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# CHAPTER ONE

Saturday, 2 January 1943

Standing in front of the dressing-table mirror in her pretty bedroom, Emily drew a deep breath and tried to make her shoulders relax, but it wasn't easy. She felt so miserable and tense these days that her shoulders were practically at the same level as her ears. Just a few short weeks ago, she had been the happiest she had ever been in her whole life, and now . . .

Now, *right* now, this afternoon, she was going to hold her chin up and put on a brave face for the sake of her friends. Yes, *her* friends, she reminded herself, not just Mummy's friends; they were hers as well, and you didn't let your friends down. The thought gave her a feeling of determination and she looked squarely at her reflection. Lord, but she'd changed. She had lost weight and her forget-me-not-blue jumper and navy A-line skirt were looser than they ought to be. Her face was thinner too and her dark hair had lost the shine she used to be so proud of. She looked a fright – but what did it matter? It didn't. She didn't care. Gone were the days when she had loved looking at herself, when she had gloried in gazing at her reflection. Being in love had made her cheeks glow and her blue eyes sparkle – yes, they really had sparkled. She wouldn't have believed it if she hadn't seen it for herself, because it sounded like the sort of daft though rather appealing description you found in books.

Well, there was no point standing here gawping at herself. 'That won't butter any parsnips,' she murmured. It was something she'd heard Mrs Green say. She loved Mrs Green. She'd loathed her to start with, but that had been back when she'd still been a silly little snob who didn't know any better.

Emily lifted a hand to straighten the Peter Pan collar of her white blouse before turning away to sit on the bed and remove the slippers she'd been given for Christmas so she could put on her shoes. She'd had to carry on wearing her old school shoes for some time after she'd come home from boarding school until Mummy had taken her to the market to look for a suitable second-hand pair. Mummy had said this was more sensible than splurging precious clothes coupons on new shoes. Emily had longed for a pair of stylish slingbacks, but she'd been more than happy with a pair that had almond-shaped toes and, oh bliss, heels. They were proper grown-up shoes, not silly schoolgirlish flatties. Grown-up shoes for a grown-up young woman. That was what she'd thought at the time; she remembered thinking it. But now she knew that being an adult wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

She went downstairs into the sitting room, where Daddy was reading the newspaper while he waited. Thanks to the fuel shortages, the furniture hugged the fireplace, though Mummy might restore the old arrangement in the summer.

Daddy lowered the paper as she walked in. 'You look pretty, darling.'

Emily smiled. Daddy was always good for a compliment. But she felt a stab of sadness too. She didn't feel pretty; she felt washed-out and wretched and the thought of never seeing Raymond again filled her with despair.

'You're a really nice girl,' Raymond had said when he finished with her.

A really nice girl! He was her whole world and she was nothing more than a really nice girl.

But she was *not* going to dwell on that today. This afternoon, they were going to Mrs Cooper's house in Wilton Close to celebrate Mabel's engagement.

As if he could read her thoughts, Daddy stood up and came over to her, looking down into her face. 'You'll be all right this afternoon, won't you?'

'I managed at Lucy's engagement party, didn't I?' Emily answered. 'I'm an old hand at it now.'

Her old chum Lucy had got engaged at Christmas – the same time as Mabel, as it later turned out – and Lucy's parents had thrown a party for the happy couple in between Christmas and New Year. It was supposed to be an impromptu party, but it was obvious it had been planned down to the last detail. Beforehand, Mummy and Daddy had thought there might well be a party and they had wanted to spare Emily from having to attend.

'Mummy can practise saying, "Oh, what a shame. We have other arrangements for that evening" in case Lucy's mother mentions an engagement party,' Daddy had said.

But when the invitation came, much to her own surprise Emily had second thoughts.

'Mummy, could you please say that we have other arrangements that evening, but we'll drop in for a while on our way?'

'Are you sure, darling?' Mummy had looked concerned.

'No,' Emily said bluntly, 'but I think we ought to.'

'Good girl,' said Mummy.

Her parents always liked it when she did the decent thing. They'd brought her up to be polite and it turned out that the need to be so applied even when you were heart-broken.

After that Mummy had come home from work with the news that Mabel had returned from her Christmas visit to Annerby sporting a ruby engagement ring that she was flashing left, right and centre, 'along with the happiest smile you can imagine,' according to Mummy. And this afternoon there was to be the get-together at Mrs Cooper's, where Mabel lived, for her friends to celebrate the wonderful news with one of the railway friends' tea parties that they all loved so much.

Emily felt better about going to this party than she had about attending Lucy's. Was that because she and Lucy had been friends for simply yonks, ever since they were little girls, and these today were new friends? But that made it sound as if her new friends weren't as important and that most certainly wasn't the case. She'd only known them since the summer of '41 and, truth be told, she hadn't been at all keen in the early days. These days, shame could still make her face tingle when she recalled how she'd looked down on Mrs Green and Mrs Cooper for being working class. Back then, she'd felt ashamed of her mother for wanting to be friends with people of that sort. She hadn't liked Mabel, Alison and the rest either, fearing that they were simply out for what help they could get from Mummy, maybe free legal advice from Daddy. Why else would girls in their twenties pal up with someone of Mummy's age?

How wrong she had been, how completely wrong. Emily had learned to value people according to their characters and their actions instead of making harsh and unsubstantiated judgements based purely on age or class. She'd been rather a twerp, actually, and dearly hoped her railway friends had forgotten her old snobby ways. She still experienced the occasional twinge of doubt in case they only accepted her because she was her mother's daughter, but with her sensible hat on, she knew this wasn't the case.

Emily looked round as Mummy walked into the room. She didn't miss the glance that passed between her parents when Mummy saw Daddy standing close to her. They'd been very protective ever since Raymond dumped her, which was perfectly sweet of them, of course, and she adored them for it, but it could feel a bit, well, smothering sometimes. There were moments when she just wanted to say, 'It doesn't matter how kind you are or how much you watch over me. You can't change the way I feel,' but she never did.

Mummy looked swish but not overdressed in dove grey with her trademark pearl earrings. Mummy always looked nice. Elegant. You'd never imagine she spent her working days out on the railway tracks, dismantling, cleaning and reassembling the lamps belonging to signals as well as to engines, coaches and wagons. In her snobby days, Emily had been obscurely ashamed of her mother's job. Essential war work it might be, but it wasn't exactly suitable for a respectable, educated, cultured lady from the upper middle class. Daddy had thought so too, but they had both come round since then.

'All set?' Mummy asked, smiling.

