



# Chapter One

## *The Tatham Arms, Tatham Street, Sunderland, County Durham*

### *Christmas Day 1943*

'I reckon this little girl's ready for her bed,' Helen said, nodding at Hope.

The two-and-half-year-old was her half-sister, not that Helen saw the gorgeous, dark-haired girl curled up on her lap as a 'half' sibling – it didn't matter to Helen one iota that they had different mothers.

'Yes, yer right,' Gloria agreed reluctantly, leaning across and pushing her daughter's fringe away from her eyes, causing her to stir. 'I've been putting it off.'

'Because you're having to go back to a cold, empty flat? On Christmas night?' Helen ribbed as she hoisted Hope onto her hip; her little sister immediately clamped her hands around her neck and wrapped her legs around her waist.

'Don't rub it in,' Gloria said, standing up and putting on her coat. She sighed. 'I don't know – I must be getting soft in my old age.' She picked up her boxed-up gas mask and her handbag, swinging them over her shoulder.

'Come on then, sleepyhead.' Helen kissed Hope on the cheek.

Gloria followed Helen through the throng of Christmas revellers, her daughter's cherubic face watching her, chin

resting on her big sister's shoulder as she desperately tried to keep her eyes open.

When they reached the hallway, Helen handed Hope over.

'You don't fancy coming back for a while?' Gloria asked. She really did *not* want to go back to a cold, empty flat. The cold she could tolerate, but not the emptiness. Or rather, the absence of the one person she wanted to be there more than anyone in the world: Jack Crawford. Hope's father. The man she had loved for as long as she could remember. The man she'd been forced to live apart from these past two years.

'Yer could have a hot chocolate 'n tell me what *really* happened today? Yer won't have to worry about anyone eavesdropping,' Gloria said. It had been obvious something had happened when Helen had turned up earlier with Pearl Hardwick and her daughter Bel Elliot.

'I think I'll stay here for a bit longer,' Helen said, tipping her head towards the lounge door of the pub, where there was life and laughter and plenty of festive cheer. 'I'll come around tomorrow and tell you everything, OK?'

Gloria forced a smile. 'I look forward to it.'

Pulling open the front door, Gloria stepped out into Tatham Street. It was quiet, and the virgin snow meant there was no need for her little electric torch. As she started the short walk back to her flat, it felt as though her mood was getting heavier with each step.

*Yer should be happy*, she berated herself. It had been a lovely Christmas, spent with those she was close to – and with a slap-up dinner at Vera's, in spite of rationing. Then they had all walked to the Tatham Arms and continued the festive celebrations, stepping out and listening to the carol singers when the Salvation Army band had turned up. She'd even had the bonus of getting a Christmas card from

her boys, Bobby and Gordon, both serving in the Royal Navy.

Gloria thought of Rosie with her husband behind enemy lines, Hannah, a Jewish refugee from Prague with parents in a German concentration camp, and Polly, who'd just had a baby with a man who was spending the war yanking limpet mines off the hulls of Allied ships.

*If they could all keep their spirits up and a smile on their faces, then so could she.*

Gloria looked down at Hope. At least Jack was just over the border and safe – or as safe as could be these days, working in an industry that was one of Herr Hitler's prime targets.

But, Gloria thought as she trudged towards the end of Tatham Street, it didn't matter how much she argued with herself, she still couldn't stop feeling totally despondent about ever seeing her lover again, never mind Hope ever having a father in her life.

Reaching the T-junction at the top of the street, Gloria turned left into Borough Road. Crossing over, she kept her eyes on the ground, not wanting to slip and fall with Hope in her arms. The snow on this stretch of road leading into town had been churned up by traffic, making it a mix of slush and ice.

Reaching the pavement on the other side, which, thanks to the lack of footfall, was still carpeted in a thick white layer of snow and unspoilt, Gloria's attention was caught by the outline of a figure standing outside the entrance to her flat. A dark, man's figure. He had his back to her. A duffel bag was slung over his shoulder.

Gloria slowed her pace.

As though sensing her approach, the man turned round, causing Gloria to stop dead in her tracks.

*It couldn't be? Could it?*

Was her mind playing tricks on her? Did she want this so much her mind had fabricated it?

'Gloria!' Jack's voice sounded out loud and clear as he dumped his bag in the snow and strode towards her. 'Hope!' The joy in his voice was undisguised.

Gloria stood immobile, unable to speak as the man she loved reached them and wrapped his arms around them.

'Jack! Oh, Jack!' Gloria's voice was muffled. She could feel her heart thumping against her chest. 'I can't believe it!' She looked up, needing to see him, to be reassured that this was not a dream.

She watched as Jack stepped back and took Hope, kissing her on the head and lifting her high in the air.

'My beautiful little girl!' He smiled up at his daughter and spun her round.

It was only when Gloria heard Hope's tired but excited little voice cry out 'Daddy!' that she knew this was for real.

Only then did the tears start tumbling down her face.

The initial rush of euphoria Gloria felt was quickly pushed aside by fear and panic. She blinked to clear her vision, which had become blurred by the sudden onset of tears at seeing Jack and watching him with his daughter. Hope's shrieks of joy and excitement were filling the air, breaking the silence of this unforgettable Christmas night.

