

Chapter One

October, 1939

The threat of war had been the talk of the East End and, although Sally Turner had little idea of what it would really mean, she'd heard enough of the old men's tales to know it would probably be the most frightening thing she could ever experience. After the rumours and fears had been confirmed in Chamberlain's declaration, she could see the changes in the narrow streets and alleyways of Bow, for many of the children had already been sent to the countryside. Now it was her turn to leave with her little brother, and the thought of being taken far from the sights, sounds and smells of the only place she knew was terrifying.

She carefully placed the birthday card on top of their clothes, closed the battered suitcase, and secured it with one of her father's old belts. It was the only card she'd received and, as it had come from her father, it was extra special, and not something to be left behind. Harold Turner was already at sea when war was declared, and she had no idea where he was – but he'd remembered she'd turned

sixteen a month ago, and it made her adore him even more. Her mother, Florrie, had forgotten as usual.

‘Where’s Mum?’ Ernie was sitting on the end of the sagging couch which pulled out as a bed. He and Sally slept there every night unless Florrie was entertaining – then they went downstairs to Maisie Kemp’s. ‘I want Mum.’

Florrie hadn’t come home last night and Sally could have done with knowing where she’d got to, but she had her suspicions. The pubs, clubs and streets in the East End were heaving with servicemen looking for a bit of fun – and Florrie liked a good time. ‘She’s probably gone off to work early,’ she said, calmly.

‘Mum never goes to work early,’ he muttered.

Sally wasn’t willing to get into an argument over their mother’s whereabouts. Ernie was only six. ‘There’s a war on,’ she said, instead. ‘Everyone’s got to do their bit – including Mum.’

Ernie’s clear brown eyes regarded her steadily. ‘Old Mother Kemp says Mum’s doing ‘er bit all right, and that Dad wouldn’t like it. What did she mean by that, Sal?’

Maisie Kemp should learn to keep her trap shut around Ernie, thought Sally. ‘I don’t know, luv. Now, sit still and let me sort you out or we’ll never be on time.’ She tucked her fair curls behind her ears and picked up the special boot which she eased carefully over Ernie’s misshapen foot. Once the laces were

tied, she began to buckle the leather straps round his twisted, withered leg.

The polio had struck just before Ernie's second birthday, and it had left him with a crippled leg and weakened muscles – but, despite his disability, Ernie was like any other six year old – full of cheeky mischief and far too many questions.

'Do we 'ave to go, Sal?'

She made sure the callipers weren't too tight and patted the bony knee that jutted from beneath the hem of his short trousers. 'The prime minister says we 'ave to get out of London cos it ain't safe. All yer mates are going, and you don't want to be left out, do ya?'

Ernie shrugged and pulled a face. 'Why can't Mum come with me?'

'Because she can't – now, where did you put your school cap?'

He pulled it out of his pocket and rammed it on his head before tugging on his blazer. 'Will I 'ave to go to school? Billy Warner says there ain't no school in the country, just cows and sheep and lots of poo.' He giggled.

Sally giggled too and gave her little brother a hug. 'We'll have to just wait and see, won't we?' She made him a sandwich with the last of the bread and dripping. 'Eat that while I tidy up, then we must be going.'

It didn't take long to strip the bedding off the couch, finish the washing-up, and collect the last

few things to take with them. Their home consisted of two rooms on the top floor of a house, which was in a sooty red-brick terrace overshadowed by the gas-works and Solomon's clothing factory, where she had worked for the past two years alongside her mother.

Florrie had the only bedroom; the sitting room, where Sally and Ernie slept, doubled-up as a kitchen, with sink, gas ring and cupboards at one end. There was no bathroom, water had to be fetched from the pump at the end of the street, and the outside lav was shared with four other families. Baths were once a week in a metal tub on the strip of lino in front of the gas fire.

Sally had lived there all her life and, as she helped Ernie on with his mackintosh, she felt a tingle of apprehension. The journey they were about to begin would take them far from London, and although she'd run the house and raised Ernie since his illness, she was worried about the responsibility of looking after him so far from the close-knit community which could always be relied upon to help. She had never been outside the East End, had only seen pictures of the country, which looked too empty and isolated to be comfortable – or safe.

Putting these doubts firmly away, she covered the precious sewing machine with a cloth and gave it one last, loving pat. It had been her grandmother's, and the skills she'd taught Sally had meant she could earn a few extra bob each week. But it was part of

a heavy, wrought-iron table which housed the treadle. It had to be left behind. She hoped it survived – and that Florrie didn't take it into her head to sell it.

With a sigh, she squashed the worn felt hat over her fair curls, pulled on her thin overcoat and tightly fastened the belt round her slender waist. She then gathered up handbag, gas masks and suitcase before handing Ernie his walking stick.

'I ain't using that,' said Ernie with a scowl.

'It 'elps you to keep yer balance,' she said, tired of this perpetual argument. 'Come on, luv. Time to go.'

He snatched the hated stick from her and tucked it under his arm. 'Do I 'ave to wear this, Sal?' He plucked at the cardboard label hanging from a buttonhole on his school mackintosh. 'Makes me look like a parcel.'

'Yeah, you do. It's in case you get lost.'

'I ain't gonna get lost, though, am I?' he persisted. 'You're with me,' he retorted with the blinding logic of the young.

She smiled at him. 'Just wear it, Ernie, there's a good boy.' She locked the door behind her and put the key under the mat before helping him negotiate the narrow, steep stairs that plunged into the gloom of the hall.