'We'd better do the blackout before we go,' said Daddy. 'It'll be dark when we get home.'

'I'll do it,' said Emily and ran around the house, pulling first the ordinary curtains and then the blackout curtains, twitching them at the edges to ensure they covered the entire windows plus a bit more. Sometimes it was hard to remember what life had been like before the blackout. Just think: small children who had never known any different would think this was normal.

In the hall, her parents were togged up in their outdoor things, complete with warm scarves and leather gloves. Mummy had a rather gorgeous wine-coloured coat with a

top-stitched collar and a grey felt hat with an upswept brim. Emily had been obliged to wear her school gabardine for quite some time after she had come home, until dear Mrs Cooper, who helped with the WVS's clothes exchange, had tipped Mummy the wink about a nut-brown coat in good condition and Mummy had quickly exchanged Emily's gabardine for the brown coat as a surprise. It had been an especially kind thing to do because even though Emily was the one to benefit, it had been her mother who had done the swap and that meant she couldn't visit the clothes exchange again for a whole month.

Emily's new-to-her coat was flattering, with its slight flare below the waist and a tie belt that had to be fastened in a knot. And Mummy's pale pink hat with magenta trim looked especially good with the coat – to the point where Mummy hadn't exactly given the hat to Emily, but she raised no objection when Emily wore it so much.

Not that it mattered these days. Emily had cared most awfully what she looked like when she was seeing Raymond, but now – so what? Looking her best hadn't made Raymond stay in love with her even though he was always telling her how pretty she was. Even when he ditched her, he'd said, 'You're so pretty. You'll soon meet someone else' – as if that was all there was to it.

Shrugging on her coat and winding her scarf around her neck and tucking it in, Emily was soon ready to go.

'Have you got everything?' Daddy asked.

They were taking with them a plate of sardine sandwiches and a coconut pudding, as well as a contribution to the afternoon's quantity of tea leaves.

'You can't have a tea party without plenty of tea,' said Mummy. 'And we're taking a quarter of our Christmas cake. Dot's bringing a quarter of hers too.'

'So we don't all scoff Mrs Grayson's,' said Emily.

'I expect hers will be the best,' said Mummy, 'even though we've all had to make eggless cakes this year.'

They walked to Wilton Close, which took about twenty minutes. The afternoon was chilly and damp. Daddy would probably cut along to the telephone box and ring for a taxi to bring them home later when it was dark and cold. That was the sort of thing he did.

When they arrived, Mrs Cooper opened the front door as they were still walking up the path and they hurried inside. Daddy took their coats and Mummy vanished into the kitchen to hand over her dishes to Mrs Grayson. Then they went into the front room into a flurry of greetings and cries of 'Happy New Year!' Those who were sitting down jumped up to hug Mummy and Emily, and Emily could almost – *almost* – feel she was a true part of what was happening. Everyone knew of her unhappiness and wanted to make her welcome and she appreciated that, she really did, even though it could be rather off-putting knowing that everybody knew the private business of her heart. But all the same, the very unhappiness that the others wanted to alleviate was precisely what made her feel distanced from what was going on.

Still, she could play her part. If there was one thing she'd learned about herself recently, it was that she could act the part of Emily Masters to perfection. So she smiled and offered best wishes for the new year and cooed over Joan's baby and tickled his chin and generally behaved as if there was nowhere else she'd rather be. And then she joined her mother, who was with Mabel, admiring her ring.

'May I see?' asked Emily. 'It's gorgeous.'

Mabel immediately took it off. 'Do you want to have a go? Try it. Everyone else has.'

Emily blinked. Not so long ago, she had daydreamed about her own engagement ring. She had thought that



would be the first ring to go on her finger. Next thing she knew, Mabel's arms were around her and Mabel was whispering in her ear.

'Sorry, kid. Me and my big mouth. I wasn't thinking. I'm just so excited.'

Part of Emily wanted to dissolve into floods of tears, but she was made of sterner stuff than that, or at least she wished she was. Pretending she was strong was the best she could do. With a small wriggle, she freed herself from Mabel's embrace before the others could realise.

'That's all right. I'd love to try it on.'

She pushed the gold band with its deep red ruby onto her ring finger. There. It turned out that ring fingers weren't so special after all. You could put any ring at all on them. She took it off and handed it back, making sure she was smiling.

'It's beautiful. Congratulations.'

'Thanks. I'm very lucky.' Mabel replaced her ring and looked at it. The rich red stone was perfect for her colouring. She had such glorious dark brown hair, which she wore scooped away from her face and hanging in natural waves down her back. Mabel removed her gaze from her ring, laughing at herself.

Joan appeared, slipping an arm around Mabel. 'Before Christmas, she'd have been gazing adoringly at Max. Now all she cares about is her ring.'

'I don't blame her,' said Emily and slipped away, duty done, but deep inside she howled in anguish, remembering Raymond, remembering how he couldn't quite meet her eyes when he had dumped her. That was what had set alarm bells ringing, because he'd always loved gazing at her. He was an amateur astronomer, a stargazer, and he'd called her his star on earth, which had made her feel like the most beautiful girl in the world. But despite the alarm

bells, she'd had no notion of what was coming. The only thing she could think of was that his call-up papers must have arrived, which was stupid of her because he wasn't quite old enough yet, but it was the only reason she could come up with for the subtle change in his behaviour. If she'd had a hundred years to mull it over, she still wouldn't have imagined he was building up to leaving her.

She spent some time in the kitchen, helping Mrs Grayson, then she volunteered to take Joan's dog Brizo for a quick walk before they had tea. She loved Brizo, with his soulful eyes, his soft, floppy ears and gingery, golden-brown shaggy coat. She made the suggestion quietly so no one would offer to accompany her, but even so, Colette joined her. Emily was fascinated by Colette, but then presumably everybody was. Colette was a quiet individual, softly spoken and gentle in her manner. She seemed like a completely ordinary person, yet she had had to put up with being treated appallingly badly by her husband and nobody had had the slightest inkling of what was going on until Tony had beaten her black and blue and put her in hospital. Instead of being sent to prison, he had been allowed to join the army, which seemed grossly unfair, but at least it meant he was a long way away – but for how long? Everyone was saying that the tide of war was turning.

'I hope you don't mind me tagging along,' said Colette, pushing a strand of buttermilk-fair hair behind her ear.

'Of course not.'

'I'm glad to have a chance to have a word, actually,' Colette added and Emily's heart beat harder for a second or two. 'I just wanted to say that I know what it's like when people are watching – kind people, I mean, people who care and who want to make things better, only they can't, because nobody can. Whatever has hurt you, you have to live with it and find your own way out the other end.'