'What yer doing here, Jack?' Gloria asked, furtively looking up and down the street. The rapture in her face was gone, anxiety now at the fore. 'Yer shouldn't be here. What if someone sees you? What if Miriam finds out?' Jack's wife had blackmailed them after finding out about their affair, threatening to expose some of the women welders' secrets should Jack ever return to his hometown.

'Don't worry,' Jack was quick to reassure her as he lowered a giggling Hope back down, 'it's all right. Everything's been sorted.'

Gloria pushed her curly brown hair away from her face and looked around, still terrified that someone might come out and clock them. Clock Jack. With Hope in his arms. Outside her flat. Then shoot across to the other side of the Wear and sell them out to Miriam.

'Let's get inside!' She hurried to the top of the steps to her flat, quickly scanning the street before clomping down to her front door. Jamming the key into the lock and pushing open the door, she flicked on the light and ushered Jack inside. He ducked slightly, at the same time kissing the top of his daughter's head. As soon as they were over the threshold, Gloria closed the door and dropped the latch. Only then did she allow herself a sigh of relief. They were safe. Away from prying eyes.

'What on earth possessed yer to come back?' Gloria said, taking off her coat and automatically going over to the electric gas fire and switching it on. She turned to see Jack gently putting Hope down; he was smiling as he ruffled her mop of raven hair.

Gloria walked towards the man she still couldn't quite believe was here as he put his hand out and pulled her close, kissing her gently at first and then with more passion.

'It's safe,' he said. 'I wouldn't have taken the risk otherwise. Trust me.' He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her again, savouring the feel of her lips on his. Her mouth tasted of sweet berries. Port. Her favourite tippie.

Gloria gave up trying to question him, believing him, knowing he would never put others in danger to satiate his own selfish needs. She kissed him back. The feel of his lips reassuring her that this was real. That he really was here.

*'Daddy!'*

They both looked down to see Hope staring up at them, her hand grasping Jack's trouser leg as she started to tug it.

'Come here, my gorgeous little girl.' Jack let go of Gloria and reached down. 'My, my, someone's grown up since I saw them last.' He picked Hope up again and kissed her little button nose, causing her to scrunch up her eyes and giggle. 'Two years. Two whole years.'

Gloria heard sadness and a shred of bitterness. Hope had just been six months old when he had last seen her.

'Daddy,' Hope said again, as though practising a new word. A word she had only ever spoken into the receiver of a black Bakelite phone.

'Aye ... Daddy ...' Jack suddenly felt his throat constrict with emotion.

Hope's face creased into a smile and she touched his face with one hand.

Gloria felt the tears welling up.

'I'll tell yer what – ' Jack looked at Gloria and then back at his daughter ' – why don't I read yer a bedtime story, eh?'

Gloria looked at Hope and pulled a happy face, mouthing the word 'story'.

'Story!' Hope clapped her hands together.

A wide smile spread across Jack's face and he took a step towards Gloria and kissed her again. Nothing, he vowed silently, would ever part them again. Nothing.

'I don't think I've ever felt this happy in my entire life,' he said, his eyes glistening with the sting of tears.

'Nor me,' Gloria said, as she kissed him back.

Gloria watched as Jack read Hope her favourite bedtime story, Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*. It had become her favourite after they'd been forced to spend the last air raid with a rather frantic mouse that had been scurrying around in Mr Brown's Anderson shelter.

Looking at Jack, Gloria saw the physical changes the past two years had brought: his hair was more grey than black and his face looked tired and weather-beaten, but physically he seemed strong, certainly more muscular than when she had seen him last on that awful day when they'd been forced to say a rushed farewell in the porch of St Peter's Church.

Gloria looked at Hope. Her dark lashes were lowering as she tried desperately to stay awake. Jack's voice was soft as he relayed the mice's tale of mischief in the doll's house, knowing that the lilting rhythm of the words would soon send his daughter into a deep slumber.

Sensing her eyes on him, Jack glanced back at Gloria and winked before turning another page of the hardback book. Gloria noticed how full of life he seemed.

At the familiar sound of her daughter's gentle snoring, Gloria stood up, careful not to make any noise. Jack followed, putting the storybook down on the stool by Hope's cot and tiptoeing out of the room.

As soon as they were in the hallway, Jack pulled her close and they kissed. This time for longer. And without interruption.

'God, I've missed you,' Jack murmured.

'Please – tell me yer here to stay? For good?' she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

'I'm here to stay,' Jack reassured. 'For good.'

Gloria kissed him again, curious to know more, but not wanting to talk. They had spoken on the phone so much since Jack's exile, she suddenly felt tired of words. She only wanted the feel of his mouth on hers and his body pressed against her own.

Sensing her passion, Jack looked at Gloria. 'I've waited two years for this moment,' he said, his breathing becoming heavy. 'I don't want to wait another minute.'

'Me neither,' Gloria said.



And with that she took his hand and led him into the bedroom.

After making love, Gloria and Jack lay in each other's arms, simply holding one another, enjoying the feel of each other's bare skin and the warmth of their bodies.

'So ...' Gloria said, kissing Jack's bare shoulder '... tell me, tell me everything. How come I've got yer back? I'm guessing it's got something to do with Helen?'

'Aye,' Jack said. 'She rang me from the old man's house and told me I could come back home.'

Gloria knew that Helen and Miriam had gone to Mr Havelock's for Christmas dinner.

