

DINNER WITH CHURCHILL

a novel

by

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It is on historical record that, on the evening of October 13th 1939, six weeks after war had been declared on Hitler's Germany, Winston Churchill and Neville Chamberlain, implacable opponents for years over the appeasement issue, met together with their two wives, Clementine and Anne, for a private dinner at Admiralty House, and event which caused ripples throughout Westminster.

Chamberlain was still Prime Minister, but had seen all his efforts to negotiate peace with Hitler shattered. Churchill had been recalled to the cabinet after ten years 'in the wilderness', his dire warnings of the Nazi threat vindicated.

It was the first and only time these four mismatched personalities ever met socially alone together. There is no record as to what transpired during that unique evening.

CHAPTER ONE

If you are a child of the English Lake District, then you are doomed to live with disappointment for the remainder of your life. Nowhere else on earth will compare. Nowhere will present you with such intimate grandeur, such beauty, such ferocity. Nowhere will face you with such jubilation in the joy of the world, and such despair at its cataclysms. You will forever live in the shadow of the mountains and the depths of the waters, and, whether you realise it or not, you will be on an eternal quest to recapture greatness in your life.

At her age of course she never considered such thoughts, not until years later. At the age of sixteen, when virtually all you have known has been the glowering magnificence of the mountains across the lake, and the equal magnificence of the cumulus clouds above, threatening yet more tumultuous rain and wind, you do not analyse your feelings. You simply accept that all such daunting splendour is part of life, and is your due and your inheritance. It is in your bones.

At the age of sixteen all you are interested in is love, and laughter, and the breaking of rules.

Not that Lucy appeared on first encounter to be concerned with any of those things. She was well aware that the image she presented to the world was not as impressive as the landscapes around her. Few noticed her as they passed by. The villagers knew her well enough, as they knew everyone for miles about in those days, but they never thought of her as anyone other than a familiar teenager amongst all the others who went to the local grammar school a bus ride away around the lake. If they referred to her at all, it was usually as 'that sweet young baker's daughter', or 'that shy little Armitage girl.'

She wasn't actually little, standing five and a half feet in her stockings, but she gave the appearance of being so, merging into the background as she was so adept at doing. It was only on the hockey pitch or playing basketball in the school gym that she shone, which earned her a modicum of respect amongst her peers, but even they paid her little attention away from those arenas. Like many adolescent teenagers, she was uncertain of her being, ignorant of her direction, unconfident of her personality. The embers of a fire glowed somewhere deep inside her, but they were far from bursting into flame.

Her older brother, Tom, on the other hand, was always noticeable. He stood not far short of six feet, and his broad shoulders, craggy features, and affable smile made him a centre of attention in most companies. Tom had no such inhibitions about putting himself

forward, and, on the surface at least, seemed utterly assured of his future and his ambitions. Tom was Lucy's hero, especially as he looked on her as his charge, to be protected against all threats and all oppressions, real and imaginary. The affection between them was one of the guiding lights in Lucy's life.

Another was Tom's best friend, Henry Collins. Henry was almost as impressively built as Tom, and certainly prettier in aspect, with his waving dark hair and wide brown eyes which invited intimacy whenever they engaged with others. It was Henry who first awakened the sexuality in Lucy, for such stirrings came late in young womens' breasts way back in those repressed years between the wars. The stigma of lustful sin, and the hideous threat of unwanted pregnancy was taught in every home and classroom, and thundered from every pulpit in those days, and country lasses especially - who were all too aware of the fecundity amongst the farm animals everywhere about them - were forever wary of the attentions of the opposite sex.

As it was, an early summer evening arrived when the pair found themselves, apparently by chance, alone together outside the village hall during a rare birthday party of one of their classmates, whose parents had hosted the do. Live music had gladdened the event, and beer and cider had been available in ostensibly rationed quantities. June had been wet and warm, but this evening was pleasantly dry, and the heavens sparkled in their black vault above the peaks. Lucy, as usual a little intimidated by the revelry around her, had wandered out to sit on one of the benches across the lane which overlooked the lake. She was unaware of Henry's approach until he was sitting beside her.

'Running away from the mob again, Lucy?' he said in his already deep voice with its slight Cumberland lilt.

She nodded. Henry, through long acquaintance, was one of the few beings outside her family and relations with whom she could feel relaxed.

'Bit noisy for me.'

He nodded back at the hall. 'Didn't see you dancing much. None of the lads to your taste?'

She pursed her lips. 'All too familiar, and too kaylied for my liking.'

'Ah, Lucy - when are you going to let your hair down?'