'Yer off then.' Maisie Kemp had just finished scrubbing the front step, her large face red beneath the floral headscarf knotted over her curlers. She

groaned as she clambered off her knees and wiped her hands down the wrap-round pinafore, before taking the ever-present fag out of her mouth. 'Give us a kiss then, Ernie, and promise yer Auntie Maisie you'll be a good boy.'

Ernie squirmed as the fat lips smacked his cheek, and he was smothered in her large bosom.

'No sign of Florrie then?' The blue eyes were knowing above the boy's head, the expression almost smug.

'Mum's meeting us at the station,' said Sally, unwilling to admit it was highly unlikely she'd even remembered they were leaving today. 'Cheerio, Maisie, and best of luck, mate. See you after the war.'

She clutched the suitcase with one hand and Ernie's arm with the other. Maisie could talk the hind legs off a donkey, and if they didn't get away quickly, they'd be later than ever.

Their slow progress down the cracked and weed-infested pavement was made slower as the women came out of their houses to say goodbye, and the remaining children clustered round Ernie. Not all of them would be leaving London, but Sally and her mother had been forced to accept that Ernie's incapacity meant he would be more vulnerable than most once the bombing started. It was also why he had to be accompanied – and as Florrie had flatly refused to leave London, Sally had no choice but to give up her job at the factory and go with him.

Ernie let go of her hand, and abandoned the walking stick as they came in sight of his school. He hurried off to join the swarm of chattering children, the calliper and thick special boot giving an added, stiff swing to his awkward gait.

Sally kept an eye on him as she joined the cluster of tearful women at the bus stop. If he got over-excited, his muscles cramped, and it would do him no good just before their long journey. With this thought she had a sharp moment of panic. Had she remembered his pills? She dipped into her coat pocket and let out a sigh of relief. The two little bottles were snug and safe.

'I wish I were going with you,' sobbed Ruby, her best friend. 'But what with the baby to look after and me job at the factory . . .'

Sally rubbed her arm in sympathy. 'Don't worry, Rube. I'll keep an eye on the boys for as long as I can – and we'll all be back again soon enough. You'll see.'

Ruby blew her nose, her gaze following the eight-year-old twins as they raced around the playground. 'I'm gonna miss the little buggers and that's a fact,' she muttered, clasping the baby to her narrow chest. 'The 'ouse ain't gonna feel the same without 'em, especially now me old man's gone off to war.'

Sally knew only too well how tough it was without a man in the house, but she could only imagine how hard it must be for her friend to have to send her children away. She was rescued from

having to reply by the arrival of three buses. They pulled to a halt and a large, well-fed woman in a tweed suit and laced-up brogues climbed down from the leading bus. She took in the scene at a glance and clapped her hands before her plummy voice rang out.

‘Mothers, say goodbye to your children, and make sure they have their gas-mask boxes and identification discs, as well as their brown labels firmly attached to their clothing.’ Her stern gaze swept over the tearful, defeated faces. ‘I do hope you’ve managed to pack everything on the list. We can’t expect our host families to provide any more than they already are.’

Sally thought of the long, impossible list she’d been given, and knew she wasn’t the only one here that couldn’t manage to get even half the stuff the government seemed to think was necessary. After all, who could afford spare shoes and two sets of underwear when it was hard enough to put food on the table?

She stood back as the other women gathered up their children, kissing them, holding them tightly until the last possible moment. None of them knew when they would see each other again and, as realisation set in, the older children quietened, their fear and distress almost tangible as the little ones began to cry.

Sally battled with her own tears as she hugged Ruby, kissed the baby and ordered the twins to hold

Ernie's hands. She was aware of the envious glances of the others, and tried not to feel guilty. It wasn't as if she'd had any choice in the matter.

'Children,' the woman called. 'Form a line here, so I can check your labels.' She shot a glance at Ernie's calliper. 'You must be Ernest Turner,' she muttered, going through the list pinned to her clipboard. Her gaze travelled over Sally and a thick brow rose in disdain. 'Are you his mother?'

Sally didn't like the way the woman made her feel, and she returned her stare. 'I'm 'is sister,' she said firmly, 'and we're together. I'm also looking after these two,' she added, indicating the twins who were jostling one another and sniggering.

'This is most irregular.' She sniffed her disapproval, took their names and executed large ticks on her list. 'Go to the back of the first bus, and hurry along. We don't want to be late, do we?'

Sally felt as if she was five again, and being reprimanded by her headmistress. Her face was burning with embarrassment as she helped Ernie and the twins clamber up, and struggled down the narrow aisle with the suitcase, walking stick, handbag and gas-mask boxes. Settling the boys by the window, she watched the tearful goodbyes on the pavement. The bus was already filling up, the younger children snivelling as they clutched an assortment of brown paper parcels, cardboard cases and gas-mask boxes – the older children more thoughtful, their wistful eyes gazing out of the

windows for sight of their mothers as the truth sank in.

There was still no sign of Florrie, and she suddenly felt very young and vulnerable. If it hadn't been for Ernie, she'd have got off the bus and headed for the factory, where at least she knew the routine and everything was familiar – but Ernie needed her, so she reluctantly stayed put.

The fat woman finally clambered aboard with her clipboard and ordered the driver to get going. As the buses slowly trundled away from the school, the women walked alongside them, touching the windows where their children's tearful faces were pressed against the glass, calling out last-minute instructions and loving endearments to their little ones.

It was almost a relief to Sally when the buses picked up speed and left them behind. The guilt was growing by the second, and she couldn't look those women in the eye any more – but the sound of wailing children just emphasised the finality of it all and made her want to cry too.