'Thank God I offered to work Christmas Day – she'd have had a job getting hold of me otherwise.' He looked at Gloria. 'She told me that Bel 'n Pearl had turned up out of the blue. All she said was that I had to trust her – that she'd tell me everything later, but that I could come back.'

'It must have been something big for Miriam to allow yer to return,' Gloria said.

Jack blew out air.

'*Allow.*' He repeated the word with undisguised resentment. 'That woman has been ruling our lives for too long.' Gloria knew Jack wasn't just thinking about his banishment to the Clyde, but about the fact that Miriam had lied and manipulated him into marrying her all those years ago, pretending she was pregnant to get him down the aisle and then telling him she'd had a miscarriage, by which time it was too late – he had a ring on his finger and an invisible shackle around his ankle.

'Well,' Gloria said, snuggling up to him, 'all should be revealed tomorrow when Helen comes round.'

Gloria smiled as Jack switched off the light and pulled her close. *No wonder Helen hadn't wanted to come back to the*

*flat.* She'd known Jack would be waiting for her. She had done well to hide her excitement. It had been Helen's mission for a long time to get Jack back – to put right the wrong she felt partly responsible for – so that Hope could finally have her daddy home where he belonged.

Her final thought as sleep came was that Helen too would now have her father back in her life – something, Gloria knew, that would mean the absolute world to her.

## Chapter Two

### *Boxing Day*

As Helen drove across the Wearmouth Bridge, she automatically looked to her left, her eyes scanning the river, crammed as always with an eclectic mix of boats and barges, cobs and colliers, the odd schooner and, of course, ships – those in the making, as well as those docked for repair. She caught a glimpse of the J.L. Thompson & Sons shipyard on North Sands through an archway of overhanging cranes, before forcing her attention back to the road. Whenever she saw her place of work, she never failed to feel a swell of pride.

Driving down Bridge Street and turning left into High Street West, she spotted a couple of billeted Admiralty leaving the Grand Hotel and her mind swung to her mother. She had heard her return late last night, stumbling up the stairs to her bedroom, having undoubtedly drunk the bar dry with her friend and fellow lush, Amelia.

Helen indicated and turned right down Norfolk Street.

Parking at the bottom of the street, she climbed out of her beloved green sports car, admiring it for a moment. Even though she had bought it several months ago, the novelty of owning such a swanky motor, and driving it rather than being chauffeured, had not worn off.

Looking at her watch, Helen saw it had just gone half ten. Enough time for Gloria and her father to have had a lie-in and enjoyed their first breakfast together with Hope

as a family, but not so late that they might have ventured out – something she knew they'd be loath to do until they'd been told exactly what had happened yesterday.

Walking through the melting snow towards the end of the road, Helen turned right into Borough Road. As she approached the steps that led down to Gloria's flat, she imagined how wonderful it must have been for her father to finally be reunited with Gloria and Hope. Her heart warmed at the thought of it.

Knocking on the front door, Helen called out, 'Only me!'

Seconds later, the door opened. Jack stood with Hope in his arms.

'Dad!' Helen held her arms out wide and hugged them both.

'Daddy!' Hope shouted out, copying her big sister.

'Yes,' Helen said, cupping Hope's heart-shaped face. 'Daddy's back!'

Looking over her father's shoulder, Helen saw Gloria coming out of the kitchenette. She didn't think she had ever seen her look so happy.

Having fussed over Hope playing with her toys on the clippy mat by the coffee table, Helen sat down in the arm-chair next to her and watched as her father settled with Gloria on the sofa opposite.

'So, come on, don't keep us in suspense any longer,' Jack said.

'Well,' Helen took a quick sip of her tea, 'it's a long story, which I will try and keep as short and succinct as possible.'

She kept her word, briefly telling her father about Bel's true paternity, how she had initially suspected that she might be a Havelock after seeing Bel and Miriam at Polly and Tommy's wedding last Christmas. The similarities between the two had hit her like a slap on the face: the

same corn-blond hair, the same button nose, the same lips and the same blue eyes. Both pretty and petite. She relayed how she had ended up employing a young female private eye, whom she had nicknamed Miss Marple, to find out the truth. Armed with the information she'd been given, Helen had decided she would only know for sure if she confronted Pearl and Bel; something she had done last May in the Tatham Arms.

'So, you've known all this time?' Jack asked, surprised that Helen hadn't told him.

'I have,' Helen said.

'And I have as well,' Gloria said, looking at Jack. 'But Bel said she wanted as few people to know as possible. She said it was all right for Helen to tell me as she knew how close we are.'

'So,' Jack said in disbelief, 'the old man is Bel Elliot's real father?'

Helen and Gloria looked at him and nodded.

'Pearl used to work as a scullery maid way back when—' Helen stopped short.

'And he got her in the family way?' Jack said.

'More like *raped* her,' Helen said.

Jack looked to Gloria for affirmation. She nodded, her face grim. He felt a shiver go down his back. Charles Have-lock had been his father-in-law for over twenty-five years. This was shocking.

'And I learnt yesterday that Pearl wasn't the only one,' Helen continued. 'One poor girl called Grace never got over what had been done to her. Her mother came home one day to find her daughter hanging from the bannisters.'

Gloria's hand went to her mouth. 'Oh, that's terrible.'

Jack stood up and paced across the living room. His face was red and his jaw clenched.

