

CHAPTER 11

Elizabeth was glad to get back to camp. She never thought she would feel like that, but after all the rows at home with her mother and father over Casey, she just wanted some peace and quiet. "I'd rather peel ten tons of spuds than go through another weekend like that," she thought.

When Angela arrived they exchanged their news.

"Well you can't say they're wrong can you Elizabeth, this Casey sounds a right nasty piece of work."

"Oh don't you start, I thought I could depend on you to understand."

"Don't speak to me like that Elizabeth. I know you're in a mess, but it is a mess of your own making. I know you want someone special to love, but playing around with every Tom, Dick and Harry isn't safe. If it hadn't been for those redcaps dragging that fellow off you a couple of weeks ago, you would have been badly hurt then." Angela turned away from Elizabeth, and hung her jacket in the long cupboard standing to attention beside her bunk.

Wiping her nose, she covered her face a little, so that Angela might not realise just how much she had upset her.

She was right of course. Elizabeth thought back to the night she had gone to the pictures with a very young soldier from the camp, he was a nice boy, and Elizabeth had nothing to do the night he asked her out, so she went. Walking back up the leafy Jane, a hand had shot out from the dark and grabbed her by the hair. She didn't know who it was, but yelled instinctively for the young boy to go and get help. Luckily for her two Redcaps had been heading their way, and ran with the boy to her rescue. They grabbed him by the arms, and then frog marched him away, before they left they said, "You will have to see the C.O. first thing in the morning." The outcome was that Billy Larkin was confined to barracks for three weeks, and Elizabeth was made to feel like she'd asked for it. The c.o.'s parting comment, said under his breath was, "Some of you girls should never had joined up."

Whenever she saw Billy Larkin on the camp, or out in the town from then on, she just tossed her head like a young filly, and refused to speak to him. He on the other hand, had tried to speak to her to apologise, and explain that his blind jealousy had led him to assault her, but Elizabeth would not listen to him.

"Come here and give me a hug Angela, I don't ever want to fall out with you, you're my best friend." They hugged.

"I'm just out to enjoy myself, why do these bloody men have to get serious. I promise you Angela I will pack Charles in the next weekend pass I get."

It was a lovely May day when war was declared over. Everyone knew that they were winning long before the final declaration. Elizabeth had met Charles at the Oxford Circus tube station, and arm in arm along with thousands of others, they made their way towards Buckingham Palace. Saint James's park had never seemed more beautiful; it wore its mantle of green with pride. Sandbags and guns still protected the Mall, but they were as nothing now the war was over. As they walked down the Mall with the crowd getting bigger, and bigger, Elizabeth felt her heart swell with pride at being British.

"My father always said the two best breeds of men for fighting are the English and the Germans. As much as he hated their guts, he admired them as a fighting force."

"Don't let's hear another word from you about the war, it's over. We have the rest of our lives to enjoy. No more bombs, and no more scurrying like rats for the shelters."

The crowds surged towards the palace, and when the King and Queen came out onto the balcony with the two princesses, a huge cheer resounded across the crowds. When the crowd realised Winston Churchill was up there with the Royals, the cheers were deafening. Everyone knew that without Winnie, they would have lost the war.

As the bells rang out across the country, men and women, boys and girls, turned to their neighbours and kissed them with joy. Charles turned Elizabeth towards him, and kissed her on the lips. Elizabeth was a bit taken aback, she didn't want him kissing her when she was about to tell him that she could no longer see him. He had never kissed her on the mouth before, always on the cheek.

Elizabeth thought I'll wait until tonight and then I'll tell him, he looks so happy, I don't want to wipe the smile of his face, but the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.

"Elizabeth, Now the war is over, I've got something to ask you, Will you marry me, and make me the happiest man alive?"

It came as such a shock to Elizabeth that she started to laugh with nerves. She fumbled with the tunic of her uniform, pulling at the buttons. "Don't be silly Charles, I've always thought of you as a friend."

The hurt in Charles eyes was terrible to see, Elizabeth felt wretched. She really had only thought of Charles as a really dear friend, never as husband material. After all he was twice her age.

When Charles had recovered his composure, he let go of her hands saying, 'What a pity Elizabeth, I wanted to take you around the world, and show you all the wonders of the world. And if I'm truthful, I also wanted to show you off to all my friends. But we can't always have what we want in this life can we?' No hard feelings, take that look off your face, looking miserable doesn't suit you. Come on now, let's enjoy the rest of the day."

There was no way they could just walk away, so they gently edged themselves inch by inch sideways, until they reached the edge of the dense crowd, and made their way into a side street. People were dancing and laughing all along the streets, people were dancing the conga, and some of the lines were almost a street long. Everyone was having a wonderful time it seemed, everyone except Charles and Elizabeth. Both were quiet with their thoughts.

Elizabeth would never know just how much she had hurt Charles. All she could think of was that "Yes, she was now free of Charles, and Casey wouldn't be able to hurt him, so that was a relief, but she had wanted to let him down lightly."

When they reached Cleopatra's needle on the Embankment, they walked down the steps and gazed into the water.

"I am really sorry Charles, do please forgive me."

"Don't worry about it Elizabeth, let's forget I ever asked you." He smiled at her lovely face, but inside his heart was breaking. "Come on Elizabeth, let me take you home."

It was the last time she saw Charles. He left a huge void in her life, she really had thought of him as a kindly father figure, the kind of father she would have loved to have.

CHAPTER 12

It was going to be a wonderful night down at The Ship. Everyone was determined to enjoy themselves before they were demobbed tomorrow at the camp. Dorchester pubs had been packed to the gills ever since peace was declared.

Angela and Elizabeth decided they would wear their uniforms for the last time, as did many others. The low-ceilinged pub was full of smoke, and crowded, but two of the young soldiers from their camp called across, 'We've saved you two seats here.'