She fingered her straight dark tresses, which were down to her shoulders for the occasion. Thirties Hollywood waves and curls had not yet reached the rural North of England.

'They're down as far as they'll go.'

'You know what I mean.' He put his arm round her in fraternal affection. 'You'd be such a pretty girl if you let yourself.'

'What d'you mean?'

'You know. Open up a bit.'

She was silent. He stared up at the heavens. The half-moon cut a shimmering slice of silver across the black waters of the lake. 'Nice night. Wish it was always like this here.'

'I quite like the rain.'

'In small doses.' He drew back and looked at her. She felt uneasy under his gaze.

'How often you been kissed?' he asked casually.

She blinked her eyelashes at him. 'A few times.' It was a very few actually, but she didn't elaborate.

'That's a shame. Let's make it one more.' And he leant forward and kissed her gently. 'That was nice,' he said, and kissed her again. She didn't resist, although it was such a surprise coming from him. But then he compounded it by slipping a hand into the top of her party dress, and before she was aware of what was happening had cupped her breast in his palm.

She jolted then in surprise, and without thinking slapped him hard on the cheek.

'Wo!' he exclaimed, and withdrew his hand, laughing. 'Sorry. Didn't mean to take you by surprise.'

'Is that what you do every time you kiss a girl?' she asked, eyes flashing.

'Only the ones who have a nice kiss,' he said, nursing his cheek.

'I didn't take you for a seducer, Henry Collins.' She was indignant, but at the same time aware that the feel of his large warm hand on such an intimate part of her had not been unpleasant. 'That's how Amy Little got pregnant.'

He chuckled again. 'Amy Little was a tart. And you don't get pregnant by having your titties touched.'

They were both quiet again. She was assimilating the novel feelings churning inside. What he was thinking she had no idea.

Then he said, 'What d'you think you'll be doing with yourself, Lucy, when you leave school?'

She was taken aback by the question. It would be at least a year before that happened, and in any case it was not often asked of girls then. They were generally expected to seek out an eligible male, get married in good time, and join the production line creating babies - preferably boy babies since the devastation of the male population by the Great War was still

in people's minds. The idea of taking a different course was only considered by the minority, and a vaguely suspect minority at that.

'What do you mean, doing with myself?'

'Well, you're a bright girl. You could have a career. A lot of women are doing that now. Or are you just thinking of taking over the bakery business?'

She was again silent for several moments. To tell truth she had hardly contemplated the possibility. Although she helped out at the bakery in the early mornings and at weekends, she had always assumed her brother would inherit the business one far-off day when their parents retired from the relentless task of feeding the local population. And as to other possibilities, ambition had not pointed her in any such direction.

'I don't know,' she said. 'Haven't really thought about it.'

'You should do.'

'Why?'

'There are going to be a lot of opportunities for women in the future. Jobs in the cities and all round the empire.'

'The empire?' It was a commonly used term for the vast federation that spanned the globe, but she had never considered its potentials, except as spreading pink areas on the geography lessons maps.

'Canada, Australia, South Africa - they're all crying out for qualified people to come and work there. Even India. Think of the adventures.'

'Is that what you're thinking of?'

'Maybe. Not sure yet. There could soon be another war coming. That'll change things.'

'Another war?'

'That's what they're saying.'

She was so ignorant of political affairs. 'Surely not. That would be terrible.'

'It's what the papers are saying. Adolf Hitler's getting too big for his boots. Anyway, that will bring more chances for women. They'll be needed to fill the gaps if the men are off fighting.'

Something opened in Lucy's mind, a small window to a wider horizon. 'Will that really change things?'

'Of course. For everyone.' He brushed a lock of his thick hair back from his eyes. 'Tommy and me are thinking of joining the army actually.'

She turned her head and stared at him. 'Lord, Henry - why would you want to do that?'

He shrugged. 'It's a good career, the army. And if there's a war we'd probably be called up anyway, so it'd be clever to get ahead of the pack.'

'But you...? I mean, why...?' She did not know how to respond. This new scenario was too big to be absorbed.

A voice came from behind. 'What are you two doing, sneaking off from the do?' Her brother Tom appeared, beer glass in hand, and stood beside the bench, his substantial figure outlined against the night.

'Just talking,' replied Henry. 'Discussing how girls get pregnant.'

'Oh, that.' Tom sat next to Lucy on the bench. 'Yes. One of the mysteries of the world, that. Don't tell Lucy. She might never recover from the shock.'

She punched him in the chest. 'Don't be a ninny.'

'Well, there could well be a few cases after tonight,' he said, taking a swig from his beer. 'It's getting quite steamy back there. A lot of girlfriend swapping going on.'