‘That’s exactly it,’ Emily exclaimed. ‘Everybody back in the house knows about Raymond and me, and I know they all care deeply, but they can’t make it better.’

‘It’s the same for me,’ said Colette. ‘I love my friends and I appreciate everything they’ve done to help me, but when push comes to shove, I still have to live with my feelings. Nobody can take them away, no matter how much they want to.’

‘No, they can’t.’

‘If ever you want to talk to somebody who – and I mean this in the kindest possible way – won’t try to make you feel better, but will just let you feel what you feel, then I’m here.’

‘Thanks,’ said Emily, feeling that a little piece of her burden had lifted. It was flattering, too, to be paid attention to in this way by someone older than herself and to be talked to as an equal. The other girls were in their twenties, but she was only sixteen, with her seventeenth birthday coming up in March.

They walked Brizo as far as the police station on Beech Road and back again. When they returned to Wilton Close, there was chatter going on in the kitchen, which suggested it was nearly time for tea. Emily slipped into the front room. Fussing over Brizo, she took him into a corner and sat on the floor with him. Soon the room was full and Emily wasn’t the only one sitting on the carpet. Plates were passed round and tea was poured while everyone chatted. Emily smiled and laughed occasionally as if she was joining in, but she wasn’t really. She felt distanced from what was going on, as if her deep sorrow and heartache lifted her out of the occasion.

She looked round at everyone. Mummy was sitting on the sofa between Mrs Green and Mrs Cooper. It was Mummy who had got Mrs Cooper the job of taking care of this house while the owners, Mr and Mrs Morgan, were

away in North Wales for the duration. Mrs Cooper didn't just take care of the house, she took great care of the residents as well, helped by Mrs Grayson, who was a wonderful cook and turned out tasty, nutritious meals in spite of all the shortages and rationing. With them lived Mabel, Margaret and Alison, all of whom worked on the railways.

Joan used to work on the railways as a station porter at Victoria Station, and then briefly in Lost Property, before she had Max. Now she was a housewife. Her husband Bob was here too. Emily liked him. He was what she imagined a big brother would be like, kind and good-natured with a lively sense of humour. He wasn't film-star handsome like Mabel's fiancé, Harry, but he was the sort of person you felt comfortable with and that counted for a lot. Harry wasn't here this afternoon because he'd had to go back to Bomber Command straight after Christmas.

Next to Joan, dandling Max on her knee, was Persephone, who was the most beautiful girl Emily had ever seen, with her honey-blonde hair and her violet eyes, but as Mrs Cooper said, she was lovely on the inside as well. Educated at a boarding school herself, Emily recognised in Persephone the confidence that came from living away from home, but in Persephone's case it was more than private education. It was the confidence that had been bred into her through generations of titled ancestors stretching back to when Adam was a lad.

Daddy was talking to Mr Green and Bob while Mrs Green sat with Mummy and Mrs Cooper. Mrs Green was Mummy's great friend even though they were poles apart socially.

She caught Mrs Green's eye without meaning to and quickly buried her face in Brizo's thick coat before Mrs Green could speak to her. She was quite all right tucked

away here in her corner. All she wanted was to be left alone. It wasn't difficult, because Mabel was the centre of attention.

'Where's the wedding going to be?' asked Alison.

'At home in Annerby,' said Mabel. 'Mumsy can't wait.'

Alison pulled a face, but then she smiled. 'I suppose it was too much to hope that you could get married here.'

'Of course she can't,' exclaimed Mrs Cooper. 'She has to get married from her parents' house.'

'It's going to be a June wedding,' said Mabel, 'and I'd love it if you could all come, though I know it'll be tricky to get the time off. I want Alison, Margaret, Emily and Persephone as my bridesmaids and Joan and Colette as matron of honours – or should that be matrons of honour? All I know is, I'll be one blissfully happy bride if I can have all my friends as my attendants. And I want you there too,' she added, looking around at Mrs Green, Mrs Cooper, Mrs Grayson and Mummy, 'though you can't be mothers of the bride for me like you were for Joan.' She grinned. 'I don't think Mumsy would stand for that.'

'I'm so sorry, Mabel,' said Mrs Grayson. 'I really don't think I could travel all that way, not even for you.'

'I understand.' Mabel pressed Mrs Grayson's hand. 'I'll let you off, but only if you promise to bake my wedding cake.'

Mrs Grayson pressed a hand to her chest, looking emotional. 'Oh, I should love to. What an honour. I never imagined . . . not with the wedding being so far away.'

'It wouldn't be a proper wedding without one of your cakes,' said Mabel. 'Will you let Mrs Mitchell help you with it? She's family, as well as the person who introduced me to you, so I'd like her to be involved.'

'Of course,' said Mrs Grayson. 'She's been a good friend to me all these years.'

'The rest of us would love to be at your wedding, Mabel,' said Mrs Green, 'but it'll depend on getting time off.'

'You must tell us as soon as the date is confirmed,' said Mummy.

'It's so exciting,' said Margaret.

'There's something else I ought to tell you,' said Mabel. 'I expect you've already worked it out for yourselves, but I ought to say it anyway.' She pressed her lips together, looking emotional. 'When Harry and I tie the knot, obviously I'll go to live down south. Harry has applied for married quarters.'

'Of course you have to live with Harry,' said Mrs Grayson.

'No, you don't,' Joan teased, though her eyes were suspiciously bright. 'You could get wed and come back to us.'

'I think Harry would have something to say about that,' said Alison and the others laughed, so Emily joined in, though she didn't really feel she was part of the conversation. Not because she was being left out, but because . . . oh, just because.

'We'll all miss you, love,' said Mrs Green and there were murmurs of agreement.

Mabel wiped away a tear. 'But we'll keep in touch, won't we?'

'Of course!' everyone cried reassuringly, dashing away a few tears of their own.

'If there's one thing I can guarantee about this lot,' Alison declared, looking round, 'it's that they're superb at keeping in touch. I was snowed under with letters last year when I was packed off to Leeds.'

After everyone had finished eating, Margaret and Joan went to boil the kettle again so that more tea could be squeezed out of the pot.

'Don't start drinking yet,' said Mrs Green, standing up when all the cups had been refreshed. 'We need to have a

toast. It's a shame Harry can't be here, but we all want to wish the very best to our lovely Mabel – a wonderful future and a long and happy marriage.'