'So,' Gloria said, 'I'm guessing when you 'n yer mam were at yer granddad's for yer Christmas dinner, Pearl 'n Bel turned up – and Bel told Mr Havelock that she was his daughter?'

'Yes,' Helen said.

'And I'm guessing,' Jack said, his face still flushed with anger, 'that Bel said she'd tell everyone about what he'd done to her mam – 'n that she was the result – if I wasn't allowed to come back.'

'More or less,' Helen said.

'And what about Miriam?' Gloria asked. 'I can't imagine she took all of this lying down.'

'No, she didn't.' Helen sighed. 'She accused Bel and Pearl of being liars, at which point Bel showed them the private eye's report, which detailed all the evidence that pointed to Grandfather being Bel's father.'

'What? You gave Bel the report?' Gloria didn't try to hide her surprise.

Helen nodded.

'Bel said she'd make it plain that Pearl was in no way a willing participant in her conception and that she would tell the judge and jury and anyone else who would listen to her that Grandfather was a rapist. A "sick and perverted old man". And that Pearl had only been fifteen years old at the time, which, she pointed out, was below the age of consent.'

'Blimey,' Gloria said, beckoning Jack to come and sit down.

'And very clever,' Helen said. 'She had Grandfather in a corner. Even if it couldn't be proved he'd raped her, it would still be an offence because of Pearl's age.'

Helen watched as her father sat back down next to Gloria.

'Bel said that in exchange for her silence, she wanted Dad to be able to return home to be with the woman he

loves, but more than anything so that he could be a father to Hope. She did what she did for this little girl here,' Helen said, looking at Hope playing intently with her dollies. 'So Hope could have a father in her life.

'But,' Helen went on, raising her eyebrows, 'that wasn't the only shocker to come out of yesterday's very eventful Christmas dinner.'

'There's more?' Gloria said.

'There is indeed.' Helen looked from her father to Gloria. 'Grandfather said that he'd also been doing his research and knew Bel had a half-sister called Maisie who had been adopted as a baby.'

'Which everyone knows already,' Jack said.

'They do,' Helen said, 'but not many know that she is also a *call girl* – and that she works in an upmarket bordello which is run by Rosie's friend Lily.'

Helen looked at her father and Gloria. Neither looked at all shocked.

'Did you know that already?' she asked accusingly.

'We did,' said Gloria. 'But it wasn't our secret to tell.'

Gloria and Jack waited for Helen to ask more about Lily, the eccentric woman with the orange hair and fake French accent, and her connection with Helen's head welder, Rosie Miller, but she didn't. Much to their relief.

'So after Grandfather showed his trump card,' Helen continued, 'he told Bel that if she said anything to anyone about him being her father, then he would inform the authorities about the bordello, and also make sure all the women welders' secrets would be bandied about town.' Helen sighed. 'And, of course, that he would take great pleasure in finding ways of ruining not only Bel's life, but the lives of all those she holds dear.'

Jack shook his head in disbelief.

'So, how come he agreed to allow Jack back?' Gloria asked.

Helen arched an eyebrow. 'Pearl. Unbelievably, it was Pearl who saved the day.'

'How come?' Jack asked.

Helen watched as Hope got up, squeezed her way past her mammy and started climbing on to her daddy's knee.

'Well, Pearl said that if he did grass them all up, Lily's little black book would undoubtedly find its way into the hands of the police. And that every one of those businessmen, judges, lawyers and those high-up in the police would know it was Grandfather's fault that they were being pulled in for solicitation.'

'She had him by the short and curlies then,' Jack said.

'She did, but Pearl had one more card to play to totally secure the deal,' Helen said.

'And what was that?' Gloria asked.

'Grandmother,' Helen said simply.

'What do you mean?' Jack asked.

'Well,' said Helen, sucking in air, 'it would seem that my dear grandmama is not in fact dead, but is very much alive and living – or should I say incarcerated – up at the asylum under an assumed name: *Miss Henrietta Girling*.'

'What? At Ryhope?' Jack was incredulous.

'Yes,' said Helen.

Jack had met Henrietta a few times in the early days of his marriage to Miriam. He'd never forgotten her look. She was eccentric, certainly, but not mad.

'Why's she at the asylum?' Jack asked.

'That's the pertinent question,' Helen said. 'Grandmama Henrietta has been locked away in the local mental hospital because of Grandfather.'

There was silence as Jack and Gloria digested what they'd been told.

'So, he got her sectioned?' Jack asked.



'He did. Greased the necessary palms. And she's been there ever since,' Helen said.

'Are you sure about this?' Gloria asked.

'I've seen her with my own eyes.' Helen looked at their shocked faces. 'I drove there last night and Genevieve the old receptionist took me to see her.'

Gloria and Jack looked at Helen and then at Hope, whose attention was now also focused on her big sister.

'And she's *lovely*,' Helen said. 'Really lovely. Obviously, she comes across as a bit doolally, but who wouldn't if you'd been shut away in the local loony bin for the past two decades.'

Jack and Gloria were speechless.

'And you'll never guess who her doctor is.' Helen was looking at Gloria.

'Not Dr Eris?'

'The one and only,' Helen said, wide-eyed.

Jack looked puzzled. 'Who's Dr Eris?'

Helen stood up and sighed. 'A story for another day.' She looked at her watch. 'Gosh, look at the time. I've got to get back to the yard.' She got up and looked at her father, Hope on his lap and Gloria sitting next to him. She smiled. 'I'll come and see you all later.'