"Oh my God, it's that Ray, Angela. He's a lovely man, but he's not my type. I don't think he'd ever been out of Dorchester, until war broke out. The girls all laugh when they see him looking at me, they say he's pining for me, and that I'm cruel, when I barely nod at him. Oh well, he's saved us two seats, let's go and seat our bats. With a bit of luck he'll buy us both a gin and tonic."

"Elizabeth you're outrageous, I'm not letting Ray buy me a drink, I'll get my own, and I think you are forgetting that he was at Ypres, and even his mates said he was extremely courageous. One even went so far as to say that he saved his life. So don't go putting him down."

They walked over to Ray, and his friend George, and squeezed in beside them.

"Thanks boys" Elizabeth said airily, "for saving the seats."

"It was really kind of you"; Angela said smiling warmly at them both.

Ray and George couldn't believe their luck, two of the best looking girls on the camp were sitting with them. Ray jumped up and said, 'What are you drinking girls?'

"Gin and Tonic for me," Elizabeth answered.

"I'll get my own, thanks Ray", Angela said as she lit a cigarette.

"Don't be silly, it's my turn to get a round in, same as Elizabeth then."

Angela couldn't be bothered to argue, "OK Ray that's really nice of you."

Ray smiled, and pushed his way to the tiny crowded bar.

The excitement in the bar was electric, they knew that they would most probably never meet up again, and their comrades had become like family, so they were going to make the most of tonight.

They drank until they were merry, and then a few people tried to dance in the crowded bar, some were already kissing and cuddling, and the bar man had called out, "Can't that wait until you get outside. We've got plenty of countryside beyond that door."

Ray and George had got up to go to the toilet, and Angela remarked, "They've been gone a long time. Do you think we've been dumped?"

"Hope we have, but no such luck", Elizabeth replied, "I've hardly been able to breathe, Ray has been sitting so close to me, he might just have well have been sitting on my lap. I could feel his hot breath on my neck, when he slid his arm along the back of my chair."

"Don't be nasty to him, will you Elizabeth. He can't help it if he has feelings for you. He's a very nice looking man, a bit like Alan lad with that blonde hair and green eyes. Has Alan lad got green eyes, I'm not sure now that I've said that."

"Look Angela, I've still got to get rid of Casey when I go home, and believe me that's a big problem. I don't want to complicate things by getting involved with anyone else, until that's sorted out." Elizabeth sighed as though she had the world's troubles on her shoulders.

"Ask Johnny Balfour to get us a couple of gin and t's, Elizabeth, pass this pound to him, it's a bit too crowded to squeeze pass everyone to get to the bar, and anyway I might not get my seat back." Elizabeth did as Angela asked, remarking, "Can't think where Ray got to, can't like me as much as you say he does."

They leaned across the table to chat to their friends, sipping their drinks. The evening wore on, and at closing time everyone had a great time, kissing each other, and saying their "Goodbyes", promising to write and keep in touch, knowing full well that they most probably wouldn't.

Two of the local lads had a little old car that was just about able to chug along, and they kindly said that they would give the two girls a lift back to camp.

"That's great", said Elizabeth eagerly, "But don't expect anything in return, we gave you all kisses in the pub."

'We're on the level, just trying to do you a good turn, and that's the thanks we get. By the way, did you hear what happened to Ray tonight?

Both girls were now seated in the back of the tiny little Austin Seven, "No", they replied in unison."

'Well one of the boys said you were a Gypsy, you know old loud mouth Nicholls, and Ray was furious so he called him outside. Ray was winning when he suddenly missed old Nicholls, and he punched the brick wall instead. Surely you heard the ruckus inside the pub?"

"Never heard a thing," Angela slowly answered, "but of course with all the noise going on inside, we wouldn't. would we?"

Elizabeth pulled at the jacket of the young man who wasn't driving. 'Where is Ray now then, did he go straight back to camp?"

"No, poor bugger had broken a couple of fingers, and his friend George had to drive him to the hospital. He seemed more upset that he hadn't knocked old Nicholls out, than about his fingers." As he talked the driver nearly overturned the car in the pitch black country lane.

"Watch what you're doing, or we'll all end up at the hospital", Elizabeth shouted. Even though Elizabeth had now lived in the country for eighteen months, she still felt a little nervous about the countryside. She liked towns best, with crowds of people; you can keep your cows and cornfields she was always telling people. It didn't endear her to the people of Dorset, but Elizabeth didn't care.

"Thanks boys", Angela said, as they alighted, "let us know if you hear any news about Ray."

"Oh I'll find out about Ray tomorrow morning. Come on Angela I'm dog-tired and my feet are killing me. I swear half the men in the pub must have trod on my toes while dancing with me. I'm not even going to have a wash tonight, I'm just going to fall into bed, and shake the dust from this place off my heels tomorrow morning."

The two young men waved them goodnight, and the girls crept into the hut, being careful not to wake those that were sleeping. They slid into their bunks, but Angela wasn't ready to sleep.

"Have you really hated it here so much Elizabeth?"

"No, of course not. Our friendship alone would have been worth joining up for. I really do love you like a sister, and I'm going to miss you so much when I go

back to my bug-hole of a home. We really must try and meet up before you fly out to Canada, maybe I could come to your wedding?"

Angela interrupted her, 'Well if you are not at my wedding, you'd better be dead, because I'll not take any excuses. My family will adore you; they will never have met anyone quite like you. You are my best friend Elizabeth.'

They were trying to whisper, but still a voice came out of the darkness, "Shush, some of us are trying to sleep, we've got long journeys tomorrow."