As their bus made its grinding way through the streets, Sally kept Ernie and the twins occupied by pointing out the preparations for war. There were sandbags piled in front of government buildings and public air-raid shelters; white tape criss-crossed windows, and tank emplacements were strung all along the river. Signs over shop doorways declared support for Chamberlain, exhorting their customers

to do their bit for the cause, whilst recruiting stations were busy with long lines of men patiently awaiting their turn. London's parks had been dug up to provide even more shelters, and every available strip of land was being planted with vegetables. They smiled as they saw men painting out the street signs – that would confuse the enemy and no mistake, for London was a warren of streets and alleyways.

The entrance to Victoria Station was surrounded by vast piles of sandbags which were guarded by armed soldiers. As the buses ground to a halt, the fat woman took charge again. 'You will form up in pairs in a straight line and follow me,' she boomed. 'Everyone hold hands with the person next to you and make sure you have everything with you.' She stepped down and was met by three more women who looked just like her.

Sally and Ernie were the last to leave the bus, and she gripped tightly to his hand as the long, snaking line headed into the gloom of the great station. The twins were nearby; she could hear their loud voices above the almost deafening chatter of hundreds of children pouring off similar buses.

There was little time to look around, but the impression Sally got was of a vast domed ceiling, endless platforms and giant steam engines. The noise and bustle of hurrying men in uniform, of crying women, wailing babies and excited children was overlaid with clouds of smoke and

steam and the strong, pungent smell of burning coal. As neither of them had been on a train before, she and Ernie stared in awe at their surroundings and Sally realised they were both experiencing a tingle of expectation for the coming adventure. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad after all.

Their labels were checked again, and then they were being led down the platform, past the great iron wheels to where porters helped them climb aboard. Sally slid back the door to the empty compartment, placed the gas masks and suitcase in the luggage rack and helped the other children settle in.

Once Ernie was made comfortable by the window, she tugged on the leather sash and leant out, scouring the bustling platform for sight of their mother. Just one glimpse of that peroxide hair was all she needed – just one fleeting sight of that familiar, brightly dressed, energetic figure cutting a swathe through the kitbags and suitcases that littered the platform was all she asked for.

'She ain't coming, is she?'

Ernie's pinched little face revealed his disappointment, and it twisted Sally's heart. She sat down and clasped his hand. 'No, luv,' she said softly beneath the hubbub of a hundred children's voices and the shouts of the porters. 'She's probably too busy at the factory and forgot the time.'

Ernie looked at her solemnly through the tears. 'I wish you was me mum,' he sniffed, burying his head into her side.

She put her arm round him and silently cursed Florrie for being so thoughtless. If her Dad had been here things would have been different. And as she sat consoling Ernie, she felt tears welling, and hurriedly blinked them away. She missed her father terribly – was as lost and frightened as her little brother, but it would do no good to let Ernie know that.

The train jolted alarmingly as a great shriek of steam and smoke billowed along the platform. The clank of the huge iron wheels slowly gathered pace and they left the gloom of the station and began to roll with a clinky-clack past the rows of red-brick terraces, the rooftops, spires, bridges and factories of London.

Sally's fear fluttered in her stomach. For, as the wheels picked up speed and settled into a rhythm, they were taking her away from home and everything she had ever known.

Peggy Reilly was glad Bob and Charlie were at school, and that her husband, Jim, was at the Odeon, where he worked as a projectionist. Her father-in-law, Ron, was making enough fuss as it was, and his lurcher wasn't helping by getting in the way and trying to cock his leg on everything.

The two men from the council had arrived at Beach View Boarding House an hour ago with the Anderson shelter – a large, ugly sheet of curved corrugated iron which they proceeded to erect over

the four-foot-deep hole they'd dug at the bottom of the long back garden.

'We might have had to pay seven quid for that,' muttered Ron, 'but you'll not be getting me in it. The damp will have me shrapnel on the move again, and I'm a martyr to it already, so I am.'

Ron's shrapnel was a regular topic of conversation, along with his war stories. Anyone who didn't know him would have thought Ronan Reilly had won the First World War single-handedly. 'You'll be pleased enough of a bit of shelter when the bombs start dropping,' Peggy replied, her smile soft with affection for the cantankerous old man. His bark was always sharper than his bite, and she was used to hearing his complaints.

Ron pulled a face, grabbed the shaggy-coated Bedlington cross by the scruff and ordered him to sit. 'They didn't get me in the last war, and if they manage it in this, then it'll be in me own bed, so it will. I'll not be sleeping in that.'

He tied a length of string to the dog's collar, patted the pockets of his voluminous poacher's coat and stuck his unlit pipe in his mouth. 'Harvey and me are goin' off to find a bit of peace and quiet,' he announced. 'We'll be back for our tea.'

Peggy took a deep breath and let it out on a sigh. Ron was a widower and, at sixty-two, a law unto himself, with strong opinions and set ways. It wasn't that he was impossible to live with – just difficult. And yet he had a lot of good points, for

he was masterful at telling stories, a knowledgeable countryman, skilled hunter and forager, who loved nothing more than taking his grandsons with him when he roamed the nearby hills that he knew so intimately. She just wished he wouldn't keep his ferrets in the scullery and let Harvey sleep on his bed. It was most unhygienic.

'That's it, missus. Thanks for the tea.' The foreman broke into her thoughts and handed her back the mugs. The men tipped their caps and hurried through the back gate. They had another eight shelters to erect before it got dark.

Peggy eyed the Anderson shelter with deep suspicion, and realised she agreed with Ron. It didn't look a terribly welcoming place to spend the night, and she rather hoped they would never have to. She took a few hesitant steps towards it, noting the rough wooden door they'd put on the front, and the sods of grass they'd placed over the roof. It looked as if it had grown out of the ground like a giant and rather menacing molehill.