'Mabel,' everyone said, raising their teacups, and 'Congratulations,' and 'Harry's a lucky man.'

Emily joined in, but it was like she wasn't really there. She was an observer rather than a participant. Lucy and Charlie. Mabel and Harry. Things were meant to happen in threes, weren't they? She wasn't sure she could bear it if Alison and Joel got engaged too.

Except that she would bear it. It wasn't as though she had a choice. She didn't have a choice about anything these days. The one choice she had made, to be with Raymond for ever, had been ripped away from her.

She watched all the smiling faces around her and saw Mabel's happiness. Was it always going to be this way for her from now on? Was she always going to feel she was on the outside looking in?

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## CHAPTER TWO

It was time to start being sensible. Mabel had had a whale of a time showing off her beautiful engagement ring to all and sundry, wearing it on a chain around her neck when she went to work, but now it was the middle of January and it was high time she stopped. Removing the silver chain, she dropped it onto the dressing table and took the little velvet-lined ring box out of the drawer to put it beside her bed. She held up her hand for the umpteenth time to admire her ring. From now on, she would keep it at home and wear it in the evenings and on her days off.

Home. She looked around the bedroom. The Morgans had slept in single beds, with a bedside cupboard next to each one. There was a chest of drawers, a dressing table with a triple mirror, and a wardrobe with a long mirror inset in one of the doors. One wall housed the chimney breast and fireplace, which must have made the room as warm as toast before the war.

This had been Mabel's bedroom since the spring of 1941. Now it was the start of 1943 and they were still at war. But without the war, she would never have met her darling Harry, her very own cheeky blighter. Just thinking of him made Mabel go wobbly inside. He was as handsome as any star of the silver screen, with his dark eyes, generous mouth, straight nose and broad forehead with its suggestion of a widow's peak at the temples. Better yet, he was a man in uniform and Mabel wanted to stand taller and breathe more deeply when she was by his side. She was massively



proud to be able to utter the words 'fiancé' and 'Bomber Command' in the same sentence.

Just think. In just a few short months, they would be man and wife. There was nothing Mabel wanted more in the whole world, but she hated to think of leaving her friends behind. They were inexpressibly dear to her. How would she manage without them? Yes, there would be letters, of course, which were more important than ever in wartime, but could they really make up for the day-to-day company, the chatting and laughter in the station buffet, the kindness and concern and staunch support that came from all of them being together regularly? Something inside Mabel slumped. Letters would be wonderful in their own way, but it would be a huge wrench to leave her chums behind and have to start again.

Harry understood perfectly, bless him. Others often underestimated Harry. They thought he was all charm, and it was true that with his dishy smile and silver tongue, he could entice the birds out of the trees. But he could be sensitive and insightful as well, though this was a side of his character that he saved for Mabel.

'I can't wait for us to live together,' he had told her after they got engaged, and the deep note in his voice had sent a delicious little shiver all over Mabel's skin. 'But I know you'll miss your pals badly. You're so close to one another and I know it's helped you all to cope with the war.'

Mabel had nodded. 'I can't bear to think of leaving them behind.'

Harry grinned. 'If you arrive at Bomber Command with extra suitcases, I won't be surprised if your friends burst out of them.'

Tilting her head to one side, Mabel pretended to consider it. 'That's not a bad idea.' She reached up and touched his cheek. 'As long as you know that as much as I love and need my friends, I love and need you more.'

Harry kissed her tenderly. 'I'll make sure you're happy in your new home, my love, I promise.'

Her new home! Wilton Close had been a real home to Mabel, thanks to the warmth and kindness of Mrs Cooper and Mrs Grayson. Plenty of girls had billets that were just somewhere to lay their heads and stow their belongings, but number 1 Wilton Close in Chorlton-cum-Hardy was a happy and secure home in the very best sense. Mabel knew she would never forget her time living here, sharing this bedroom first with Joan and now with Margaret, while Alison occupied what used to be the box room at the end of the landing.

Girls living together and getting along so well was like having sisters. Mabel's heart dipped for a moment. Althea, the dear friend she'd grown up with and whom she'd always called the sister of her heart, had died in tragic circumstances before the war and for a long time she had haunted Mabel's thoughts. They had always planned to be one another's bridesmaids and now Mabel was going to get married without her. A wave of sadness washed over Mabel and the world seemed to slow down, but then – an important lesson learned in wartime – she acknowledged the scale and importance of her grief before carefully setting it aside and concentrating on the good things.

There was a gentle knock at the door and Mrs Cooper walked in, carrying a neat pile of garments.

'I've done the ironing, dear,' she said, putting some on Margaret's bed and the rest on Mabel's.

'You do spoil us, Mrs C,' said Mabel. 'We should do our own ironing.'

'There's no call for that. I like looking after you. Everyone fettleing for themselves wouldn't be very homely, and I like to think I'm providing a home'

'You certainly do that,' Mabel replied with a smile.

'I'm only doing for you what I used to do for my Lizzie,' said Mrs Cooper. 'I like to think that your mum and Alison's mum are happier knowing you're being properly taken care of.'

'And if Margaret's mum is looking down on her, I bet she's thinking the same.'

'I hope so,' said Mrs Cooper. 'Are you coming down, chuck? Mrs Grayson is ready to put the tea on the table.'

They went downstairs together, Mabel following her landlady. Mrs Cooper was a small bird of a woman who looked as if a puff of wind might blow her over, but she worked hard, not just here caring for the house and her lodgers, but also as a cleaner in other women's homes. Her cleaning service was called Magic Mop, a name Mabel had coined, inspired by jokes about Mrs Grayson and her magic mixing bowl. Magic Mop had suffered some loss of custom last year through no fault of Mrs Cooper's, but now her list of clients was building up again.

With the three girls all working shifts, it wasn't unusual for mealtimes to be spread out, but this evening they were all there. They bowed their heads as Mrs Cooper said grace, giving thanks for the brave men of the Merchant Navy.

'Weren't you supposed to stay in town and go out with Joel this evening?' Mabel asked Alison as they started on their vegetables baked in potato pastry.

'Yes, but he's got to do a double shift because of another doctor being ill,' said Alison.

'That's a shame,' said Margaret.

'Never mind that,' said Alison. 'Let's talk about the wedding. Does it feel strange having the arrangements going on so far away?'

'In a way,' Mabel admitted, 'but Mumsy would be devastated if Harry and I had a quick ceremony down here. She

wanted June because the roses will be in bloom and we can have rose petals as confetti.'

'Lovely,' said Mrs Cooper.