"Same here Angela, I had a lot of friends where I lived, but no one that I could confide in like you. I will really miss you", laughing quietly she said, "Naturally I'll miss all the men more."

Angela got out of bed, took Elizabeth's hand, squeezed it, and kissed her gently on the cheek.

"Goodnight my cheeky friend, sleep tight."

They turned over, pulled the rough army blankets around their shoulders, and fell asleep in minutes.

The next morning everyone was up and dressed, all ready to hand in their uniforms. Some were sad, and some were very glad. Elizabeth was one of the very glads.

Elizabeth and Angela both wore suits to travel home. They knew that they would probably end up sitting on the floor of yet another dusty train carriage, littered with cigarette ends. They took care with their makeup, especially Elizabeth, lots of mascara and eyebrow pencil, and the brightest red lipsticks in their make up bags was piled on. Both wore their hair loose and wavy. Angela put a couple of grips in to hold her glorious red hair out of her eyes, if the wind caught hold of her hair she knew it would look like a lion's mane. Crowning glory it might be, but it needed taming.

Angela wore a soft wool green suit, and Elizabeth a similar one in blue, both wore cream blouses with bows at the neckline.

"I feel like a pussycat with this bow under my chin", Elizabeth chuckled.

"Take it from me, you look the cats whiskers. Come on now, or we'll miss the train. I don't want to keep my future husband waiting, or some other girl might run off with him at the station."

After a tedious journey, where soldiers, sailors, and airmen, were all crammed onto the train, and were having a great time trying to chat up all the girls.

Angela leaned out of the train window as they pulled into the station, and yelled out, "Paul, Paul, Paul darling." She had spotted him standing on the densely crowded platform. He couldn't hear her across the noise of the train, but he waved to let her know that he had seen her. Angela's flame red hair would have been hard to miss.

"Angela, I'll say goodbye to you now," and with a tear in her eye, and a lump in her throat, she turned Angela around away from the window, gave her a big kiss. There you are all the sloppies are over with, grab your suitcase, and run to Paul before one of those other girls reach him."

Angela kissed Elizabeth back, grabbed her luggage, stepped off the train and was whisked away in the crowd. Watching them go, Elizabeth felt a little jealous of Angela's love for Paul. She wasn't jealous of her happiness; she just wanted to feel that overwhelming passion for a man.

CHAPTER 13

Jumping ahead of the queue, Elizabeth gave one of her winning smiles, and no one raised a voice in protest at her blatant queue jumping. Sitting by the window upstairs on the smoke filled bus, Elizabeth looked out at the grim blackened shops and houses. Here and there were spaces filled with debris, Hitler had taken his toll on the City. She had mixed feelings about going home, she wasn't sorry to get out of the ATS, but she would miss her friend Angela. On the other hand, it would be lovely to be back with her sisters and brothers. Wondering how Dad will be, was her main worry, especially since she had now finished with Charles. He couldn't stand the sight of Casey, and that was the other problem she had to resolve, no easy task.

The six-five-three bus stopped at the top of Maria Street, Elizabeth crossed the Kingsland Road, and started to walk down slowly. Nothing had changed except that one of the houses had been directly hit with an incendiary and had been gutted; children were playing in its shell. Just as she was nearing her home Rosie, Violet and Alan came tearing towards her. "Hello Elizabeth, are you home for good?"

"Yes, I'm home for good." She hugged all three. Looking upwards she saw her mother leaning out of the top floor window, must be making the beds, Elizabeth thought, "Hello Mum, I'll be up in a second, as soon as I can get

these three off me." What a contrast she thought, three laughing faces looking up at her, two of them looked like fat rosy apples, and her mother's face looked so thin and careworn. Young Rosie's face was thin and sallow, she resembled their mother, but she was laughing, and this made the difference.

Laughing she untangled herself from her siblings, and entered the house. God, how she hated this place, it stank of cabbage water, "Go on drink it up," her mother had said a million times, "You've got all your vitamins in that." Dutifully the older ones did as they were bid, but the little ones would just say "Yuck", and run off. She climbed the bare wooden stairs, entered the sparsely furnished living room and felt her heart sink. All the old thoughts of getting away from here came flooding back to her. She did a bit of self-talk, "Now stop it Elizabeth, you haven't been in the door more than a minute, and you're already depressing yourself." She pulled herself together, and with a gaiety she didn't feel, called out, "Hello Mum, hello Dad, it's good to be home."

"Sit yourself down girl, while I go and make a nice pot of tea. Sit and have a little chat with your Dad."

Sitting on one of the wooden straight back chairs, Elizabeth began, "How have you been Dad, cough any better?"

Mr. Martin, now turned his head towards Elizabeth saying, "Like you care. You couldn't wait to get away from here, bloody glad to get back though aren't you?"

Knew you'd never take the discipline, you never could be told anything for your own good."

"Don't start Dad, I'm tired, and I've been looking forward to coming home, and being with you all." Elizabeth turned away from him as she spoke, getting up she said, "I think I'll join Mum in the kitchen."

The kitchen was worse than the living room. It consisted of an old black range, a shallow yellow sink in the corner, a grey and white gas stove that had been bought on the "never-never" for a few coppers a week and a large sorry looking wooden table with a huge galvanised bath beneath it, that held the usual vast amount of washing waiting to be done.

"Anything new happened Mum?"

"Not really Elizabeth", she looked thoughtful, and then said, "Except your sister Joan will be coming home now that the war is over, and she's finished her schooling. What do you think about that?"

"Poor Joan, she had been away for seven years, evacuated with Auntie and Uncle. She must have forgotten what this place is like. What a shock it's going to be when she gets here. No more snow white sheets on the bed, no more delicious plump apple pies baking in the oven." Elizabeth felt sad at the shock

that was coming to fourteen year old Joan. Elizabeth hadn't seen Joan for six years, on the rare occasions that their mother visited, she never took the children with her, probably looked forward to a day away from the family.

