know my mum, she never had a bad word to say about anyone. Oh, Gertie, I still can’t believe she’s gone, that they’re both gone.’

‘I’m so sorry, Hilda, so very sorry.’

Ellen leaned against her mother, shivering, her teeth beginning to chatter. ‘Mum...I...I’m cold.’

‘Here,’ Gertie said as a tarpaulin-like cover was thrown over them. ‘Tuck that around you and it’ll keep you both warm.’

‘How far is it to your place?’ Hilda asked.

‘It’s a fair trot, and don’t expect too much. By the time we get there you’ll find

yourself in the middle of nowhere, and as for those daft shoes, forget it. Like me, you'll need boots and the same goes for Ellen.'

'Gertie, I can't believe how different you look. In London you always looked so smart, if a bit severe, and I never thought I'd see the day when you'd wear trousers and wellies.'

'Needs must,' Gertie said dismissively, 'and anyway, I prefer them.'

'You said in your letters that you're fine, but it's been years since Susan left. Have you found anyone else?'

'No, and I don't want to.'

'Aren't you lonely?'

'Not really. I have my animals, and – unlike people – they don't let you down.'

'You sound so bitter, Gertie.'

'What do you expect?' she replied, eyes flashing. 'I lost everything for Susan, my reputation, my career, then after moving here she left me.'

'You could have returned to London.'

'At first I wanted to lick my wounds in private, then, as time passed, I became used to the seclusion. I love it now. I'm self-sufficient and I doubt I'll ever leave.'

'At the moment you're better off here. London is hell. Since September we've had bombing raids day and night, but mostly at night now.'

'You'll be safe here.'

'Have you heard from your father?' Hilda asked. 'Is he still in London?'

'I expect so, but I haven't heard from him and doubt I ever will. You know what happened when he found out. He almost had an apoplectic fit and said I'd disgraced the family name. He'll never forgive me.'

Ellen was at a loss to understand this strange conversation. Forgive Gertie for what? She spoke of licking wounds, and what on earth was an apothingy fit? Ellen wanted to ask, but knew better than to interrupt her mother when she was talking. She'd learned that if she kept quiet, sometimes adults would forget she was there, but one sound, one word, and they'd either stop speaking or chase her out.

They had left the town behind; the countryside they were passing through wintry and bleak. It was so quiet, so peaceful and warm beneath the cover that Ellen closed her eyes. She felt the sway of the cart and found the voices drifting, growing distant.

Hilda saw that Ellen had fallen asleep again and held her close. She sighed heavily, the tension in her neck easing. Gertie had welcomed them and at last they were away from the bombings. Surely in the peace of the countryside Ellen's nerves would heal?

'It's lovely to have you here, Hilda, and yonks since I've seen you. Just how long have we been friends?'

'I'll have a go at working it out. I was about eight years old when my mum started work as a domestic in your father's house and you were the same age. I think we saw each other occasionally, though at that time I'd hardly call us friends.'

Gertie chuckled. 'Yes, I remember now, and my goodness I was such a stuck-up little bitch.'

'Don't remind me,' Hilda said ruefully.

'When my mother died and I was sent to boarding school, it was a rude awakening. I missed her so much and hated it, yet it was worse when I came home

during school holidays. My father had changed so much and, other than religious instruction, he ignored me. If it hadn't been for your mother's kindness, my life would have been very bleak.'

'Mum was a good woman, but even then you and I rarely saw each other. I think it all changed when you were expelled and by then we must have been close to twelve years old.'

'I wasn't sorry to be expelled; in fact, I think I pushed for it by behaving so badly, yet I came unstuck. It was worse being tutored at home and I was so bloody lonely. My father was wrapped up in his work, the church, and was hardly ever home. After lessons I just rattled around in that huge house, with only your mother and the cook for company.'

'That was when Mum started dragging me to your house every weekend and during school holidays.'

'She dragged you! Was it that bad?'

'Gertie, I hate to say it, but it was at first. I hardly knew you, and, let's face it, you were a lot different from my usual friends. To me you sounded posh, upper class, and in fact, you still do.'

'It certainly didn't rub off on you though,' Gertie said, but the sting was taken out of her words by her warm smile. 'You've never mentioned it, but you must have resented having to come to Kensington, especially when my father would only allow you to play with me if you joined us in religious instruction.'

'I must admit I didn't like all that stuff from the Old Testament.'