She moved closer and gingerly followed the muddy steps down to the door. There was a dank pool beneath her feet, and the back wall and tin roof were already coldly damp to the touch. As she tried to imagine what it would be like to sit in here for possibly hours during an air raid, the door swung shut behind her, plunging her into earthy, smothering blackness. It was like being buried alive.

With rising panic, she fumbled her way out and

took deep breaths of the clean salty air that blew off the sea. If she was going to persuade anyone to spend time in there, she would have to get Jim to make it more habitable. Though getting her rogue of a husband to do anything practical around the place was something she hadn't yet managed in their twenty-three years of marriage. Jim was always far too busy getting into mischief, and she suspected he was rather looking forward to the prospect of doing even more shady deals now war had been declared.

Peggy firmly dismissed her suspicions. She'd known he was a scallywag when she'd married him, and had long since learnt to turn a blind eye to his nefarious ways. As long as it didn't affect her family, or her marriage, she was prepared to accept he would never change, for she still loved her dark-eyed handsome husband whose smile could make her feel fifteen again.

She pulled her meandering thoughts into order and made a mental note that the steps and floor would have to be concreted, a bench fixed to the wall so they had somewhere to sit, and a hook placed on the roof to hold a lantern. She could bring down the old oil heater to chase away the damp and chill, and put together some blankets and pillows which they could take in with them when needed. It would be a terrible squash, though, with so many people in the house – for, apart from her own family of seven, she had two lodgers, with an evacuee due to arrive later today.

With that thought, she glanced at her watch. The day was half gone, and there was a lot to do before she had to be at the station. She walked down the path that ran through Ron's vegetable garden, and hurried past the outside lav, concrete coal bunker and ramshackle shed until she reached the double doors that led into the two-bedroom basement flat, which Ron shared with twelve-year-old Bob and eight-year-old Charlie.

On passing, she shot a glance into the bedrooms, noting they were untidy as usual, and that the ferrets were absent from their cage beneath the scullery sink. Ron must have them in the pocket of his poacher's coat.

She quickly made the beds, tidied up and scrubbed the stone sink in the scullery before climbing the concrete steps that led into her kitchen on the first floor.

Beach View Boarding House had been in her family for three generations; when Peggy's parents retired to a bungalow in Margate, she and Jim had moved to Cliffhaven and taken it over. Peggy had run it as a successful bed-and-breakfast establishment until the news came from Europe. The impending declaration of war had put an end to holidaymakers coming to the seaside.

Money was tight and now only two of her five guest rooms were occupied. The Polish airman whose name she could never pronounce was in one, and dear little Mrs Finch was in the other. The

evacuee from London would go in the smallest of the three rooms in the attic, next to that shared by her two daughters.

Beach View was a tall Victorian terraced house set on a hill three streets back from the promenade. Surrounded by many similar terraces, there was only a glimpse of the sea from the top right-hand window. Arranged on four floors, the large rooms had been divided up to provide five guest rooms and a bathroom on the top two floors, her bedroom on the hall floor, along with the kitchen and guest dining room. The square entrance hall led through a glass-panelled front door to a flight of stone steps which overshadowed the basement window and ran down to the pavement.

Peggy bustled about her kitchen, aware of the time passing as she peeled carrots, onions and potatoes for the stew they would have tonight. Rationing hadn't started yet, but she'd already registered with the local butcher and grocer, and the ration cards were sitting on the mantel above the fireplace where the Kitchener range warmed the kitchen.

It was her favourite room, which was a good thing, because she spent a lot of time in there. The window overlooked the garden and the backs of the houses behind it; the lino was worn, but colourful, and matched the oilcloth she'd spread over the table, which could seat eight at a pinch. There was a picture of the King and Queen on the wall, shelves were laden with crockery, and hooks above the range held

pots and pans. The wireless stood proudly on top of the chest of drawers where she kept her best linen tablecloths, and the kettle was set to one side of the hob, filled and ready to put on to boil. There was always time for a cup of tea.

‘I’m hungry,’ whined Ernie, as he jealously watched the other children eating the sandwiches their mothers had packed so tearfully that morning.

Sally was hungry too, but after Ernie’s breakfast of bread and dripping, there had been nothing left in the larder to bring with them, and no time or money to buy something on the way. ‘Sorry, luv. You’ll just have to wait until we get to wherever we’re going.’

‘But I’m hungry now,’ he muttered.

‘I know,’ she sighed, the guilt flooding through her again. He was so small and skinny and he relied on her for everything. She’d let him down. Then she remembered the toffee in her coat pocket. She’d been given it the day before at work – one of the girls had brought in a big bag of them and she’d popped it into her pocket, meaning to enjoy it the night before. Rummaging, she found it, and brushed off the fluff. ‘Suck it slowly,’ she advised as she unwrapped it. ‘It will last longer if you don’t chew.’

Mollified and content, Ernie closed his eyes and savoured the sweet.

Sally folded her hands on her lap and looked out of the window. She reckoned they’d been travelling

for at least an hour, and the sights of London were far behind them now, replaced by endless fields, narrow lanes, thatched cottages, sprawling farm-houses and big open skies.

She looked down at the fast-running river as they clattered over a bridge, gazed in awe at the sight of the great rolling hills that seemed to tower over the tiny villages nestled beneath them. She had never seen such emptiness before, and wondered how people managed without shops and neighbours close by. What did they do all day? How did they make a living?

The sound of the door to their compartment sliding open made her turn. It was the bossy woman again.