'What are you thinking about Elizabeth?' Mrs. Martin asked a little sharply. It was almost as if she could read Elizabeth's thoughts. Feeling a little guilty, Elizabeth said, "I'll take the teas in for you."

Elizabeth placed the teas on the table, passing one to her father. She got a grunt as way of thanks. She nudged the old tabby cat away from her as she sat drinking her tea, but he wouldn't be put off, he jumped up on her lap, settled himself and began to purr, letting his claws gently in and out as though massaging her thigh. She didn't push him off. She was an animal lover, but she had learnt a lot being in the ATS about hygiene, and what you could catch from animals. This is what had made her hesitate in actually stroking the cat.

Eleven years old Rosie came bouncing into the room. "My cat hasn't forgotten you either Elizabeth, do you know that cat is as old as I am?"

"Poor old thing, it looks a bit moth-eaten."

Rosie look downcast, "Don't say that Elizabeth, Mum and Dad are always telling me to have it put down, but it's wicked to kill a cat just because it's old."

As if the Martin's didn't have enough children they also had lots of animals.

Either side of the fireplace were two old fitted cupboards, one held a mass of worn out shoes and boots, and the other was occupied most of the time, by the cat or the dog giving birth to yet another litter. The children loved to be so close to the animals when giving birth, that as soon as a pup or kitten was born, they would pick them up, and cuddle them.

Cries of, " Oh look Mum this one is all black, or this one's fur is still wet," would provoke a response of, 'Why don't you come away from that cupboard and leave that poor dog in peace. One of these day's she'll bite you.'" Ink the black mongrel never did. She might show her displeasure by showing her teeth and snatch back one of her newly born pups, but her love for the children made her placid. The children would bring Inkie tit bits from their plates, and stroke her head. After a few weeks of the pups roaming all over the room, Mrs. Martin would decide to call in the R.S.P.C.A. to come and take the pups away. The children would jump and cry, knowing full well that they would never see their chubby playful little friends again.

"I hate you" Alan yelled at his mother, "You know they are going to kill them." He raced after the van sent to collect them, as if he could save them. Mrs. Martin decided this time, she had had enough of the pups, so she sent Inkie off with her litter, and kept just one black one that looked like her. The children named him Gyp.

"Come on Rosie, "Let's go and sit on the backyard steps, and you can tell me what you have been getting up to."

Rosie jumped up; she had been kneeling at Elizabeth's feet stroking the cat on her lap. They ran down the small flight of steps that led out to the long flight of stone steps that led down into the garden.

Rosie couldn't wait to begin. She was so eager to have someone listen to her. Her mother showed no interest in her, she was wrapped up in the youngest two, but Rosie was fortunate that she and her father got on really well. He told her stories about his life, he showed her how to draw, and cuddled her when she had got another good hiding from her mother. This led to her doing absolutely nothing for her mother, no shopping, no washing up, and so more hidings would follow, Rosie often told her mother, "That she hated her, and wished that she had never been born." The answer to this was "When I get my hands on you, my girl, you really will wish that you had never been born." Rosie's real love in life, was her church, she spent most of her free time there.

"Come on then, start spouting", Elizabeth seated herself on the topmost step and straightened her skirt. Skirts had got shorter and shorter, because of the lack of material during the war, so Elizabeth was trying to make sure that anyone looking wouldn't be able to see up her skirt.

Rosie looked up into Elizabeth's radiant face, and thought, 'Why am I like the ugly duckling. Why couldn't I look like Elizabeth?'

"Are you ever going to start, or are you going to sit there dreaming all day?" Elizabeth pinched Rosie's arm gently, "Wake up day dreamer."

'Well the most exciting thing that happened was that I passed the scholarship exam, and I'm going to the Central Foundation Girls' School at Liverpool street, it's a bit near Spitalfields market. Do you know I was the only person from this street to pass?' This was said with a certain amount of pride.

"Good on you Rosie, education's very important, I never realised it until I met Charles. He taught me a lot of things, and took me places I had only dreamt of before. I know Mum has always said "You can never get too much learning, and although I ignored her then, she is absolutely right. So you learn as much as you can, it could open up a whole different life for you."

Rosie nodded, but didn't tell Elizabeth just how badly things had gone on the day of her interview at the new school. She had left the school at lunchtime to go with her mother to the interview, but when she got home the house was empty, not even her father was there. She had run from room to room calling, "Mum, Mum, where are you?" I know where she must be, nagging to all her friends in Hoxton market. She didn't care about the interview, she hadn't forgotten, Rosie's thoughts went back to that disastrous day, and a tear slowly

crept down her cheek. She wiped it away quickly so that Elizabeth wouldn't see it. Mr. Hawkes the headmaster had asked his secretary to wipe young Rosie's face when she returned to her school, and take her to the interview. She was kindness itself, she gently washed Rosie's tear stained face, the mucous mingled with the tears. Rosie leaned against the small sink to look in the mirror, "Do I look as if I've been crying?" she asked the secretary anxiously.

Rosie told the story of how she went for her interview with the secretary, and how the headmistress Miss West was really beautiful, tall, slim and blonde, and how Miss West had heard her read, gently putting an arm around her waist to encourage her.

'Well the outcome Elizabeth was that I was in. I felt very proud of myself, and so did Dad, but Mum didn't say much.'

"I don't think Mum meant to forget your interview, with all the work she has to do, it probably just slipped her mind."