As she left, she turned. 'And Dad ... it's great to have you back.'

'I'll second that,' Gloria beamed.

As she closed the door, Helen heard Hope's squeals of delight. They weren't the only ones to be over the moon to have Jack back.

As Helen walked to the car, she thought of Dr Parker. He was never far from her thoughts, especially when she was excited or upset or she had some news to tell – and boy did she have some exciting, as well as pretty scandalous, news

to impart. She wished she could go and see him now, just drive over to the Ryhope and have a good catch-up over a pot of tea and an iced bun. John's favourite. But she had to get back to work; although, even if she didn't, it was likely that John would be busy in the operating theatre, doing his rounds or on call. And if he wasn't, there was an equally good chance he'd be with that awful woman – Claire Eris. *Dr Claire Eris*. Helen didn't like her one bit. And not just because she'd got her claws into the man Helen wanted for herself – the man she was in love with.

The moment she had first met Claire that day in the canteen on a visit to see John, her hackles had risen. There was something about Claire that she didn't like. It was hard to pinpoint exactly what. Outwardly, Claire was a lovely, intelligent, attractive doctor – a psychotherapist, no less – doing a wonderful job of helping others, of *mending minds*, as she put it. But Helen suspected that inwardly all was not so perfectly lily-white – that Claire had a mean, conniving streak in her, and could be ruthless when she wanted something.

Still, those were thoughts she'd have to keep to herself. She was going to have to learn to deal with Claire, as there was a good chance that she'd bump into her when visiting her grandmother at the asylum. Claire was Henrietta's doctor, after all. Typical – out of all the doctors working in the asylum, Claire was her grandmother's shrink. But at least Helen's visits to Ryhope would give her the opportunity to see John.

As she got back in her car, Helen's mind wandered back to two days ago, to Christmas Eve, when they had been squashed up in the Tatham after the christening. John had seemed genuinely sad that they hadn't seen much of each other lately. He'd been in a reflective mood and had talked about how close they had become over the years, which

was true, and how they had been there for each other, which wasn't entirely true. He had been there for her – through-out her four-month pregnancy, her miscarriage, the sickening revelations about her grandfather – but she honestly didn't think that she had really been there for him, other than as a companion.

Starting up the engine, Helen indicated and pulled out, turning left into Borough Road. She just wished she had realised she was in love with him sooner. But at the beginning she had been too wrapped up in her girlish crush on Tommy; then she'd become involved with Theo – lying, cheating, married Theo – who had used her like a rag, tossed her aside and returned to his pregnant wife and two children. John had helped her pick up the pieces, and as time had gone on she had realised, too late, that she was in love with him. Although even if she had realised sooner, it would still have been hopeless. John would not want her as a wife. As her mother had repeatedly told her, she was 'sullied', after all.

As she drove through the town centre and then across the Wearmouth Bridge, Helen recalled John saying how much he valued their friendship. '*I think we've got something special,*' he'd said. And she'd told him that she agreed. That she was glad she wasn't losing him, despite his relationship with Dr Eris. And she had meant it.

She couldn't imagine a life without John in it, even if it was just as a friend.

## Chapter Three

### *New Year's Day 1944*

*'Happy New Year!'*

Rosie, Polly, Gloria, Martha and Hannah looked up to see Dorothy and Angie, arm in arm, walking across the yard towards them.

*'Health, wealth and happiness!'* they declared, their voices loud enough to cause most of the other overall-clad workers in the vicinity to glance up. Seeing that it was the two gobby welders from Rosie's squad, they turned back to their own conversations.

*'Happy New Year!'* the women chorused back in unison. They had been bracing themselves for the arrival of the squad's 'terrible two'. The pair were pretty much inseparable. They worked together and lived together in a little flat in the centre of town, yet they were like chalk and cheese. Dorothy was tall and dark-haired and came from a relatively well-off background. Angie just nudged five foot and had strawberry-blonde hair and came from a mining family in the Barbary Coast, known as one of the poorest areas of the town.

*'They don't look too worse for wear.'* Gloria spoke out of the corner of her mouth to the group's gentle giant, Martha. They were both holding their hands up against the warmth of the five-gallon brazier they had managed to get going as soon as they'd arrived at their workplace, a stone's throw away from the quayside. The fire was now flickering and

spitting, providing them with some much-needed heat to combat the bitter cold and biting winds slicing across the yard from the North Sea.

'Yeah!' Dorothy let go of Angie and marched over to Polly. 'She's back!' She threw her arms around her work-mate and squeezed her. 'We've missed you! Didn't we?' She looked at Rosie, Gloria, Hannah and Martha. They all nodded, smiled and muttered their agreement.

Polly had been forced to give up her job when she had nearly miscarried in the third month of her pregnancy. After having a cervical stitch put in, she had kept on working in the yard in more sedentary positions, first as timekeeper and then as a clerical worker in the admin department. She'd worked right up to giving birth to Artie, who had come almost two weeks earlier than expected and had been born amidst great drama on the sorting table in the middle of the main office. That had happened four months ago and today was her first day back with the women welders.

'Eee, yer knar, Pol, I can honestly say it's not been the same without yer,' Angie said, her face serious.