'We shall be arriving in ten minutes,' she said. 'Don't leave anything behind, and that includes your rubbish,' she said, with a pointed glare at the sandwich wrappings on the floor. Her gimlet gaze settled on Sally. 'I will hold you responsible for the children in here. Make sure they are ready to alight once the train comes to a standstill.' She shut the door with a sharp click and moved on down the swaying corridor to the next compartment.

'I don't like her,' mumbled Ernie through the toffee. 'I 'ope she ain't staying with us.'

'I expect she'll be going back to London,' replied Sally, as she pulled down the cases and parcels from the luggage shelf. Having checked that each child had been reunited with the correct items, and that

the wrappers and sweet papers were tidied away in an empty paper bag, she slipped on her coat and hat and hid the bag in her pocket. She didn't want the fat woman finding fault – it could make a difference to where they were billeted.

She fussed with Ernie's blazer, mackintosh and school cap, and held his squirming chin in a tight grip as she gave his face a quick clean with her handkerchief and tugged a comb through his tangled hair. Satisfied he looked reasonably presentable, she glanced in the mirror above the opposite seat, and had to admit she looked tired. The felt hat and draughty coat looked tired as well in the light that streamed in through the window, but there was nothing she could do about it. She sat down again and clutched the handbag on her knees, wondering where they were going, and what the people there would be like.

The train slowed to a crawl and chuffed its way along until it reached the platform. Sally was joined at the window by the excited children, and she looked for some clue that might tell her where they were. But all the signs had been taken down and, as the train took them deeper into the gloom of a large station, Sally realised that wherever they were, this was a fairly big town.

As the train came to a halt and billowed smoke, she clutched Ernie's hand and steered the other children in front of her as they joined the crush in the narrow corridor that ran alongside the

compartments. The noise was deafening as everyone talked at once and the three women in charge bellowed out their orders.

Sally found the twins in the melee and kept them close as they followed the women across the concourse to an area that had been cordoned off with bunting. Beneath the large welcome sign there was a long trestle table manned by an army of smiling women in WRVS uniform.

Sally's mouth watered and the children's eyes bulged at the sight of so much food in one place. There were cakes, sandwiches and rolls, milk and cordial and, at the end of the table, a vast urn promised hot, sweet cups of tea. Her stomach rumbled loudly and she hoped no-one had heard it. 'See,' she said, turning to Ernie. 'I told you we'd be fed soon.'

She found him a seat in the rows of chairs that had been set out, and left him in charge of the case and gas masks to join the queue. The older children helped the little ones as the women behind the table served huge slices of cake and iced buns, their cheery smiles making them forget just how tired and frightened they all were.

When Sally had loaded his plate and settled him with a mug of tea, she went back for her own. The hot tea was the best she'd ever tasted – full of milk and sweet with sugar, it slipped down and revived her no end – and no-one minded when she asked if she could have another cup.

The cake, sausage roll and two sandwiches were delicious, and she could have eaten more, but she didn't want to appear greedy. There were a lot of children to feed. But Ernie had no such inhibitions. He'd polished off his plateful and gone back for more. 'I don't mind the country if the food's like this,' he said, through a mouthful of chocolate cake.

'You'll make yourself sick,' she warned, hastily wiping chocolate off his blazer. 'And do mind what yer doing, Ernie. Yer supposed to eat the cake, not wear it.'

He'd finally eaten his fill, and Sally polished off the discarded sausage roll before returning the plates to the nice WRVS ladies. As she returned to the seat beside him, she became aware of a crowd of people standing on the other side of the cordon. She guessed they had to be those who'd volunteered to take in the evacuees, and she studied them carefully as, one by one, the children were led away.

She noticed that siblings were kept together, and that some people took three or four of the kids, while others only took one. Some of the people looked very smart in good winter coats and polished shoes, and she rather hoped that one of them would take her and Ernie.

The twins went off happily enough with only the merest wave goodbye, and Sally noted the pleasant-faced woman who led them away. They would be all right.

As the numbers dwindled, Sally realised she and

Ernie were being scrutinised closely before being passed over. So, she thought, that's the way of it, is it? Well, if they don't want us, we can always go back home, and good riddance. She held Ernie's hand and tried not to care that she and her brother were being muttered over as if they were on a butcher's slab – and found wanting.

'Miss Turner. Mr and Mrs Hollings have kindly offered you a place in their home. Please bring your belongings with you.'

Sally gathered everything up and helped Ernie to his feet.

'Just you, dear. Your brother has been assigned another billet.'

She shot a glance at the middle-aged couple, caught the way she was being ogled by the husband and sat down again. 'I ain't going nowhere without Ernie,' she replied, 'and especially not with them.' She glared at the man, who at least had the decency to redden and look hurriedly away.

'Your brother will be hard to place, Miss Turner, which is why we have made arrangements for him to go to the local orphanage.'

Sally felt a chill run down her spine as she leapt to her feet and stood in front of Ernie. She didn't trust this woman not to grab him and try to haul him away. 'He ain't no orphan, and he ain't going nowhere without me.'

The woman shrugged and turned apologetically to the couple, her voice loud, the tone scathing. 'This

is what you get for trying to help. Really, these East End girls have no manners at all. I do apologise.’ She hustled them away.

‘What’s an orph . . . orphan . . . ?

‘Nowhere you need worry about, luv.’ Sally grimaced as she returned to her seat and held him close. If this was an example of what she could expect in this place, then she and Ernie would be better off in the Smoke. At least people didn’t judge them there.