'It seems a shame to denude the rose bushes,' said Mabel, 'but with confetti not being allowed, what else is there?'

'Rice,' said Alison.

'Waste of food,' said Mrs Grayson.

'I read in *Vera's Voice* about rice at weddings,' said Mrs Cooper. 'They suggested shaking hands with the happy couple and presenting them with a bag of rice instead.'

'That's not a bad idea,' said Margaret, 'but rose petals will be romantic.'

'I just hope nothing goes wrong in terms of last-minute hitches,' said Alison. 'Like Joel having to do this extra shift this evening. These things happen, especially to servicemen.'

'Well, I personally won't have a last-minute hitch of that sort,' said Mabel, 'because I'll hand in my notice and finish work before the wedding. You hear about brides being given just two or three days off, four if they're lucky. We'll only have Harry to worry about in terms of duty calling.'

'My sister got married with next to no notice, if you recall,' said Alison. 'She got a letter from her boyfriend with a proposal and a possible wedding date all in one. He came home on leave and they dashed up the aisle, had a weekend honeymoon, and then she had to wave him off again. She hasn't seen him since.'

'A lady in the butcher's queue was telling me about her niece,' said Mrs Cooper. 'She was busy organising her wedding when she got an urgent telephone message saying "Come immediately and bring a hat." Her fiancé was about to be posted overseas unexpectedly and she had to rush down to the south coast. Not that anything like that is going to happen to you and Harry. I'm sure, dear,' she added.

‘What shall you wear?’ asked Margaret. ‘At least you’ve got plenty of time to sort out a dress – or a suit, if you prefer?’

Mabel shook her head. She had given this some thought. Back at the start of the war, there had been a feeling that it was unpatriotic to have a big white wedding, but now things had changed, and the prevailing opinion was that it was good for morale, not to mention one in the eye for Hitler, to have a wedding that looked as pre-war as possible.

‘I’d like a proper wedding dress,’ she said. Then she couldn’t suppress a smile. ‘Mumsy would never let me get away with marrying in a suit. She’s been dreaming about this for years.’

‘Bless her,’ Mrs Cooper murmured.

‘And then there’s the cake,’ said Alison. ‘With all the restrictions on sugar, some couples are having chocolate cake.’

‘Not in June, I hope,’ said Mrs Grayson. ‘Think of the mess if it melted.’

‘One thing Harry and I decided about the cake before Mumsy could take over absolutely everything,’ said Mabel with a touch of pride, ‘is that on the top, instead of figures of the bride and groom, we want a V for Victory. Pops is going to arrange for a V to be made specially for us in the factory.’

‘V for Victory,’ said Alison. ‘That’s perfect.’

‘Yes, it is,’ said Mabel.

‘V for Victory,’ said Margaret, ‘and V for Very Happy Couple.’

‘Talking of victory,’ said Mrs Grayson, ‘that reminds me. It said in the paper that there’s going to be a Wings for Victory Week in March to raise funds for the RAF.’

‘I wonder what’s being organised locally,’ Mabel said at once. ‘I’d like to be involved.’

‘Of course you would,’ said Mrs Cooper, ‘with your future husband in the RAF.’

‘I’d like to be responsible for organising something,’ said Mabel.

‘It would be your legacy here,’ said Margaret.

Mabel liked the sound of that. Her legacy. She loved her home town of Annerby in the north of Lancashire and she loved Manchester too, had felt a profound connection to the city ever since the devastating Christmas Blitz of 1940 when she, a trained first-aider, had taken part in rescues throughout those two never-ending nights of death and destruction. She would love to feel she was in some small way leaving a legacy behind her. As much as she longed to be Mrs Harry Knatchbull and as dearly as she was looking forward to living with him near Bomber Command, she knew that part of her heart was going to break when she had to leave Manchester and her wonderful friends.

So it was right and fitting to leave a legacy behind her, and not just the memory of a successful Wings for Victory Week event either, but something lasting. Something permanent. Something that would make her friends proud of her.

‘Oh, for a proper bath,’ groaned Mabel, ‘with deep water and scented soap. Never mind fighting for freedom. Today I’ve been fighting for scented soap.’

‘One of the girls in the engine sheds, Sally, was given a cake of scented soap for Christmas,’ said Margaret.

‘She wasn’t,’ Alison breathed.

‘She was. She says she’s put it on the mantelpiece so she can pick it up and smell it from time to time as a treat.’

Mabel rolled her shoulders. It had been a tough day out on the permanent way levering up heavy railway sleepers so that the ballast that shifted slightly every time a train

ran along the track could be shoved back into place and packed down. It was always hard work, no matter how used to it you were, but there had been thick fog today, with large gloops of stinky yellow-grey mush hanging thickly in the air, which made the job more dangerous. All the lengthmen, and indeed anybody working on the permanent way, had to keep their ears pricked the whole time because it was impossible to see the trains coming. Bernice, who was the leader of Mabel's gang of lengthmen, was a stickler for safety and she had given each of them a long piece of string. They had each tied their piece to Bernice's knapsack, which was left a yard or so away from the outermost track, and tied the other end to their belts, so that when a train was heard through the murky air, no one was in any doubt as to which way to go to reach the scrubby wasteland beside the tracks.

'Take care of my string an' all,' Bernice had ordered, 'and don't go piking off with it at the end of the day. I want it all back. I've had these lengths of string since I became a lengthman when the war started. You can't get new string for love nor money these days.'

'You can't get most things for love nor money,' Bette had added wryly.

Now back at home, Mabel said, 'A foggy day out there really takes it out of you. Rain's horrible because you get so cold, but with fog, you can't stop listening and concentrating for even a minute.'

'Go and have your bath,' said Mrs Cooper, 'and then come downstairs and settle beside the fire.'

Mabel grinned. 'It could be heaps worse. Fog's horrid, but at least we aren't having much snow. Do you remember how bitter it was this time last year? And all because it was building up to dumping six feet of snow everywhere.'

'The entire country disappeared under it for weeks on end,' said Margaret. She waggled her shoulders. 'Brrr. It makes me shiver just to remember it.'

Mabel went upstairs to have her bath. Wearing her dressing gown, she went into the bathroom, where a black line around the inside of the tub showed how much water was permitted. Tempting as it was to let the water run until it turned hot, she put in the plug and switched on the hot tap, praying the water would heat up swiftly. As soon as the water level reached the line, she turned off the tap, hung up her dressing gown and stepped into the bath.

Long gone were the days of plunging the soap into the water before creating a delightful foam on the flannel. Now the technique was to wet the flannel and do little more than show it to the soap. Making soap last until the next ration was released was an art in itself.