Elizabeth thought the problem might have been that her Mother actually felt nervous about the interview herself. She probably thought, "I can't present myself and my child at a posh school looking like two ragbags." Yes, that was more likely to have been the reason. Her mother was always spouting you're as good as anybody else in this world, to try and give her kids confidence, but how can you feel confident when you don't get enough to eat, and your clothes are tatty. As soon as people knew that you lived in Maria

Street was enough to put them off you, most children were afraid to walk down in case they were caught up in a fight. The children from Maria Street were used to fights, they fought most of their young lives; adults there didn't set them a good example. Every weekend there was a free for all outside the Duke.

"Are you still going out with Casey, Elizabeth?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Well he's been around here several nights in a row to see if you were home."

"Oh that man he makes me so angry, I wrote and told him I would be home tomorrow. I didn't want him rushing around here tonight. I want to get my hair washed, it's so thick that it takes all night to dry."

"Did Mum, tell you that Joanie is coming home next week?" I can't even remember what she looks like, in fact I can hardly remember her at all"

"Well is not surprising is it? You were only four yourself when she went away. How are you getting along with Violet and Alan now, before I went in the A.T.S. you and Violet never stopped fighting."

'We still fight all the time, it's because I know that Mum loves her more than me, but I get on alright with Alan, in fact I take him lots of places with me. Not so much now that I am at the Grammar School, I get loads of homework, and when I've done that I generally go to church. There's always something going on there, and Sister Marjorie is so good to me, she likes me. Mondays it's Campaigners, Tuesday it's The Young Fellowship class, Wednesday Sister Marjorie teaches us to cook, and then most of Sunday I'm in church. I love it.'

"You really are a funny one Rosie, you're the only member of the family to have caught religious mania," Elizabeth laughed, "The only time any of us ever wanted to go to church was when they were going to take all the kids on holiday to Whitstable. And then we all went for four weeks, went on holiday, and didn't go to church again until the next holiday was due." Elizabeth said, "I think we've jawed long enough let's go in, it's getting a bit chilly out here."

"Come on skinny guts, help me and Mum get the tea ready, Elizabeth was addressing Rosie.

"Not me, let her get the tea ready herself."

"You little bugger Rosie, no wonder Mum gets wild with you."

"I remember before you went into the ATS you never lifted a cup for Mum, I remember Dad saying so."

'Well, I'm different now, I realise just what Mum has had to put up with all these years. I can tell you Rosie after peeling tons and tons of potatoes to feed the forces, getting tea ready for a few people is a piece of cake."

"Good luck to you then, but I'm off out, I'll grab a slice of bread on the way."

Elizabeth walked across the kitchen to where an old mirror stood on the mantelpiece, and combed her hair, and re-applied her bright rosy red lipstick.

"You're not going out tonight are you Elizabeth", her mother asked.

"No Mum, I'm going to wash my hair, but just in case Casey turns up early I thought I'd tidy myself up. If he should come later don't let him up, tell him I'm coming home tomorrow."

She need not have worried, Casey had a fight that Saturday night, and arrived to take her out on the Sunday, as Elizabeth had wrote and told him to.

CHAPTER 14

Crashing the knocker, Casey let the street know that he had arrived. As Elizabeth opened the door to him, he stepped back for her to admire his new navy blue suit, topped by a new white overcoat lined in soft silky raging red, which he now threw back in case she had missed anything. She smiled, he was very childlike. "You look great Casey, where are we going tonight?"

"Not so fast young lady, let me get a good look at you. It's weeks since I've seen you. My, you look good enough to eat." Elizabeth had taken great care and looked stunning in a black dress, with red shoes and handbag. She was glad that Casey appreciated the trouble she had taken. "No you look better than that, you look fabulous. Come here my sweet darling and give me a kiss?"

"Not on the doorstep, all the neighbours will see."

"I blow a kiss to all your neighbours", and with his laughing lips he kissed his hand and threw the kiss to anyone who cared to be watching.

Taking hold of Elizabeth gently, he kissed her. "Now tell Casey how much you've missed him."

Elizabeth laughed she couldn't help it. He had such charisma.

"Yes, I've missed you Casey, now where are we going tonight?"

'Well my vision of loveliness, I thought we'd go to the pictures first, there's a good film on at the Odeon, and then finish the evening off with a drink at my pal's pub The Queen's also in Hackney Road. I haven't seen him this week, thereby killing two birds with one stone. Is that OK with you?"

"Sure Casey, it sounds lovely." She was surprised to find that she had warmed towards Casey, maybe it was because she was missing all her old pals in the army.

They sat in the smoke filled cinema, the ashtrays were overflowing with butts from Weights and Woodbines, or if you were better off Black Cats. Casey kept on stroking Elizabeth's hair, much to the annoyance of a couple sitting behind them. Elizabeth barely noticed, she was entranced by the story of a Stolen Life starring Bette Davis. The clothes, the yachts, the country cottages, "yes, that's what I want," she thought. They left the cinema with its overflowing ashtrays, and cigarette strewn carpets, and walked along Hackney Road breathing in the fresh cold night air. The road was busy, couples like themselves were now making for the pubs, and the others were queuing for buses to take them home.

Several of Casey's friends were in the pub, but Casey spent a lot of time at the bar talking to his old boxing chum, Elizabeth felt a bit peeved at having to sit at a table making small talk while sipping her gin and t. The men at the table seemed a bit quieter than she had remembered them, but she thought, what the hell, I'll be on my way home in an hour. One of them started to pat her hand while he chatted to her, and when she told him to stop, he said, 'Why who do you think you are the bloody Queen of Sheba?'

Rising regally from her seat Elizabeth smoothed her tight black dress over her knees, and said "Excuse me, I want to get out to the toilet." She had just started to push her way through the smoky throng, when the good looking young man sitting next to her tried to grasp her hand.