'Who?' asked Henry. 'Anyone chasing your Jenny?'

Jenny Conway had been Tom's unofficial girlfriend for six months or so. A pretty, fair-headed girl with green eyes and an infectious laugh, who was in his sixth form class at school and would be leaving at the same time later that year. Lucy could see why Tom was attracted to her, and doubtless the feeling of breasts, and conceivably even more than breasts was part of the arrangement, but she didn't like to picture such things. She wasn't sure how intelligent Jenny was. She didn't think it would last, but she would never say so to her revered brother.

'Oh, she's flirting with George Smithers,' Tom was saying. 'But then she's always flirting with someone. If you could get pregnant by flirting she'd have triplets by now.'

Henry laughed, but Lucy had more serious things on her mind. 'Is it true you're thinking of joining the army, Tommy?'

He glanced at her. 'What have you been saying, Henry?'

'Just mentioned it. We were talking careers.'

'Are you serious about it?' she asked.

He stared into his glass. 'Just considering it.'

'Have you told Mum and Dad?'

'No. And don't you either. Haven't made up our minds yet, have we Henry?'

'No.'

'But what...? I mean, what would happen to the bakery?' Tom often helped with deliveries from the shop, unofficially driving its rattling Ford van around the various outlying cafés and hotels.

'What d'you mean, what would happen? It'll go on as always. Mum and Dad and you can handle it, and bring in people from the village at peak times like always.' He threw her a glance. 'I certainly don't intend to end up as a baker.'

'What's wrong with that? Good enough for Dad and his dad.'

'Not for me. Serving buns and pork pies to tourists and the greedy folk of the Lakes for the rest of my life is not my idea of fulfilment.'

'I thought you were going to try for university.'

'Might still. Depends on how things go.'

The sound of music and laughter spilled from the hall behind them.

'Well,' said his friend Henry, rising from the bench. 'Better get back to the fight. See if there's anyone left for me to have a jig with.'

'Go for it,' said Tom. 'Just don't get her pregnant.'

Lucy punched him again, as Henry left and sauntered back towards the party.

CHAPTER TWO

The bakery was a long low extension to the Armitage home, a three bedrooomed cottage set on the fringe of the village behind a sheep-dotted field stretching down to the lake shore. The building was probably over two hundred years old - no one knew for certain - and, built as it was of solid granite slabs and slate roof, would likely last for another two hundred. Little had been changed during that time, except for the replacement of window frames and oak front door, and the addition of a modern bathroom with toilet tacked on at the back. The bakery itself, once just an adjoining animal shed, was the largest room in the whole place, with the ovens ranged along the back wall, shelves all round the sides, and a long timber counter splitting the area in two - work space behind, customer space before. Its output was prodigious, ranging from loaves of various shapes and sizes, to buns, scones, Eccles cakes, pies, and even the occasional specially commissioned decorated cake for birthdays and anniversaries. The former were turned out in their daily dozens, the latter were rare, since the nation was just recovering from its post-war austerities, and both money and exotic ingredients were hard to come by.

In winter the shop was a favourite meeting place for folk from far around, since the roaring ovens made it the warmest place in the village. In summer, the opposite prevailed, when customers dashed in and out as hastily as possible to escape the oppressive heat. Lucy's father, Fred Armitage, stolidly reigned over his small domain in all temperatures and all weathers. People said that his amply upholstered form insulated him from such, but his ruddy features betrayed their exposure to decades of fires and vapours, and he carried with him a permanent fragrance of freshly grounded flour.

Her mother too, although built on slighter dimensions, was a regular custodian of the shop counter, and advisor on all things wheaten. Consequently the pair knew everyone in the village and beyond. Fred was a gruff, taciturn character who disdained small talk, but his wife Minnie was a petite bundle of congeniality. She was confidante and commiserator to all and sundry, and there was very little of local gossip that she did not know about.

Lucy herself aided the early morning baking sessions virtually every day before going to school, and also helped with the baking and delivering at weekends. In holiday periods, when the tourists and fell walkers flooded into the legendary neighbourhood, demand for produce was high amongst the local cafés and guest houses, and the bakery was at full stretch. It was a thriving business.

It was two days later, early on the Monday morning after the party, that found Lucy in her usual place beside her father, wearing her apron and thick oven gloves, taking the trays of freshly baked loaves as he shovelled them from the brick ovens, and distributing them around the various shelves. She and her mother chatted as they worked, whilst her father rolled, pounded and heaved, and muttered instructions to himself. It was then that Lucy made the error that dogged her for a long time after.

'Did you know Tommy was thinking of joining the army, Ma? What d'you think of that?'