Downstairs afterwards, Mabel huddled by the fire for a few minutes because dear Mrs Cooper insisted, but it wasn't fair to the others to hog the warmth, so she curled up in a corner of the sofa.

'Do you think we'll automatically carry on being careful with everything after the war?' she asked. 'Or will we all go mad and fritter everything away?'

'Chance would be a fine thing,' said Mrs Grayson, looking up from her knitting pattern. 'You don't imagine that all the shortages will miraculously end, do you?'

Wouldn't they? It was a sobering thought and not one Mabel wanted to contemplate just now. She was grateful when Mrs Cooper changed the subject.

'Are you still going over to Joan's in the morning, chuck? Would you take a plate back to her? It got left behind after the tea party.'

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Oh, the tea party! 'That was just *wonderful*,' Mabel enthused. 'You're all so kind. I just wish Harry could have been here for it, but I'll tell him all about it next time I telephone. And, yes, of course I'll pop the plate back.'

Tomorrow was her day off and she was looking forward to spending time with Joan. They had developed a closeness during the time they had been room-mates here. Joan was one of only two people who knew about . . . well, never mind what. That was all well and truly behind her and it did no good to think about it. She adored Harry and he adored her and that was all that mattered.

It didn't take Mabel long to walk from Wilton Close to Torbay Road, with its long line of red-brick houses with bay windows in the front and black-tiled roofs above. Mabel rang the bell and Joan answered the door.

'I was watching for you from upstairs,' she said, standing aside to let Mabel in. 'Breathe in,' she added as Mabel slid past Max's splendid old coach-built pram to get to the staircase.

This was Joan's childhood home, where she and her late sister had grown up, looked after by their fierce grandmother, Mrs Foster. Joan and her little family now lived upstairs while Mrs Foster occupied downstairs and everyone shared the kitchen and the bathroom.

The front room upstairs was now Joan and Bob's sitting room. They didn't possess much furniture, just a couple of armchairs, a table with mismatched chairs, and a wooden cupboard with a drawer at the bottom. Brizo was lying on the rug in front of the fire and Mabel sat down to fuss him.

'Where's that other boy of yours?' she asked.

'Having his morning nap. I'll pop down and make us some tea. I won't be a minute'

When Joan returned, she settled on the rug with Mabel.

'Are you in line for some of the new Utility furniture?' asked Mabel.

'Forget furniture. I'd sell my soul for a pushchair. Max is going to grow out of the pram eventually. I'm lucky there was a pram in the family, but nobody has a pushchair. Anyway, Utility furniture is just for newly-weds, not for old married couples like me and Bob. Besides,' Joan added with a laugh, 'look at us sitting on the rug. We're not a good advertisement for needing Utility, are we?'

'I'd rather be right by the fire on a day like today.'

'So would I. Sometimes I feel guilty for having two fires on the go in one house, but then I tell myself that if Gran was a stranger who'd opened her home to us, we wouldn't be sharing a sitting room with our landlady, would we?'

'No,' Mabel agreed loyally. Things hadn't always run smoothly for Joan and her grandmother and although matters were good enough now for them to share a house, and by all accounts old Mrs Foster was very taken with her great-grandson, Mabel knew that Mrs Foster and the Hubbles didn't live in one another's pockets. Mrs Foster wasn't neglected or left to be lonely, but while multi-generational families usually lived together in the traditional way, it was better for Mrs Foster and the Hubbles to have boundaries.

'I felt quite emotional at the end of December and beginning of January,' said Joan, 'entering a fresh year with Max. He'll be one in May. I can't believe how the time is passing by.' With a twinkle in her eyes, she added, 'Who knows, you might be a mum yourself before his second birthday.'

Mabel shook her head. 'We've waited a long time to get engaged and get married. I've known Harry since 1940, would you believe. That's a long time these days. We want to enjoy being a married couple before we have a family.'

Joan gave her a push. 'I know you, Mabel Bradshaw, Mrs Knatchbull-to-be. You want to be the belle of the ball at all the RAF dances, don't you?'

'What's wrong with that?' Mabel smiled broadly. 'I want to make the most of being on the arm of the handsomest man Bomber Command has to offer.'

'Well, don't wait too long to start your family,' Joan advised. 'Having a baby in wartime isn't the easiest thing, but don't let that put you off. Kindness and ingenuity go a long way. I must show you the felt dog Persephone made out of an old hat for Max's first Christmas. And a lady up the road is married to a soldier who smuggled home a service blanket, which she made into coats for her daughter and her little boy. The boy's outgrown his now, so she's passed it on for Max when he's bigger.'

'I heard Canada is sending over lots of baby things.'

Joan nodded. 'That's right. "Bundles for Britain", they're called. They're for new babies, not whoppers like Max, but a WVS lady gave me a card of safety pins from a bundle that had two cards by mistake. Wasn't that good of her?'

'How things have changed, when safety pins are something to be grateful for.'

'If you don't want children straight away, are you going to work on the railways down south?'

'I'll have to work at something,' said Mabel, adding with a grin, 'not like some people, slobbering around at home.'

'There speaks someone who isn't a mother,' Joan retorted. 'Actually, I'm going to have to start pulling my weight again with war work.'

'You're coming back to the railways?' Mabel asked in surprise.

'No, I mean looking after children. You've seen the posters, haven't you? I can't remember the exact words, but they say something like, "If you can't go out to work, help a

woman who can." In other words, look after her children for her. There's a new word for it: childminding.'

'Is that what you're going to do?'

'I think so.'

'You don't sound bowled over by the idea, if you don't mind my saying so.'

Joan immediately brightened. 'I've been spoilt, being here with just Max. It's been wonderful, such a special time for both of us, but I promised myself that once we got to the new year, I'd do my bit to help someone else.'

'It's important war work in its own way.'

'I know, but it's a bit different to being a station porter. I loved that.'

'You'll love this too. Look what a loving mum you are.'

'Mothers need to make sure their children are cared for properly. How else are they to concentrate on their work? You can't have munitions girls worrying about whether little Billy is all right.'

'That's what I mean,' said Mabel. 'It's important work. Essential work.'

'There are plenty of mothers who would give their eye teeth for a loving, reliable person to look after their children. There are never enough nursery places and even if there were, there would still be mums who'd prefer their little ones to be cared for in a home, like a little family. So that's what I'm going to do.'

And there it was, inside Mabel's head: she knew precisely what her lasting legacy was going to be.