"Get away from me, before I slap your face," she turned from the table, and walked towards the toilet door. While putting on more ruby red lipstick, she thought she heard a crash. "Some daft idiot's had one over the eight, and crashed against a table, spilling everyone's beer." She washed her hands yet again, and went back into the bar. All hell had broken loose in the five minutes she had been in the toilet.

Casey had Brian O'Ryan by the throat and was trying to strangle him. He had already taken a beating, his lips were split, and he had a large lump rising still on his forehead. Brian was gasping for breath when Elizabeth screamed at

Casey to let go. Casey turned towards her, still holding on tightly to Brian's throat, "He insulted you, didn't he? And no one insults my future wife."

"Please Casey let him go, you've punished him enough, come on let's get out of here."

Casey relaxed his grip, but Brian still didn't move, in fact he never moved until Casey and Elizabeth went through the pub doors. He was afraid Casey would come back and finish him off.

Casey tucked Elizabeth's arm through his, and smiled at her as though nothing had happened.

"How can you smile like that, when you've nearly killed a man, and for what, a few careless words?" Elizabeth wanted to pull her arm away from his, but she was afraid to. She was used to seeing the odd fight down Maria Street, and her mother and father having a barney, but she knew that Casey's anger had been out of control, and that really frightened her. Somehow she had got to get away from Casey.

They walked home from the pub; the night air cooled her hot face. She allowed Casey to kiss and cuddle her outside the old paint peeling street door, but didn't ask him in as she knew her father despised him. Casey was well

aware of the situation, so despite the fact that they were engaged he didn't mind. He didn't want to have another argument tonight, this time with Elizabeth's father. One day soon she would be his, and father or no father he wouldn't be able to ignore him then.

The house was silent, so she pulled the string and let herself in as quietly as she could, crept upstairs, and slid into bed beside Nellie. She woke Nellie, "Sorry Nell, I didn't mean to wake you, but now that you are awake, do you want to hear what happened down at the pub tonight."

"If you like, but I am tired and I've got to get up for work in the morning."

Nellie didn't turn around to face Elizabeth; instead she just pulled the old brown blanket over her shoulders, and snuggled down again.

Elizabeth relayed what had happened down at the pub, and Nellie just muttered, "Well, don't tell me you're surprised, look at the way he treated you when you wouldn't give in to him. He's an animal" Nellie drifted back to sleep to dream about her Fred, who was on his way back from Italy.

The next morning shone bright and clear, June was beginning to warm up. So Elizabeth got up early and helped her mother give the youngsters their breakfast of tea and toast. She was like her mother, always burnt the toast and ended up scraping it. Alan started arguing, "I'm not having that piece, it's too burnt."

"Neither am I, I don't like burnt toast."

Just get on with it the pair of you, or you will be going to school with nothing. " Elizabeth wasn't in the mood to put up with any nonsense from the children this morning. She was still mulling over in her mind what had happened last night.

"Go on kids, off to school, I've just seen Mr. Hawkes go by, and if you're late he'll make you sit in the big hall all morning." Rosie had already left as she had a bus journey up to Liverpool Street, and after Alan and Violet ran off, the house quietened down. Elizabeth made another pot of tea, made some more toast, and Mrs. Martin sat down, as usual rubbing her hands together, Mr. Martin followed, Elizabeth thought it was a bit unusual for her father, he never used to have a lie in.

"Here's your tea, Dad," Elizabeth said pushing the chipped old mug towards him. "Thanks girl" he said, he picked the tea up, and sat back in the old armchair in front of the now fire. "God it feels cold this morning."

Mrs. Martin lit a fire most mornings because "her Bill" always felt cold.

'What are you going to do today?' Mrs Martin looked towards Elizabeth.

"Going after a job?"

The biggest crime in Mrs. Martin's book was not to have a job. She didn't hold in with layabouts, everyone in this world has got to pay their way, she lived by this philosophy. Once you had a job, on Friday nights you'd arrive home with your pay in a little brown envelope, and automatically give up half its contents. No one cribbed, everyone in the family knew that the money was essential to feed them all.

"Yes Mum, I'll get down the Labour Exchange as soon as I've finished my tea. Bet there'll be a lot down there, as everyone's getting demobbed."

"Don't let that put you off. We don't want no lazy buggers swanning around in this house."

"I said I'm going, don't go on." Elizabeth answered angrily.

She finished her tea, and popped into the kitchen and peered into the old mirror propped up on the shelf. She mascara-ed her lashes until she was satisfied that they were caked enough, reapplied her lipstick, and set off for the Labour Exchange in Hoxton.

As she set off down the street, a couple of the local lads whistled her, as they lolled around on the street corner. She tossed her head, as if to say, "I

wouldn't give you the time of day." Not for her some local lay a bout. Her mother said, "There are those that don't want to work, and they always end up thieving."

She entered the Labour Exchange and wasn't surprised to find that there were at least ten people in front of her.

She sat in the chair opposite a frosty old woman whose hair was plaited and rolled around her ears like earphones. She pulled out a sheet of paper and began to take Elizabeth's particulars. Opening a small index file she ran her fingers down the cards.

"There's just three jobs here that might suit you, one is helping in the C & A factory, they will eventually teach you how to machine, the other is making children's shoes, and the last one is helping to run a cafe in the Kingsland Road market. Well, which one of those do you fancy."

Elizabeth looked at this sour old woman, and replied sarcastically, "I don't fancy any of them, but I've got to have a job so I'll go for the cafe."

"You don't realise just how lucky you are my girl to get the choice of a job. I've worked here and seen men in tears, because they couldn't find work." She looked over the top of her steel rimmed glasses at Elizabeth.

"Bet she'd have made a good SS woman", thought Elizabeth.

The woman filled in the appropriate form for Elizabeth to take along to the owner of the cafe.