Both her parents stopped what they were doing and stared at her.

'What?' growled her father.

'The army?' said her mother. 'When did he tell you that?'

Their looks of dismayed astonishment warned Lucy, and she remembered too late her brother's instruction to keep it a secret.

'Oh. I shouldn't have said. It was just a vague idea between him and Henry.'

'When did he say that?' demanded Fred. Lucy adored her father, but rather at a distance. She was ever a little in awe of his sharp temper and definitive political views, and their relationship was a delicate one.

'The other night, at the party. I don't think they were serious.'

'They better not be.' Her parents exchanged glances. He added, 'Not the place to be for a bright lad.'

'Isn't it?'

'Not any more. Not just swanning around playing in bands in smart uniforms these days. You're just cannon fodder.' Fred Armitage's two elder brothers had both been killed in the Great War, one at Passchendaele, the other at the Somme. His own parents had never recovered from their grief.

'Is there another war coming then?' Lucy asked, as she arranged a tray load of wholemeal buns along a cooling shelf.

There was no immediate answer. She turned to her mother with raised eyebrows. At that moment the shop door pinged, and old Mrs Tomlinson, the ex-postmistress entered. She was an early riser and invariably one the first customers to arrive.

Minnie Armitage turned to serve her, saying, 'Is there going to be another war, Ada? What do you think?'

The old woman, well into her seventies now, but still alert, said, 'It's what they're sayin'. Can't credit it, can you, God help us. Not after the last lot.' Ada too had lost a son in the trenches. 'But Winston's bin bellerin' again about rearming.'

Fred growled from the ovens. 'He's always belling about rearming. He's as bad as Hitler. Needs to keep his mouth shut. Pair of warmongers, both of 'em.'

The name of Winston Churchill had provoked fiercely divided opinions across the land for several decades.

Lucy's mother sighed. 'Well, I don't know. I sometimes thing the world is mad. The usual, Ada?'

'Small loaf and three of your Eccles cakes, please, Minnie. And get ready to do a million pork pies for the troops.' Ada cackled then, and the atmosphere lightened. She glanced at Lucy, who had been listening to the exchange. 'And what about you, young Lucy? Fancy yourself in nurse's uniform lookin' after all the young men, eh?'

Lucy smiled shyly. 'I hope it doesn't happen.'

'Ay well, that's what we all hope. Meanwhile you just look to your lessons. We need smart young women these days.' And she gathered her purchases and waddled off to her tiny cottage in the high street, which she had occupied for all her adult life.

Fred dumped another tray of fresh loaves onto the work surface. 'I need to have a word with that son of mine,' he muttered.

'Don't be cross with him, Dad,' said Lucy, conscience-stricken. 'It wasn't serious. I shouldn't have said anything.'

But, serious or not, it caused a stormy row later that day. She was back from school and changing out of her uniform up in her small bedroom with its serene views across the lake, when she heard the shouting going on downstairs. She couldn't make out the words, but her father's and her brother's voices were clear enough in fierce altercation, with her mother's softer tones intervening spasmodically in an effort to keep the peace.

And Lucy herself couped the aftermath before supper, when she came down to the kitchen and found Tom there.

'Thanks, Lucy. Really landed me in it there,' he growled as he was throwing cutlery onto the table.

'Sorry, Tommy. It just slipped out. I didn't mean to tell them.'

'Caused one hell of a row, and they're not done yet, damn you.'

A tear gathered in the corner of her eye. 'I'm sorry.' She brushed it away, took some dishes from the dresser and helped him set the table. 'Would it be such a bad thing, you joining the army?'

He banged down a jug of water. 'Dad thinks so. You've heard him talk about the last war. But it's not a bad career, especially if you make officer's rank. You have responsibilities, you get to travel around the country. Maybe abroad. There's British soldiers in every corner of the empire.'

'Would you like to go abroad?'

'Course I would. See the world. Who wouldn't?'

'There are scary places.'

'Oh, Lucy, don't be so timid. There's more to life than baking buns. And next time keep your blurry mouth shut.'

There was a sullen silence over supper that evening. And it extended for several days, occasionally erupting into more arguments. Tom took to staying out of the way as much as possible, and Lucy withdrew into her shell. The seams of the tightly bonded Armitage household were splitting a little.

She did not see Henry Collins again for a couple of days. Then one morning he stopped her as they were passing each other in the school corridor in between lessons.

'Tommy and me are catching the bus into Keswick on Saturday to go to the cinema. He's bringing Jenny. Why don't you come?'

She hesitated. She loved the cinema, but she was wary of his intentions.

'I'll see,' she said, and went on to her classroom, her heart beating a little bit faster.