'Ah, thanks,' said Polly, pushing a strand of her thick chestnut-coloured hair back into her headscarf. She'd almost forgotten what a battle it was to keep her hair away from her face. Thompson's was located on the bend of the River Wear, making it perfectly positioned to take the full force of the north-east's unrelenting weather.

'I have to agree,' Rosie said. 'It's going to be good to have you back – and not just because I won't have to find a replacement.'

Polly looked at Rosie and then at the rest of her friends.

'It feels good to be back,' she said, a wide smile appearing on her face. 'Even if the weather's awful.' She looked up at the dark morning sky, which was only just starting to lighten with the break of day.

'You don't think you'll miss Artie too much?' Hannah, the group's 'little bird', asked. She was still considered one of the squad, even though she had left welding when Rosie got her an apprenticeship in the drawing office, where she had excelled; pen and paper suited her much more than a rod and metal plates. Hannah's question about baby Artie had been one that had gone through all their minds on seeing Polly back in her overalls this morning.

'I hope not,' Polly said, looking at Hannah, who had on double layers of everything. A muffler as well as a scarf. A hat as well as her hood pulled up. You could only just see her face peeking out and the blunted fringe of her bobbed black hair.

'I'm only going to be working normal hours, no overtime,' Polly explained to all the women. 'So I'll be with Artie from the minute I get back from work until the minute I leave. And all weekend.'

'But today's Saturday?' Martha asked, genuinely puzzled.

'That's just to get me back into the swing of things,' Polly said. 'You know, with it being a short shift.' In reality, Polly had been chomping at the bit to get back and had argued the case with her mam, Agnes Elliot, to start today rather than Monday.

'I suppose it's the start of the New Year. A clean sheet and all that,' Gloria said.

'A clean sheet. Exactly,' Polly agreed. 'And I really don't think Artie will miss me at all.'

'That's a bit harsh,' Rosie said.

'Yeah,' Dorothy agreed. 'I'm sure that won't be the case. Little Artie adores you.'

Polly let out a splutter of genuine laughter. 'Honestly, since the twins arrived in his life, he's only had eyes for his two younger cousins.'

There was a collective ‘ahh’ at the mention of Gabrielle and Stephen, the newborn babies Bel and Joe had adopted on Boxing Day. The women had gone to meet the two new additions to the Elliot household earlier on in the week and had all been instantly smitten.

‘Well, I for one,’ Dorothy said, ‘have a good feeling about this year.’

‘Why’s that?’ Martha asked, giving the fire a poke with a pair of metal tongs.

‘Yeah,’ Angie chipped in, ‘yer been looking into that crystal ball of yers?’

‘The stars are aligned,’ Dorothy explained. ‘Gloria’s got Jack back.’ She looked at Gloria and smiled. ‘And Rosie’s heard from Peter.’ They had all been there when Dorothy’s beau, Toby, had told Rosie on Christmas Day that her husband, Peter Miller, an undercover operative in France, was alive and well. ‘And Angie has *finally* –’ Dorothy’s eyes went to the heavens – got it together with Quentin.’ Thanks to a little meddling from Dorothy and their neighbour, Mrs Kwiatkowski, Angie and Quentin had become girlfriend and boyfriend after he had surprised her on Christmas Eve, having got leave from his job with the War Office and travelled back to his hometown to tell the woman he had been in love with for over a year how he felt.

‘And,’ Dorothy said, pausing for dramatic effect, ‘I’m pretty sure that I might well be wearing something shiny and diamond like on my left hand before the year is out.’

‘Really?’ Hannah asked. She and Olly had been courting for over a year and neither of them had even thought about getting engaged. Or at least *she* had never thought about it.

‘Why are yer so sure?’ Gloria asked.

‘I’m *so sure*,’ Dorothy said, ‘because Toby kept going on about meeting my parents when he was here at Christmas. And we all know what that means.’

'It means he wants to meet yer mam 'n stepdad,' Angie said, rolling her eyes.

Dorothy ignored her.

'He clearly wants to ask their permission for my hand in marriage,' Dorothy explained. 'Like a proper gentleman – not that I want to jinx it.'

'Haven't you just jinxed it by saying it out loud?' Martha asked. She had nearly been jumped on when she'd started to say that they'd not had an air raid since the end of May last year.

'Blimey, there's nowt like being sure of yerself, is there?' Angie gawped at her friend.

All the women laughed loudly, although none of them thought that it was so improbable. They had seen Toby and Dorothy together on Christmas Day when he had turned up at Vera's café looking very dashing in his army uniform. There was no doubt they were well suited – both were from educated, middle-class families – and it was as clear as day that Toby was well and truly taken with his sweetheart.

'*Love!*' Dorothy put both hands on her chest. 'There is to be a lot of love this year! I can feel it in my bones.'

As soon as the midday klaxon sounded out, the women downed tools and hurried across the yard towards the sanctuary of the canteen.

'I've just got to pop up to see Helen,' Rosie said. 'I want to catch her before she heads over to Doxford's for the launch of *Arabistan*.'

'More like heading off for a schmooze with the scrump-tious Matthew Royce,' Dorothy declared.

Matthew Royce Jnr was the new manager at Doxford's, who had made no secret of his amorous feelings for Helen.

'I don't think Helen sees him that way,' Gloria said.

'Is the woman totally blind?' Dorothy gasped.



'Who's blind?' Angie sidled up next to her best mate.