She caught a Number 22 bus, and jumped off at the Metropolitan Hospital. The cafe was right opposite on a corner. The windows were in need of a clean, and the tables were littered with the remains of meals. This didn't seem to bother the working men; they were tucking in to beans on toast, or sausages with bread and butter. Huge mugs of tea stood steaming on the tables, while the men seemed to be looking down the situations vacant columns of the newspapers.

"Poor devils, they have fought for their country, and been put through hell, and here they are trying to find a job." Elizabeth felt sorry for the men, but the men were laughing, and playing jokes on one another. "I suppose it's such a relief to be home again, and not looking down the barrel of a German gun." All these thoughts went quickly through her head as she headed for the counter where a fat man stood. A not too clean fat man. The apron he was wearing, was covered in fat, dirty fat. He had a florid face, and breathed heavily. He looked as if he had put half a pound of margarine on his thick black hair.

"Yes young lady, what do you want?" he asked in an impatient tone, as if to imply he hadn't got all day to waste.

"The labour exchange sent me about the job. You evidently need someone to help you run the cafe."

Elizabeth wasn't intimidated by him, she thought she was doing him a favour applying for the job.

'What experience have you had?' Anthony Milano barked at her. Tony's people had settled in England before the First World War, and when war was declared the name Milano was quickly forgotten and they became the Miller family. The cafe was called Tony's, of which Tony was immensely proud. To him it was on a par with the Ritz.

"I've just been in the ATS for eighteen months, and for most of that time, I served in the cookhouse. That enough experience for you."

Tony smiled. "I'll give you a try-out, but you can cut the lip, I won't put up with that."

Elizabeth smiled back. "When shall I start then?"

"Tomorrow at seven thirty sharp. The men start coming in then for their breakfast so don't be late, and don't wear those silly high heeled shoes, you'll have plenty of running around to do."

Elizabeth ignored the last remark, and thought I'll wear whatever I please, he doesn't own me just because he's giving me a job.

Arriving home at midday, she flopped onto a chair, telling her mother straight away that she had got a job working in a cafe.

'Working in a cafe?' Mrs. Martin's voice held scorn, "I thought you'd find yourself something better than that."

"Mum, they only had three jobs down at the labour exchange. I thought working with other people and dealing with the public was preferable to sitting at a sewing machine all day, and that's what I would have been doing if I'd gone to C & A or the shoe factory."

"I'm sorry Elizabeth, of course any job's better than no job at all. If you don't like it, you can have a look around for something better." The emphasis was on the word better. Mrs. Martin wanted better for her children.

Mrs. Martin went into the kitchen to make Elizabeth egg and chips for her dinner, and made a large pot of tea that they could gossip over.

Mr. Martin turned his head towards her, "Never mind girl, something else will turn up, you'll see."

Elizabeth and her father had warmed to each other since she came out of the forces. Elizabeth was glad. The only time they had words now was over the matter of Casey.

To Elizabeth's surprise she found working in the "Greasy Spoon" as she had nicknamed it, fun. The men teased her, told her how pretty she was, but kept their hands to themselves. Even old Tony was fun to be with. He praised her for working so hard, and told her how he didn't know how he managed before she came. This was just what Elizabeth needed, her self-esteem rose with each passing day. It was a hard day; apart from cooking the food, which was mainly fry-ups, she cleaned the shop from top to bottom, tables, floors, even the windows. When she walked home after her first day, she realised that she actually felt happy, really happy.

CHAPTER 15

The weeks turned into months and VJ. Day was celebrated with a huge street party. The kids all wore paper hats, and waved union jacks, and the street was ablaze with red, white and blue bunting. All the women had begged, stolen or borrowed to put on a good table. There were cakes, and jellies, and plates of salmon and shrimp paste sandwiches. Small union jacks decorated the tables. The men had been kept busy putting up the trestles which had been borrowed from the pubs and churches in Shoreditch. They had been practising for weeks, playing the ukulele, or accordion. Now they were getting everyone to join in the singing. Roll Out the Barrel, and Run Rabbit Run, were the favourites with the kids, but Bye Bye Blackbird, and Roll Me Over in the Clover and Do it Again, was sung with great gusto after the adults had sunk a few pints. All agreed it was the best day and night that Maria Street had ever known.

The Martin family left the party at eleven o'clock. Mr. Martin was feeling very tired, but he'd done his bit, helping to put the trestles up, and amusing everyone with his musical prowess on the spoons, and saw. Mrs. Martin was very proud of him, she said with great pride to Mrs. Wallace her next door neighbour, "My Bill can make that saw sing." Mrs. Wallace agreed, she wouldn't want to fall out with her, because when she went into labour, it was Mrs. Martin who delivered her babies. Everyone down Maria Street knew that no one knew as much about delivering babies as Mrs. Martin."

Why," they said," she knew more than the midwives, after all she had had nine herself." Mrs. Martin was also very adept at pushing the kids out into the street or garden to play, while she got on with the job of being midwife. If it was raining she just sent them into her own house until the birthing was over. This was one job she knew how to organise.

Rosie, Alan and Violet were sent off to bed straight away, they didn't argue like normal, they were tired out. Mr. Martin said, "I'm off too, I don't want a cup of tea. See you in the morning, sleep tight, and don't let the bugs bite."

"Goodnight Dad," Elizabeth said quietly.

"Goodnight, Bill", I'll be up in a minute, just going to have a cup of tea with Elizabeth."

Mrs. Martin wanted to get something of her chest, and decided this was the right time to do it.

"Molly Bassett's husband comes home tomorrow. He's been in hospital for the last year, he was so badly wounded they didn't think he was going to live."

"Molly'll be glad to have him home, she's only young and must have missed him terribly", Elizabeth said.