She was battling with her angry tears, trying to remain in control of her emotions for his sake. Being so young he, thankfully, didn’t understand what was going on. She looked around her. Most of the children were gone now, and soon they would be the only ones left. It was galling to be unwanted – and shaming. Nothing like this had happened to either of them before.

Mrs Finch had come into the kitchen and, wanting a bit of company, had chattered on over several cups of tea. Peggy felt sorry for the poor old duck – after all, she’d reasoned, Mrs Finch was a widow whose sons had migrated to Canada many years before, and rarely wrote to her. She was, to all intents and purposes, alone in the world. It did no harm to gossip as she worked. But my goodness she could talk.

Peggy had glanced at the clock and almost left her in mid-sentence as she tore off the apron and headscarf, grabbed her coat and bag and rushed off.

To make matters worse, she'd missed the trolleybus, and the old car had taken longer than usual to get started.

As it groaned and complained up the hill to the station, she was aware of the passing time – and that now she was very late. She parked haphazardly, slammed the door and hurried on to the concourse.

One glance told her everything, and her heart went out to the skinny girl who was sitting so stoically beside the frail, crippled little boy. They were poorly dressed and looked half starved, and the boy's pinched little face made her want to bundle him up and carry him home.

'Mrs Reilly? You're late. I'm afraid there's only those two left, and the girl is a troublemaker. Perhaps you'd be better off waiting until the next train?'

Peggy tore her gaze from the girl's large hazel eyes and regarded the woman coldly. 'In what way has she caused trouble?'

She lowered her voice. 'She refused to let us place her brother in the orphanage – and turned down the chance of staying with a very nice family who live in Havelock Gardens.'

It was a leafy street on the better side of town, and Peggy held no illusions about the snobs who lived there. Her sister Doris was one of them. 'Havelock Gardens isn't all it's cracked up to be,' Peggy answered with the withering look she'd perfected over the years of running a boarding house. 'And why should the boy go to the orphanage?'

‘He’s a cripple,’ she said, making it sound as if it was something contagious, ‘and therefore rather difficult to place.’

‘I’ll take the pair of them,’ said Peggy, adjusting the ancient fox fur that hung around her neck.

‘Really, Mrs Reilly, I don’t think . . .’

‘No, you don’t do you?’ Peggy’s look was scathing as she turned away. The girl and her brother were watching her, and she thought she could see the hint of a smile touching the girl’s mouth as she stood to greet her.

‘My name’s Peggy Reilly, and I’d like you to come and stay with me. How do you feel about that?’

The girl’s smile faltered, her gaze darting between Peggy and the woman in charge. ‘Ernie too?’

‘Of course,’ she said firmly. ‘I have two boys of my own, and I’m sure he’ll settle in just fine.’

‘What’ya think, Ernie? Would you like to go with this lady?’

Ernie was eyeing the fox round Peggy’s neck with some suspicion as he slowly nodded. ‘That’s a dead fox, ain’t it?’

‘It most certainly is,’ she said with a warm smile, ‘but back home, Granddad Ron has some real live ferrets – and a dog. Would you like to see them?’

‘What’s a ferret?’

Peggy laughed. The little boy might look wan and half starved, but he was as inquisitive as Bob and Charlie and, she suspected, as mischievous. ‘It’s long

and furry and likes nothing better than going down holes after rabbits.'

'Why's that fox biting 'is tail?'

'Shut up, Ernie.' Sally shot Peggy an apologetic glance, her smile hesitant as she introduced herself. 'If you're sure you can put up with all 'is questions, Mrs Reilly, then, yes, we'd like to come with you.'

'That's settled then.' Peggy was not one to hang about. She picked up the case and took Ernie's little hand. 'Come on, Ernie, let's get home and see if Granddad Ron has got back with those ferrets.'

Chapter Two

Anne Reilly was almost twenty-three and felt blessed that her first post since qualifying was at the local primary school where she'd once sat enthralled by the things she could learn. Her smile was soft with contentment as she collected the exercise books and stacked them on her desk. She loved teaching, and the children had been well behaved today, even her little brother, Charlie.

The bell began to ring; classes were over until Monday. 'Don't run,' she called out to the stampeding children, 'and stop pushing, Charles Reilly. You'll get home soon enough.'

Her youngest brother shot her his cheeky grin and eased through the door before tearing down the hallway with an enthusiastic yell of freedom. At eight years old, Charlie had far too much energy – but he was bright and absorbed his lessons like a sponge. Anne had high hopes for Charlie.

She cleaned the blackboard, put away the chalk, rulers and pencils in the desk and set about tidying the classroom. The arrival of so many evacuees had swelled the numbers at Cliffhaven Primary, and there was very little room to manoeuvre around

the desks and benches. But that wasn't the most pressing problem, for space could always be found somewhere – it was more the fact that the majority of those evacuee children could barely read and write, let alone knew the names and dates of the English Kings and Queens or recited their tables. It seemed the East End children were needed to earn money, not waste time at school – and it was extremely difficult to run a classroom efficiently when half the children had to have special coaching to get them up to scratch.

Anne sighed as she stowed the reading books away in the cupboard. The headmaster was aware of how hard things were getting, but with a shortage of books and more evacuees scheduled to arrive over the next few weeks, the situation could only get worse. There had been talk of dividing up the lessons – the local children in the morning, evacuees in the afternoon – but that would mean only half an education for all of them, unless they worked through the holidays as well.

She stuffed the exercise books into her briefcase, pulled on her warm woollen coat and scarf and shut the classroom door behind her. Everyone had to do their bit, and if it meant shorter holidays and longer hours, then that was what she would do.