'Helen,' Dorothy explained. 'Glor reckons she doesn't fancy the irresistible Matthew Royce.'

'Never!' Angie sounded equally amazed.

Rosie and Gloria exchanged exasperated looks.

'Tell her Happy New Year from us,' Dorothy said. 'And to have a *lurvee* time with lover-boy Matthew this afternoon.'

Dorothy and Angie hooted with laughter and ran to catch up with Martha and Polly, who had just been joined by Hannah and Olly hurrying over from the drawing office.

Gloria followed them, thinking that Helen *was* blind when it came to Matthew. But she knew that was because she only had eyes for one person – Dr Parker.

'Get a move on, Glor!' Dorothy shouted over; she was holding open the canteen door.

Gloria quickened her pace. Everything seemed to happen so much faster these days. You had to walk quicker, work quicker – get married quicker. Gloria sighed as she reached the entrance to the canteen and Dorothy made a show of bowing and waving her through the entrance with a flourish. The girl was as nutty as a fruitcake, and such an attention-seeker, but she had a heart of gold.

'I feel for Toby,' Gloria ribbed Dorothy as she walked into the warmth of the cafeteria.

'Why's that?' Dorothy let the door swing shut.

'Because if he does propose,' Gloria said, 'he's gonna have his hands full, that's for sure.'

'What? Little ol' me? A handful?' Dorothy's words were followed by a robust cackle.

As they dumped their flasks and luncheon boxes on the table they had commandeered as their own after first starting at the yard, Muriel waved at them from behind the counter.

‘Good to see yer back, Polly!’ she shouted over. ‘Bet yer wish yer were up in the office today, though? Brass monkeys out there.’

Polly laughed. As did the rest of the women. They knew it didn’t matter how bad the weather was, Polly would always choose welding over office work.

Taking a bite of her sandwich, Dorothy pulled out a copy of the *Sunderland Echo* from her haversack. ‘Time for our lessons in current affairs.’ She looked across at Polly, whose idea it had been initially, although Dorothy had taken on the mantle of head teacher.

Polly nodded and pulled out her copy of the *Daily Mirror*, which she always bought because it reminded her of Tommy’s granddad, Arthur; it had been the only national newspaper he would read. Arthur had died a year ago, but she still felt his presence – still wanted to feel his presence. Looking around the table, Polly saw that she and Dorothy were the only two who had remembered to bring a paper to work with them.

‘You go first, Pol,’ Dorothy said magnanimously, ‘seeing as today is your first day back with the troops.’

‘Consider yerself honoured,’ Gloria japed.

Polly spread out the paper on the table and scanned the headlines. ‘Looks like the Chinese are having some success against the Japanese in Burma,’ she said, her eyes scanning further down the page.

‘That’s good,’ Martha said, taking a big bite of her corned beef and potato sandwich.

Everyone mumbled their agreement.

‘And there’s more on General Eisenhower and him being officially named head of the expected invasion of Europe,’ Polly continued.

‘I thought it was France they were gonna invade?’ Angie asked, her eyes glued to Martha’s sandwich. She was

always in awe of the packed lunches Mrs Perkins managed to put together for her daughter.

'France *is* Europe – well, a part of Europe,' Dorothy said, rolling her eyes.

'I think the plan is to start with France and then push through to the rest of Europe,' Olly informed them.

'Would I be right in saying that this means Peter will be a part of it all?' Hannah asked quietly, checking over her shoulder that Rosie was nowhere in sight.

'Well, now that you mention it,' Polly said, 'I would guess there's a good chance he will be.'

They were all quiet for a moment. Peter's work was very hush-hush, and although no one knew for certain what he was doing over the Channel, it didn't take a genius to guess he'd be helping the Resistance prepare for the anticipated invasion.

'I think we should keep any chatter about what's going to happen in France down to a minimum when Rosie's about,' Gloria suggested.

Everyone agreed that ignorance was bliss in this case.

'You heard anything from your boys yet?' Hannah asked.

They all knew that Gloria's sons, Bobby and Gordon, were able seamen on the destroyer HMS *Opportune*, and that it had been part of the Battle of the North Cape, which was being hailed as a significant victory for the Allies. It hadn't been without casualties, though. A battleship, a destroyer and a cruiser had been damaged and twenty-one men had been reported dead, with more injured.

'She got a telegram from them the other day,' Dorothy answered for Gloria.

Gloria sighed. 'I am capable of speaking for myself, Dor.' She looked at Hannah. 'Thanks for asking. They said they were all right, which was a huge relief.'

'They sound nice boys,' Hannah said. 'Knowing how anxious you'd be and putting your mind at rest.'

Gloria nodded. It was true she'd been worried sick the moment she'd seen the headlines. The telegram had lifted a massive weight off her shoulders, but, like just about every other mother with sons at war, she wouldn't be happy until they were back home.

'So, what about news here? What's in the *Echo*?' Hannah said, looking across at Dorothy, who did not need further encouragement to take her turn in the relaying of the day's news bulletin.

'Well, I have to say the editorial seems as sure of victory as I am about Toby's proposal.'

There was the expected rumble of groans around the table. They all knew this was all they were going to hear from now on. They could only hope that Toby dropped down on one knee post-haste to save them all months of earache.

'It reads ...' she declared, taking a quick sup of tea '... "This is the year of Victory".'