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## CHAPTER THREE

Persephone read through the typewritten sheet in the big sit-up-and-beg typewriter one final time before twisting the knob on the side that made the drum turn round, feeding out the papers. Three pieces: the top copy, which she would submit to *Vera's Voice*, the precious sheet of carbon paper, which had been used so many times it had almost no copying power left, and the bottom copy, so faint that she was sure she could only read it because she already knew what it said. This she would keep for herself and add to her ever-growing file of articles under her pen name, Stephanie Fraser.

What would *Vera's Voice* make of this one? She had written a lively piece about working on the land through the winter. She'd interviewed Miss Brown's land girls, who lived in the old gatekeeper's lodge at the bottom of the drive. They had cheerfully described their work as 'long hours and back-breaking', providing no end of examples, though it was the odd throwaway remark that had given the article its personal tone. Apparently, one of the very few advantages of being a land girl in the depths of winter was that 'the chickens are happy to settle for the night. It's hell in the summer months with double summer time. They're still clucking around at eleven o'clock and simply *won't* go to bed.'

That was the sort of detail that would raise a smile. But what about her reference to Tampax? Had she gone too far? Sanitary protection worn internally was making a big difference to girls who used it, though, so why not say so?

*Vera's Voice* was nothing if not sensible. They could always cross it out if they didn't like it – or maybe they would simply return the whole article, unwanted.

Writing articles was how Persephone used much of her free time. Not that anyone had that much these days. Persephone's job as a ticket collector at Victoria Station included compulsory overtime, but she had also spent countless nights fire-watching on Darley Court's roof and sometimes she mucked in and helped the land girls. Darley Court was used as a meeting and training centre for local Civil Defence organisations, such as the ARP and WVS, casualty services such as first aid and ambulances, and engineer services, like gas and rescue. Persephone helped keep the diary in order, ensuring that rooms of adequate size were provided and were never double-booked.

As for what remained of her limited free time, she loved seeing her friends, whether for a chatty evening or a trip to the pictures or an evening of dancing. All of which made it sound as if her writing wasn't all that important, but it was, and she set time aside for it regularly and was always on the lookout for ideas for something new and fresh to write about.

Writing was everything to her. She wanted to be a journalist and writing a wide variety of articles throughout the war was her way of proving it. Her parents weren't best pleased, but at this great distance there was nothing they could do about it, and it wasn't as though she used her own name. Meyrick House was at the other end of the country, down in Sussex, and therefore in danger of Jerry offloading unused bombs on the way home, so Ma and Pa had bundled Persephone off to Darley Court instead. In fact, the entire family had seemed to gang up on her, all her ancient rellies, not to mention her beloved brothers before they'd joined up.

That was another thing her parents weren't keen on – the way they had stopped being Mummy and Daddy and

become Ma and Pa. To Persephone, it seemed more grown-up to use Ma and Pa. She wasn't a glamorous debutante any longer. She was a young woman with wartime work to do. Even before she had started on the railways, she'd had a job to do here at Darley Court, which had to be put to bed, as it was called, for the duration. Basically, this had meant covering up the beautiful old wooden panelling with protective hardboard – not that Persephone had done this, of course, though she would have loved to. Her job had been to assist in packing away all the ornaments, the best china and so forth, ready to be stored in the vast cellars. Every box had to be carefully labelled, and a book was kept in which the contents of every crate was listed in detail.

Miss Brown had also offered Darley Court's services in storing items from small museums and private collections. This, together with using the place for Civil Defence meetings, was her way of protecting her home from hordes of schoolchildren running amok or recuperating soldiers looking for ways of alleviating their boredom by using the long gallery to play cricket.

Once the house had been securely put to bed, Persephone had joined the railways. She loved the work and also loved the friends she'd met through it, but she had never forgotten her writing and her ambition to be a reporter.

She'd had a job on a newspaper before the war – and didn't that make it sound grand? Like a real reporting job. It hadn't been that at all, not in her eyes. She had told herself it was just something to get her started. Not that she'd been blasé about it. It had, in fact, been rather exciting. It was just that it definitely wasn't what she wanted for the rest of her career.

But nobody had ever taken her seriously.

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Oh, that desperately disappointing meeting before the war! Persephone had gone to see Mr Bunting, the newspaper's editor, to propose herself as a junior reporter.

He had blinked at her. 'Great Scott, you really mean it, don't you? You actually imagine you can do this. You think you can be a reporter in London when war comes.'

She sat up straighter, not an easy thing to achieve considering her years of training in deportment. She was sick and tired of not being taken seriously. Nevertheless, she smiled. She'd been taught to do that too. ('No one likes a frowny face, Persephone.')

'I've proved I can write, haven't I?' she started to say.

Mr Bunting cut in. 'My dear young lady, a few lines once a week for the society column is a far cry from what you're proposing.'

'A few lines? Since I took over the column, I've produced simply *screeds*.'

'And most entertaining it has been too,' Mr Bunting said soothingly. 'Just what our readers enjoy. But what you're now suggesting – my dear Miss Trehearn-Hobbs, it wouldn't do at all. You're simply not up to it.'

'Give me a chance and I'll prove that I am.'

Mr Bunting bestowed an indulgent smile on her. 'Your patriotism is admirable.'

Persephone waited for the inevitable 'but', then realised there wasn't one, which made it worse. Mr Bunting found her idea so wholly inappropriate that he didn't feel the need to explain his thinking.

On the verge of huffing a sigh, she caught herself just in time. ('Sighing implies boredom, Persephone, and is very rude.') Instead, she took a moment to smooth her pencil-slim skirt. Being tall and slender, she made what her chums called a first-rate clothes horse. Her flesh-coloured silk stockings grazed one another as she daintily crossed one



trim ankle over the other, making sure to keep her toes becomingly pointed.

What could she say to change Mr Bunting's mind? Anyone would think she'd volunteered to ship out with the troops and report from the front line, not write about life at home as war took hold.

She had ventured here into Mr Bunting's office only once before, when she was given the job of writing the society column. She had always sent in her pieces – her copy, she had learned to call it, feeling frightfully modern, clever and professional doing so. Had it been a mistake to keep away? Should she have shown her face from time to time? But her identity as the purveyor of high-society gossip was a secret that mustn't be jeopardised. Besides, Mummy would have climbed out of her tree if Persephone had gone on little jolies to Fleet Street.

What a lark it had been to start with, writing her very own column. It had been part of the fun of belonging to the London scene, which in itself had provided such a contrast to Persephone's growing-up years, when Nanny Trehearn-Hobbs wouldn't permit cake and jam on the same day and Roddy and Giles, her adored older brothers, had disappeared off to boarding school, hardly ever to be seen again, or so it had felt.