Her thoughts were disrupted by Dorothy who was emerging from her own classroom across the corridor. She and Dorothy had known each other all their lives and had attended the same

teacher-training college. 'You look as if you've had a bit of a day,' Anne said with a smile.

'You should try teaching that lot,' Dorothy replied, sweeping back her wavy ginger hair. 'Half of them can't sit still for more than a couple of minutes, and it's the devil's own job to keep order. I can't say I'm sorry it's the weekend.'

Anne took her arm and gave it a sympathetic hug. Dorothy had several disruptive children in her class, and she fully understood how hard it was to keep them quiet and focused on their lessons. 'What are your plans for the next two days? Are you seeing Greg?'

Dorothy drew the bulging briefcase to her chest and gave a rueful smile as they headed for the front door. 'Marking this lot will take up most of the evening, but, yes, I'm meeting Greg for a drink later. Want to join us?'

Anne shook her head, making her dark curls dance. She didn't fancy playing gooseberry with Dorothy and her Canadian soldier. 'I've got other plans,' she replied, knowing there was a twinkle in her eyes.

Dorothy raised an eyebrow. 'It's like that, is it?'

Anne could feel the blush rise up her neck and into her face. 'We've only known each other a few weeks,' she protested. 'Give us a chance.'

'Martin Black is a bit of a catch, though, you have to admit,' said Dorothy. 'He's handsome, single *and* an RAF pilot – what more could you want?'

'I'll have to wait and see,' murmured Anne, as Dorothy collected her bicycle from the shed and they walked to the gate. 'Martin got his orders last night. He'll be moving to a permanent base within the next two weeks. He can't tell me where it is, of course, but it could be miles away, and we might not get the chance of seeing each other quite so much.'

Dorothy's smile was knowing. 'Oh,' she said, with all the wisdom of a twenty-three year old who'd had a string of admirers, 'I'm sure you'll find a way.' She settled her briefcase in the bicycle basket and pedalled off, wobbling slightly as she turned her head and waved goodbye.

Anne pulled on her gloves and tightened her scarf as the bitterly cold wind buffeted her. The gulls were wheeling overhead, filling the air with their angry cries. The fishermen must just have returned on the high tide with their daily catch.

It was a fairly short walk home, past the local shops and pubs before turning north and up the hill away from the seafront. But, as she hurried out of the school gates, her mind wasn't really on gulls, fishermen or classrooms. Her thoughts were full of Martin, and the worrying possibility that their fledgling romance would simply peter out once he was posted. She had no illusions, for she'd seen it happen to some of her friends – but life was uncertain for everyone, and she was determined to remain optimistic.

* * *

Sally trailed behind them across the concourse. Mrs Reilly was a small, wiry woman whose every step spoke of a boundless energy, but Sally was a little disconcerted by the way she had taken charge of Ernie, and of how willingly he'd taken his walking stick and gone along with her. She seemed nice enough, and she'd clearly put that awful woman in charge in her place. And yet Mrs Reilly was a smartly dressed stranger who talked posh, was clearly used to being obeyed, and wore dead animals round her neck. Sally decided to reserve judgement until she got to know her better.

As they emerged from the station, which was at the top of a long, steep hill, she was immediately struck by how cold it was, the air smelling cleanly of salt – instead of soot from a thousand chimneys, like back home. She looked up at the large white wheeling birds that shrieked and squabbled over the rooftops, and then gazed down the hill, past the large shops, banks and hotels with their stacks of sandbags and taped windows to where she caught a glimpse of blue glittering between the big houses. 'Is this the seaside?' she breathed.

'Indeed it is,' said Peggy with a beaming smile. 'Welcome to Cliffhaven. I know you must be finding it hard to take it all in, but I hope you'll be happy here.'

'I ain't never seen the sea before,' she said, awestruck.

'Cor,' shouted Ernie, who was far more interested

in Peggy's car. 'Are we goin' in that?' His eyes were wide and shining as he fingered the Ford's running board, the huge headlamps and the shining chrome.

'As long as it starts,' said Peggy, as she opened the door and helped him clamber on to the back seat. 'Otherwise it's the trolleybus.'

'Careful, Ernie. That's real leather, that is, and Mrs Reilly don't want you scratching it with yer calliper.' Sally's stern look was wasted, for Ernie was too busy leaning over the front seat to examine the dials and switches on the dashboard.

'I shouldn't worry too much,' laughed Peggy. 'This old car has withstood four children and more besides. Let him have his fun.'

Sally gave Ernie another furious look as she put the suitcase on the seat beside him and closed the door before warily joining Mrs Reilly on the front seat. The car smelled lovely, and it reminded her of the market stall in Petticoat Lane where Alf Green sold the gloves and handbags he made with the leftovers from his cobbler's shop. She could feel the cool leather against her bare legs, and the way the seat cushioned her, but she sat ramrod stiff, terrified she might damage it. Mrs Reilly must be very rich to own such a car.

'Off we go then. Hold on tight. This old girl gets a bit temperamental, but she'll be fine once we get going.'

Sally pressed back into the seat and held on as the engine spluttered into life and they jerked their

way down the hill. But as the car slowly rattled and backfired its way past Woolworths and the Odeon cinema, she forgot to be nervous, for the patch of blue at the bottom of the road had captured her full attention.

They reached the crossroads at the bottom of the hill and Peggy drew to a halt. 'There you are,' she said, with obvious pride. 'That's the English Channel.'

'So it's not the sea then?'

'Well, it is, but only the bit that divides us from France and the rest of Europe.'

'Cor,' breathed Ernie. 'It's big, ain't it?'