'Oh, yes, he loved to talk about God's wrath, of fire and brimstone.'

'It frightened the life out of me, but Mum still made me join you. It was years later before I found out why. She thought a lot of you, Gertie, and knew that I'd have to keep it up or be banned from the house. I think in some ways she came to see you as her second daughter.'

'Did she? I thought your mother was being kind because she felt sorry for me. In fact, I envied you your family – the closeness you shared.'

'I don't know why. Compared to mine, your home was like a palace.'

'My life was so restricted that it was more like a prison. Thank goodness you came along and we became more than just friends. I wish I'd known that your mother saw me as a daughter, because to me you were like a sister, one who stood by me through thick and thin.'

'Now don't exaggerate,' Hilda protested. 'As adults we went our separate ways. You for teacher training, and me, well, until I met Doug, I only worked in a local shop.'

'Yes, but we always stayed in touch, and unlike everyone else you didn't judge me, or ostracise me.'

'Why should I? You're still the same person and a good one at that. Take now for instance. If it wasn't for you I'd have been forced to have Ellen evacuated to strangers.'

'When I read your first letter, asking if Ellen could come to stay with me, I can't tell you how much it meant to me. When the school found out, they couldn't get rid of me quickly enough. I was treated like a monster, a bad influence and unsafe to be around children. My father was the worst, saying I was an abomination in God's eyes.'

‘That’s rubbish. There’s nobody I’d trust more with Ellen.’

‘Thanks, and it’s nice you’ve arrived just before Christmas. Mind you, I’ve had enough religion stuffed down my throat to last me a lifetime, but as it was once a pagan festival I won’t feel like a hypocrite if we have a bit of a celebration.’

Hilda’s throat tightened. She didn’t want to think about Christmas – her first one without her parents – yet for Ellen’s sake, she’d have to make some kind of effort.

Ellen stirred, sitting up to look around her. ‘Are...are we there yet?’

It was Gertie who answered. ‘Sorry, but we’ve still got a way to go. Are you hungry?’

Ellen nodded. ‘Ye...yes.’

‘I’ve left a beef casserole braising in the range and it’ll be ready when we arrive.’

‘Cor,’ Ellen said, fully awake now.

‘I’m not much of a cook, but hopefully it’ll be all right.’

‘How do you get on with rationing?’ Hilda asked.

‘So far it isn’t a problem, and the butcher doesn’t even ask for a coupon.’

‘You’re lucky. In London we only get our rationed amounts and there’s talk of it getting worse.’

Soon a tiny village loomed in front of them, but Gertie just drove through it and out the other side. On and on they went, the light dimming and no sign of any other habitations, until at last Gertie eased the horse and cart left into a narrow lane. At the end she finally pulled on the reins, saying as the horse drew to a halt and she hopped down, ‘I’ll just open the gates.’

Ellen could see little as her eyes tried to pierce the gloom. Gertie didn’t get onto the cart again; instead she gripped the bridle to lead the horse through. Ellen could now see a small cottage, and as Gertie tethered the animal she watched her mother climb down from the cart, her feet sinking into thick, heavy mud.

‘Yeah, I can see what you mean about boots,’ her mum complained then held up her arms. ‘Come on, Ellen.’

Ellen felt the ooze as her feet touched the ground, then the sucking sensation as she lifted one foot.

‘Come on, this way,’ Gertie said as she grabbed their cases, ‘but watch your step.’

Tentatively they squelched to the front door, both taking off their mud-caked shoes before stepping inside. It was dark, but they felt a welcome blast of warm air, along with a low growl.

‘Oh Gawd, what’s that?’ Hilda gasped.

‘It’s only Bertie,’ said Gertie as she lit an oil lamp.

‘Bertie?’ she yelped as the growls turned to sharp yaps.

‘He won’t hurt you,’ Gertie assured and, as light pierced the gloom, a small white dog with a blaze of black on his face came into view.

The dog ran up to Ellen, yapping and jumping around her with excitement. She smiled, crouching down to stroke him. ‘He...he’s so sweet.’

‘He’s a Jack Russell terrier and perfect for ratting.’

‘Rats,’ her mother squeaked. ‘Oh, blimey.’

‘There are rats in London – in fact, probably more than around here. Now take your things off and make yourself at home while I see to the horse. I expect you’re

dying for a cup of tea so you can put the kettle on the range to boil.’

‘Why the oil lamps? Ain’t you got electricity?’