Much as she loved her sister, Persephone had lived for her brothers' hols, even though those times repeatedly failed to live up to expectations. Roddy and Giles had seemed incapable of coming home without a squad of pals in tow, leaving the young Persephone aching to have them to herself.

But – and this was the biggest 'but' in the whole wide world – if they hadn't been so gregarious, there would have been no Forbes.

Forbes Winterton. Those eyes of smoky-grey. The eyebrows a darker shade than his mid-brown hair. The easy

confidence of the athlete, the clever, piano-trained fingers. ('Don't stare, Persephone.')

Forbes strode into her young life, seized her heart with both hands, then promptly hurled it to the ground and stamped on it. Not that he'd had the faintest idea.

'Is your little sister coming with us?' he'd asked, surprised, when she appeared in the stable yard in her riding togs as the boys were getting ready for a paperchase.

'Oh, yes,' Roddy said dismissively. 'Don't worry. She'll keep up.'

'Good as one of the fellows, eh?' Forbes tossed her a smile that liquefied her bones. 'We'll have to call you Percy.'

And they did, every last one of them, from that moment onwards, even the boys who hadn't been at Meyrick House at the time. It wasn't until years later, when Cordelia had pointed out that Percy was a label given to conscientious objectors back in the Great War, that it had stopped. Back when she was a girl, Persephone had spent the remainder of those hols floating about being as feminine as possible to try to undo the curse and make Forbes see her through new eyes, but it hadn't worked.

She had longed to go away to school herself, but like her sister before her, she'd been educated, if one could call it that, by a series of beautiful French noblewomen who had fallen on hard times, followed by a stint at a finishing school in Switzerland, specially selected for her to meet the right sort of girls.

Then it was time for Persephone's debut London Season, organised by Mummy as vigorously as Daddy had ever organised a military campaign.

Being a debutante was the most marvellous fun. Suddenly all those chums of Roddy and Giles's came into their own. Unlike some poor debs who didn't yet know any

young chaps, Persephone danced every single dance right from the start. She became even more popular after she was snapped for the society pages.

'Not that one courts publicity, of course,' her mother purred, 'but it's as well always to wear a pretty smile just in case one of those photographers is nearby. Wretched fellows!'

'You look a delight, Percy,' Forbes observed casually, picking up the newspaper she had artlessly left open at the appropriate page to jolt him into realising he must never let her go. Some hope.

She didn't marry from her first Season for the simple reason that Forbes never asked, drat him. Drat her, too, for pining for the one man who was immune to her charms. She didn't want Algy, even though she could have been a viscountess, and she didn't want Monty even though he sent her orchids every single day. Only Forbes would do and she pinned her hopes on her second Season.

Usually the Season started in the warmth of May, but in 1939, because of Their Majesties' state visit to Canada and America that month, it was scheduled for earlier in the year. Beforehand, Persephone felt particularly chipper, having received a charming letter from the Pond's people, asking if she would consent to be photographed for an advertisement for their face cream. This was an honour that was sometimes conferred on the girl popularly destined to be the most beautiful girl of the Season, but Daddy, who could be a real old fogey, refused permission.

'It's a shame, really,' Persephone confided to her grandmother. 'The money would have been nice. Daddy says I can have a tenner a month for my dress allowance, but that won't stretch as far as one might like.' Talking about money was vulgar, of course, but one could say all kinds of things

to Grandmama, who had been a Gaiety Girl before she'd knocked Grandpapa's socks off.

Grandmama gave her an assessing look. 'If you fancy earning a spot of pin money, I have an idea.'

And that was how it had come about. Grandmama knew the author of one of the society columns. Persephone was amazed to learn that 'Clarinda' was really a man. Apparently, he was about to emigrate to America, leaving his newspaper in need of a new Clarinda.

The editor, Mr Bunting, was very much in two minds as to whether to take on a slip of a girl but agreed to a trial period, subject to parental consent.

'But nobody else is ever to know,' he impressed upon Persephone. 'No tittle-tattling with your friends.'

'But it's *work!*' Mummy had cried in horror. 'We didn't bring you up so you could . . . work.' She made it sound like the most degrading thing imaginable.

'Besides,' said Daddy, 'there's a million unemployed. It's wrong of you to want a job. Immoral.'

'But not just anyone can do this job,' Persephone protested in her politest voice. 'Only someone in society can be Clarinda. And it's not really what you'd call a job,' she added, despising herself for saying such a thing. 'I wouldn't go into the office or anything.'

'I should hope not,' Mummy murmured.

'And it would be a deadly secret,' Persephone added. 'Not like the Pond's cream would have been.'

So she had become Clarinda, producing complimentary titbits about who enjoyed cocktails with whom at the Ritz and which couturier had dressed them. She also took her pen with her to country weekends, writing flattering comments about who sat particularly well on a horse and who wore which precious stones to dinner. Feeling devilishly clever, she also included snippets about places and events

she hadn't been to, but which she'd heard about on the grapevine.

Yes, she loved being Clarinda, but she would have much preferred writing about the preparations for war that were going on all around her. Sandbags appearing by the thousands, air-raid shelters being delivered, gas masks, preparations for the mass evacuation of children. But Mr Bunting simply wouldn't have it.

And then she'd been bundled off to Darley Court to sit out the war there. She'd had some success with getting articles published, though no magazine had ever offered to take her on, even temporarily. No editor had ever said, 'That's a jolly good idea. Can you turn it into a series?' or 'We're looking for someone to produce a monthly column about such-and-such a thing and we thought of you.'

All she could do was keep slogging away.

When Mabel cycled over to Darley Court on Saturday afternoon, Persephone made sure she had the chance to show off her ruby engagement ring to the land girls, who cooed over it longingly, much to Mabel's obvious delight.

'But I expect it's Mrs Mitchell you really want to show it to,' said Persephone.

Mrs Mitchell, the housekeeper, was related to Mabel's father and when Mabel had first come to Manchester, the Bradshaws had consigned her to Cousin Harriet's care. Mabel, however, hadn't stayed long at Darley Court. Instead, Mrs Mitchell had found her a billet with her friend Mrs Grayson, who at that time had still lived in her old matrimonial home, even though her rat of a husband had long since left her for another woman. After Mr Grayson and Floozy had been bombed out, Mr Grayson had ended up demanding his house back – it was his to all intents and purposes, because his name was still on the rent