'Who says that?' Martha asked.

'The editor of our local newspaper,' Dorothy said, again rolling her eyes. 'That's why it's called an "editorial".' She took a deep breath and continued. "'This is the year, the year of Victory, the end of the European war.'" She paused. 'Notice how he said *European* war – not the war *worldwide*.'

Angie emitted a loud sigh. 'Gerra a move on, Dor, we've not got all day. Yer might like the sound of yer own voice, but that's not to say the rest of us dee.'

Everyone chuckled. Angie was doing a valiant job of keeping up the banter with her best mate, but her words lacked any kind of sting. It was obvious to them all that she was too much in love for there to be any kind of genuine sharpness or edge to her words.

Dorothy rustled the paper and continued to read. “The year in which we believe all our troubles, real or imaginary, will come to an end.” She looked up to see Hannah listening attentively. Poor Hannah. Her worries were most definitely not imaginary.

‘Well, let’s hope so,’ Polly said.

They all hoped so. Gloria for the sake of her two boys, Rosie for Peter’s sake, Polly for Tommy’s, and Hannah for the safety of her parents, imprisoned in the notorious Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland.

The women – like countless others across the length and breadth of the country – prayed with all their hearts that the words penned by the editor of the local paper in a town on the north-east coast of England would come true.

As Rosie made her way over to admin, she felt happy. She hadn’t read the *Sunderland Echo’s* editorial, but she too had felt a sense of hope ever since Toby had told her that Peter was alive. She’d wanted to beg him to tell her more when he’d turned up at Vera’s café, where they had all been having their Christmas dinner en masse, but she knew it wasn’t fair and that it didn’t matter if she pleaded, Toby would not have been able to give her any more information, for he was part of ‘Churchill’s secret army’ – formally known as the Special Operations Executive.

It was Toby who had recruited Peter for the SOE’s French division while Peter had been working as a detective sergeant. Since Rosie had said her goodbyes to Peter in Guildford, where he’d gone for his training two years ago, she had only seen him the once, when he had turned up for an overnight stay in the summer of 1942. Since then she’d only had a short but very beautifully worded message from him, transcribed by a wireless operator. Since then, not a whisper. An entire year had gone by, during which time

she had become increasingly worried and convinced that no news was not actually good news at all, so on Christmas Day when Toby had told her that Peter was alive and well, the relief had been overwhelming. She had failed to keep her emotions in check, which was unusual for her, and she had wept openly in front of everyone.

In the days that followed she'd decided that she would continue to revel in the good news for as long as possible – before the worry set back in. She'd even allowed herself to imagine what life might be like if – no, *when* – Peter came back from the war. For the first time in a long while she began to believe that dreams really could come true – it didn't just happen in the Hollywood films which Dorothy dragged them all to see. The dream of having a family could become reality – not a family in the traditional sense, of course, that would never happen, but a happy-ever-after with her husband and sister living in the house in Brookside Gardens, with Peter back working for the Borough Police and Charlotte continuing her education. She might even be able to convince Lily to go legit. Rosie laughed at herself as she pulled open the main doors of the offices. *As if that would ever happen.* Lily and legit just didn't go together.

Taking the stairs two at a time, she reached the door to the open-plan office and yanked it open. A dozen faces looked up momentarily to see who it was before their attention returned to their typewriters or comptometers. There was a skeleton staff as it was Saturday and New Year's Day at that.

'Happy New Year!' Marie-Anne called out as soon as she saw Rosie. She got up from her desk and hurried over.

'Happy New Year to you too,' Rosie smiled.

'Thanks,' Marie-Anne said, her face suddenly becoming sombre, 'but I have to admit, I'm going to miss Bel terribly ... I'm already missing her and it's barely been a week.'

Rosie smiled again. She knew Marie-Anne had loved having Bel as her second in command. The two had got on well.

‘And she’s going to be hard to replace – that’s *if* I get a replacement.’ Marie-Anne pushed back a stray curl of her unruly ginger hair and looked over to the manager’s officer. ‘Are you here to see Miss Crawford?’

Rosie nodded and Marie-Anne walked her over to the small office, knocked and opened the door.

‘Mrs Miller to see you, Miss Crawford,’ Marie-Anne said in her best King’s English, just a hint of an Irish accent sneaking through.

‘Ah, Rosie.’ Helen waved her in. ‘Perfectly timed. Marie-Anne has just made a pot of tea.’

‘Ask if you need anything else,’ Marie-Anne said as she made to leave, jumping as Winston, the office tomcat, shot past her.

‘I will,’ Helen said, reaching down to stroke the cat, now rubbing up against her legs and purring loudly. ‘And Marie-Anne – I just wanted to say thank you for all your hard work. I do appreciate it, you know.’

Marie-Anne’s pale, freckled face lit up; she was beaming as she shut the door.

Rosie gave Helen a sceptical look. ‘I take it you’re not replacing Bel, then?’

Helen shook her head. ‘Am I that readable?’

Rosie didn’t say anything but just smiled. She had known Helen from first starting at the yard. They’d both risen through the ranks in their areas of expertise. Rosie through skill and hard work, Helen also through hard work and long hours, but helped along by a good dollop of nepotism and a nature that could be both wily and a little ruthless.

‘I’ll make it up to her,’ Helen defended herself. ‘A promotion, title and a small pay rise.’