‘No, but at least I’ve got running water.’

The journey had seemed to go on for ever, and now unable to hold it any longer, Ellen said, ‘I...I need the toilet.’

‘Go through the scullery and you’ll find it outside the back door,’ Gertie told her.

Ellen barely took in the deep sink and draining board as she passed through the scullery. The wooden door to the outside toilet squeaked, but there was no light so she left it open, managing in the gloom as she perched on such a funny seat.

It was strange here, so quiet, but sort of nice too, and Ellen thought she might like living in the country.

When Gertie marched outside again, the dog at her heels, Hilda took a look around the room. The ceiling was low, crossed with heavy, dark beams, the room dominated by a huge, black cooking range. A small, scruffy wooden table stood in the centre, and on each side of the range she saw wing-back chairs, one with horsehair stuffing poking through the upholstery. Other than that there was a dresser, the shelves packed with a mishmash of china.

Gertie was right, this place wasn’t much, but nevertheless Hilda was charmed by the cosy atmosphere. Gertie had done her best, the tiny, deep-set, lead-paned window dressed with chintz curtains, the wide sill sporting a jug of dried flowers. Hilda found herself sniffing the air, her mouth salivating at the rich aroma of beef casserole.

‘It...it’s a funny toilet,’ Ellen said as she came back inside. ‘There isn’t a...a proper seat, just a long wooden bench with...with a hole in it.’

‘I never thought I’d see the day when I thought our little house was luxurious, but compared to this...’ Hilda had to pause, a lump in her throat. There was no house now, her home just a pile of rubble. Hilda managed to swallow her emotions. They were here now, safe, and that was the most important thing. ‘We’ll be eating soon, but in the meantime I’ll make us all a drink.’

‘Why...why does Gertie wear men’s clothes?’

Hilda paused as she wondered how to answer her daughter’s question. Ellen was too young to understand so, grasping, she said, ‘I expect it’s because it’s sensible to wear trousers when you’re working outdoors, and warmer too.’

‘Can...can I wear trousers?’

‘Well, yes, I suppose so, but I don’t know how we’ll get hold of any.’

‘Get hold of what?’ Gertie asked, catching the tail end of the conversation as she stepped inside.

‘Like you, Ellen wants to wear trousers.’

‘That won’t be a problem. I’ve got an old sewing machine and we can soon knock her up a couple of pairs. You’ll need some too, Hilda.’

‘Me! No, I don’t think so.’

‘We’ll see. Now then, have you put the kettle on the range?’ she asked brusquely.

‘I was just about to do it.’

‘Get a move on, and you, Ellen, can lay the table for dinner.’

‘Gertie, you haven’t changed and sound as bossy as ever,’ Hilda said, giggling as she added, ‘Talk about a school mistress. What next? If we don’t behave, will you give

us the cane?’

Gertie at first looked shocked, but then she too began to laugh. ‘Oh, Hilda, I really am glad you’re here.’

‘Can...can we have our dinner now?’ a small voice said.

‘Yes, all right,’ Gertie agreed, ‘and tomorrow I’ll show you how to collect eggs for our breakfast.’ ‘Where’s your dog?’

‘He’s been cooped up in here while I went to fetch you, but once we’ve eaten you can call him in again. I’ve a cat too, but Wilfred’s a tom and is mostly off roaming.’

‘Wh...what else have you got?’ Ellen asked eagerly.

‘Two pigs and a goat.’

Hilda saw her daughter’s delight and smiled. It was going to be all right, and she was sure that bringing Ellen here had been the right decision. Ellen would recover and enjoy exploring the countryside. And I’ll be fine too, Hilda decided, yet there was no way that Gertie was going to get her into trousers.

Chapter 4

During the next five months Hilda saw a huge change in her daughter. Ellen's stammer disappeared, and, though they were both still grieving, the horrors of living in London during the Blitz soon seemed far away. Instead of an air raid siren, they now woke up to the sound of birdsong and Gertie's cockerel.