"There is something I haven't told you Elizabeth, there's an ugly rumour going around that she had a baby by another man, and put it on the fire when it was born." Mrs. Martin looked down at the table with a sorrowful look on her face.

'What are you saying Mum, was the baby alive or dead? Oh my God, it's too terrible to think about.'

"No one knows, all we all knew was that she was due to deliver, and then there was no baby. It was her Auntie told someone that she had put it on the fire. I mean there was no way her husband could be expected to look after someone else's child, and he'd been away too long to pass it off as his. I can't believe young Molly could have killed the baby, I believe it must have been born dead. I saw her in Hoxton market some weeks after, and she looked very pale and skinny. What she has done must be preying on her mind. Anyway young lady, keep what I have told you to yourself, we don't want the authorities poking their noses in." Mrs. Martin seemed more relaxed now that she had unloaded this horrible piece of gossip onto Elizabeth, but poor Elizabeth had nightmares thinking of the poor little mite, and her hideous end. She didn't pray often, but that night she prayed to God, that the baby had been dead before she met her end. No one had said it was a little girl, Elizabeth just felt that it was.

She continued to work in the cafe happily, and had become quite cheeky with the men now that she had got used to them. Weekends were spent with Casey if he wasn't boxing. Elizabeth was glad that boxing took him all over

England, it meant that she only saw him about once a fortnight. The time was spent drinking or going to the pictures, and all the time she would be racking her brains thinking of a way she could finish with him, without sending him into a rage. She knew that she could never marry Casey, marriage to him would mean that she would be his possession, and that if she didn't toe the line she would probably get beaten. She had made a vow to herself after the last beating she took from her father "That no man will ever lay a finger on me again!"

One Sunday morning when she was lying in bed, waiting for her mother to bring her up her burnt bacon sandwich, her thoughts turned to Joan who was coming home from Rugby at last. She had stayed on to finish her schooling after the war had ended. Mrs. Martin had said, "Not much point in her coming home to do one last year at the local school, is it? She might just as well finish her education in the country." Bill agreed.

Elizabeth thought back to her year in the country with Auntie and Uncle. How she had hated it. She had grown plump in puberty and had to walk two miles to school, there and back, and lunch times there and back again. Her plump thighs rubbed together and were made very sore, but all Auntie would say, was "Get along with you girl, and stop making a fuss. You eat too much that's your trouble."

Sometimes Elizabeth would answer Auntie back, but when she didn't want another confrontation she would let it go, but inwardly seethed. On her fourteenth birthday her mother arrived to take her home. She was over the moon to be going home.

Auntie welcomed Mrs. Martin, "Come and sit by the fire, you must be exhausted after the long train journey from London. I'll get you a nice cup of tea."

Auntie was extremely hospitable to Mrs. Martin; she made a delicious steak and kidney pie for her lunch, followed by a huge lump of apple pie, and custard. She felt that poor Mrs. Martin needed fattening up, "I suppose she gives everything to those children of hers, what a life, nine children." No one ever found out if Mrs. Bainbridge couldn't have children or whether it was her choice not to. After looking after the three Martin children, she decided that children were not the blessings they were made out to be.

Elizabeth began to collect her clothes and bits and bobs to take back to London. There was not a lot, but considerably more than she had arrived with. The day they had been evacuated the children only had the clothes they stood up in, Elizabeth's sole on her shoe was flapping like a gaping mouth as she walked towards the train. Young Joan was crying, and holding tightly onto her brother and sister's hands. Lenny was pretending bravado he didn't feel. "Now don't forget Elizabeth, you are not to be separated," Mrs. Martin said as she wiped Joan's nose for the umpteenth time. Elizabeth watched from the train window, as her mother's face

faded out of sight. She knew that she was upset, but was not going to cry in front of the children. Poor Mum, it wasn't her fault that they had to go away, it was Hitler's bombs that made it necessary.

On arriving at Rugby, no one wanted to take on three youngsters. Mrs. Bainbridge stepped forward at last, and said haughtily, " I'll take the two girls."

Just as haughtily, Elizabeth answered back, "No you won't, our Mum said that we have all got to stay together, or go home." She had added the last bit on herself.

After arguing with the WVS, Mrs. Bainbridge gave in, not because she wanted to, but she had the room and would have been ostracised if she hadn't done her bit for the evacuees.

On arriving at "Auntie and Uncles" house, they were told to have a wash and change their clothes.

They told Auntie that they had forgotten to bring their suitcase with them. All they had brought were their gas masks.

"Never mind, I'll write to your mother, and ask her to forward them." Elizabeth cringed inwardly from shame, she knew that there wasn't going to be any clothes

arriving, but to her surprise two weeks later a brown paper parcel tied up with string did arrive.

Joan, Lenny, and Elizabeth crowded around Auntie as she cut the string with a pair of scissors. Out fell a Brownie uniform, and a fairy frock, the children didn't know whether to laugh or cry over the humiliating tat.

The following Saturday, the three children were taken to the stores in Rugby, and fitted out with a complete wardrobe, from underwear to topcoats. The girls quite liked their clothes, but Lenny said, "I'm not going to wear a suit with leather patches on the elbows and arse."

"Stop that disgusting language at once. Would you rather live in those clothes you came in?" Auntie asked angrily.

"Yes I would" Lenny answered back rebelliously.

They compromised, Lenny was allowed to wear his old tatty clothes when he came in from school, but for school it was the hated tweed suit with leather patches.

All the way home in the car the children were lectured on "How ungrateful they were, and do you think Uncle and I want to spend our hard earned money on you three."

Elizabeth had been in bed long enough thinking about the time she was evacuated.

She had finished her tea and bacon sandwich and decided to get up as it was now twelve o'clock. She hoped that Joan would be happy coming home, seven years is a long time to be away from your family.