Sally gazed in awe and disbelief, unable to voice her agreement. It was enormous, stretching from the towering white cliffs at one end of the promenade to the rolling hills at the other – and as far as the eye could see to the horizon where it seemed to melt into the sky. The blue was laced with white frothy waves that splashed against the shingle and the enormous concrete blocks that had been placed haphazardly across the bay. Gulls swooped and swirled overhead, flags fluttered, and the people walking on the promenade had to hold on to their hats and bend into the October wind.

She thought how envious her friends back home would be, but as she eyed the thick coils of barbed wire, the warnings that the beach had been mined, and the concrete gun emplacements that lined the promenade, she realised that, even if she did get up

the nerve, she would never be able to actually get down on the beach, or dip her toes in the water.

Peggy seemed to have read her thoughts. 'It doesn't look its best at the moment,' she said, engaging the gears with a clash. 'Even the pier has been closed off for the duration. The army came the other day and dismantled half of it to prevent enemy landings.'

She turned the steering wheel and they headed east along the road towards the high white cliffs that were topped with grass, and the occasional gun emplacement. 'If you want to go on the beach, then the only place is down there where the fishing fleet comes in – but it's a busy place with the boats in and out, and not very safe.'

Sally stared up at the cliffs and back to the sea. She took in the black boats with their sails and ropes, and the men who clambered over them in their thick jumpers and sturdy rubber boots. She could even see the nets hanging out to dry in the wind, and the lobster pots stacked on the shingle. The nearest she'd ever come to seeing fish was in Billingsgate Market.

'I feel sick,' muttered Ernie.

Peggy slammed on the brake and Sally rushed to get him out of the car. 'Oh, Ernie,' she sighed, as he vomited copiously down a nearby drain. 'I told you not to eat so much,' she scolded softly.

Ernie's little face was green-tinged as she cleaned him up with Mrs Reilly's spotless handkerchief, and gave him a hug.

'Too much excitement and chocolate cake, by the look of it,' Peggy said, as she helped him back to the car, told him to lie down, and gently tucked a blanket round him. 'We'll be home soon,' she soothed.

'I'm so sorry, Mrs Reilly.' Sally's face felt hot and she couldn't look the woman in the eye. 'He's ruined yer 'ankie, an' all. I'll get you another one as soon as I'm earning.'

'Nonsense,' said Peggy, taking the offending article and stuffing it in her handbag. 'All children are sick at one time or another and the handkerchief can go in the wash with everything else.' She clashed the gears and the car stuttered along the seafront. 'If I had a penny for every time Bob and Charlie had been sick, then I'd be a rich woman.' She smiled at Sally and patted her knee. 'Don't worry, dear,' she murmured. 'We're nearly home, and he'll be as right as rain after a cup of tea and a bit of a lie-down.'

Sally didn't know what to make of Mrs Reilly. She seemed really nice, and had been very kind about Ernie making a show of himself – but what did a woman as rich as her want from them? She'd met do-gooders before, and they always wanted something in return for their favours; like the lady in the bakery back home, who wanted her ironing done in exchange for the few stale rolls she handed over begrudgingly at the end of the week.

Her doubts and suspicions multiplied as they

turned from the seafront and began to climb the steep hill lined with row upon row of grand terraced houses. There were no factories or gasworks overshadowing them; no cracked pavements or littered streets with kids playing football, and women leaning in their doorways having a gossip. The windows were clean, the paintwork shining in the autumn sunlight, steps scrubbed, railings clear of rust. The gardens were neat and even the smoke from the chimneys was blown away by the wind coming off the sea.

She spotted two pubs down a side street, and a row of shops – but no sign of Goldman’s Clothing factory where she was supposed to start work in two days’ time.

‘That’s the local shops,’ said Peggy, slowing the car. ‘The big building at the far end is the hospital, and the one opposite it is the primary school where my daughter Anne teaches. Bob started at the secondary school this term, but Charlie goes there, and so will Ernie.’

‘But Billy said there weren’t no school in the country,’ wailed Ernie from the back seat. He was obviously feeling better.

Peggy laughed. ‘This is the seaside, and there *is* school,’ she said before resuming the drive.

Ernie opened his mouth to express his fury at having been misled, and Sally hurriedly changed the subject. ‘How far is it to Goldman’s factory?’

Peggy frowned. ‘Goldman’s? Is that where you’ll

be working? How did you manage to organise that?’

‘Me boss at ‘ome arranged it. Mr Goldman’s ‘is brother-in-law.’

‘I see.’ Peggy changed down gears as the hill steepened. ‘You don’t look old enough to be working at all,’ she said, glancing at her, ‘and Goldman is a hard taskmaster, by all accounts. I’m sure I can get you something a little less—’

Now it was Sally’s turn to be indignant. ‘I’m sixteen,’ she replied, ‘and I’ve been ‘olding down me job at Solomon’s for near on two year now. I know the work, and I’m good at it.’

‘I see,’ sighed Peggy. She seemed to pull her thoughts together. ‘Goldman’s is past the hospital and primary school at the end of that road,’ she said, with a nod of her head. ‘It will be a bit of a walk every day once winter really sets in, but there’s a spare bicycle in Ron’s shed. You can borrow that once it’s been mended.’

Sally was feeling rather ashamed of her outburst. Mrs Reilly was only trying to be helpful – but she didn’t have the first idea of how to ride a bike, and was reluctant to admit it. ‘I don’t mind walking,’ she replied.

Peggy glanced across at her. ‘Well, if you change your mind, Anne or one of the boys will show you how to ride it. It’s a bit of an old bone-shaker, but it’ll get you there and back all right.’ She pulled into a side street and brought the car to a halt halfway