The only school was on the other side of the village and, as it was a long way to go, Gertie was tutoring Ellen at home. At first she had missed the company of other children, but once spring had arrived and the skeletal trees burst into new growth, Ellen had become totally enamoured with the countryside. When not having lessons or helping out on the smallholding, she spent hours roaming the woods, bringing home all sorts of things – bugs, bluebells and other wildflowers – all of which Gertie would identify for her. Gertie also showed her how to press the flowers and leaves before carefully placing them in albums, and, for Ellen, a love of nature was born. Hilda's smile was wry when she thought about her daughter's new passion. She couldn't feel the same. Yes, it was safe here, but she hated living in such total isolation. Gertie didn't have a wireless, so the only news they got was when they made the hour-long trip to the village. She kept in touch by letter with Mabel and had received shocking news. Mabel's house had been structurally damaged during a bombing raid, but thankfully she hadn't been hurt. Mabel had then had a stroke of luck when, through the grapevine, she'd found a private landlord who offered her a flat in Clapham. It seemed that Mabel loved it there, and, not only that, it was an area that so far had been barely touched by bombs.

It made Hilda realise how lucky they were to have left Battersea, though she still wasn't keen on working outdoors. Thankfully Gertie always mucked out the pigs, though that still left the back-breaking work of digging for spring planting. If she had news of Doug it would be something, but though she'd sent him a letter with her new address, so far there had been no reply. God, she missed him so much, prayed he was safe, and for a moment tears stung her eyes. Britain had lost so many vessels, so many seamen, and Hilda lived in constant fear of hearing that his ship had been sunk. Inadvertently her hand rose to clutch the crucifix.

'Hilda, I know you only wear that thing because it belonged to your mother, but when you're miles away you always seem to hold it,' commented Gertie. 'I thought that, like me, you'd had enough religion rammed down your throat.'

'I have, especially after the way your father turned on you. What happened to all that stuff he used to spout about not judging others lest you be judged?'

'Try telling him that.'

Hilda shuddered, remembering her childhood fear and awe of Gertie's father. The man had been almost maniacal in his preaching, and it had been enough to turn her off going to church for life.

'Gertie, can we go to the village today?'

'There's no need to go every week and I'd rather get the rest of the potatoes in, along with cabbage and carrots. There's the salad crop too and tomatoes to bring on in

the greenhouse.'

'For goodness' sake, Gertie, give it a break. I'm worried about Doug and there might be a letter.'

'This is a busy time of year and if I don't plant, I don't eat. I know I've preserved fruit from last year, made jam and pickles, but I need to sell produce to buy flour, meat, and anything else I can't grow.'

'It still seems strange to think of you making jam.'

'I hate it, hate any kind of cooking, but needs must.'

'Before we came I had no idea how much land you had. How on earth have you managed on your own?'

'I had a lad of fourteen working for me, but once conscription started labour became short. He found a job earning more than I could possibly pay him, and since then it's been impossible to find hired help. I had to cut down on planting, but now you've arrived we've managed to start a lot more off.'

'Yeah, and I've done my best to muck in, but I'm really worried about Doug. I haven't heard from him yet, and if you take me to the village I promise I'll really get stuck in again when we get back.'

'If you'd only learn to handle Ned you could go on your own.'

'He hates me.'

'Hilda, he's a horse and just needs firm hands on the reins.'

'I was firm, but the sod wouldn't move.'

Gertie shook her head with obvious disgust, but Hilda tried a winning smile. It was all right for Gertie. She was happy living like a virtual recluse, but for Hilda it was becoming more and more difficult. She missed her friends, the bustle of London, and if only the Luftwaffe would stop dropping bombs she'd go back like a shot.

'Please, Gertie.'

'Oh, all right. I need to see the butcher so might as well do that, but I'm not hanging about while you waste time gossiping with the locals again.'

Hilda smiled with delight as she went to the bottom of the stairs to call Ellen. They shared a bedroom under the eaves, snuggled up in a huge, lumpy, iron-framed bed.

'Ellen, Ellen, come on, get up.'

'Another one,' Ellen said when she finally appeared, her hands cupped around a catch.

Hilda shuddered as she backed away. That was another thing she hated, the huge spiders that regularly appeared in their bedroom and the rest of the cottage.

'Is it one of them whoppers?'

'Yes, a tree spider,' Ellen said as she walked over to the back door.

'Hurry up! Get it out of here before you drop it.'

'Honestly, Hilda,' said Gertie, 'anyone would think you've never seen a spider before. You should be used to them by now and there are plenty of spiders in London.'

'Yes, but not those bloody great hairy things.'

'They won't hurt you,' Gertie said as she opened the back door for Ellen and the spider was dispatched.

Hilda's cheeks puffed with relief, the insect soon forgotten as she began to boil eggs for their breakfast. She was anxious to go and as soon as they'd eaten she