Later, back home, she said to her brother, 'Henry's asked me if I want to come with you to the cinema on Saturday.'

'Yes,' he said. 'He asked me if I minded.'

'What's the film?'

'All Quiet On The Western Front.'

'Isn't that a war film?'

'That's why we want to see it. Supposed to be the best war film ever, but we were all too young to watch it when it came out. They're having a special showing.' He shrugged.

'Henry and I want to see what it's like being in the army, but it's probably not a girlie sort of thing.' He stole a sideways look at her. 'Do you want to come?'

'Maybe. You're bringing Jenny?'

'Yeh. We'd make a foursome.' He added, 'Mum and Dad won't mind if you're with us.'

'I'll see.'

She was playing reluctant, but she knew in her heart that she would go. There was a small flutter in the back of her mind for the rest of the week.

When Saturday came, the four of them boarded the bus after lunch, and it wound its way through the country lane, with the glowering heights of Helvellyn on one side and the long, lazy stretch of Thirlmere on the other, to the largest town in the Lakes.

They were lucky to get cinema seats. The Alhambra was one of the earliest picture houses in the country, and the golden age of cinema ensured that it was regularly filled, especially on weekends and rainy days. This was a weekend and a cloudy day, but they got into the queue relatively early and were able to get four seats some way back in the stalls. Half of Keswick was crowded in, and the place buzzed with chatter.

It was the era, not only of remarkable film making, but also of newsreels reporting the world's affairs, and of cartoons and short comedy items, all crammed into a single programme. A visit to the cinema was a major entertainment event.

Lucy sat beside Henry with her view of the screen partly obscured by the massed heads in front, but with the familiar anticipation bubbling inside her. The fare that day was the usual Gaumont British News - pulsating with stories of the Duke of Windsor on honeymoon with his newly married wife, Mrs Simpson, and with Germany's continued buildup of armaments - followed by a Bugs Bunny cartoon, and a Charlie Chaplin short. Finally came the main feature.

Nearly two hours later the foursome came out of the cinema and made their way worldlessly down to their favourite café. They found a corner cubicle and ordered its speciality, 'Sos'n'mash' - pork sausages, mashed potatoes, and gravy that looked like melted chocolate.

Jenny was the first to speak. 'I don't ever want to see a film like that again.'

The boys remained silent. Lucy said, 'It was horrible. Those poor men.'

Certainly the film had portrayed the horrors of the conflict with graphic realism. The indescribable squalor of life in the waterlogged trenches, the endless slaughter of young manhood mowed down by machine guns, the desecration of entire landscapes, had been almost unendurable to watch. The two boys, almost men themselves, glanced at each other but still said nothing.

Lucy looked at her brother. 'Surely you're not going to join up after seeing that?'

He stared down at the table top. 'It's not like that now. They'll never fight wars like that again.'

'How do you know? How else can they fight them?'

'Future wars will be fought with tanks, and artillery, and planes. They'll never do those suicidal full front attacks again. There was too much criticism of High Command after all that.'

'Even so...'

Tom took a deep breath. 'I dunno, Luce. I mean, you more or less have to, don't you? How else do you stop evil people taking over the world?'

'It doesn't mean *you* have to. There's lots you can do to help. Bakers and farmers and... all sorts of people are needed to keep the country going without having to go away and fight.' She looked at Henry, who was also contemplating the wooden table top. 'What do you say, Henry?'

He looked up. 'Someone has to fight.'

'But why you? And why join up now? There isn't even a war yet.'

He shrugged and said nothing.

Jenny chipped in. 'You boys. You just like the idea of fighting. It's the whole stupid manly thing.'

Henry glowered. 'No, it's not. It's much more than that.'

'How? Why? What else is it?'

'It's... well, it's defending your country. It's...'

'You shouldn't have to defend it. Countries shouldn't be attacking other countries.'

'Of course not, but... they do.'

Her voice became more strident. 'It's all because of bloody men trying to prove how tough they are. When will they ever stop?'

Lucy looked at her brother. 'Is that what it is, Tommy?'

He stared out of the café window at the busy street outside. 'No, it's not that.'

'What is it then?'

'It's king and country, isn't it? It has to be king and country.'

CHAPTER THREE

That summer was one of the hottest on record across the land, and holiday makers flocked to the Lakes. The waters and the hills slumbered in the warmth and absorbed the coachloads, the walkers and the sailers without a murmur. The locals grumbled about the influx of alien intruders, but took their money all the same. The bakery was working at full tilt all summer long.

The two Armitage offspring and Henry Collins all ended their school education that July, and took a few weeks holiday before embarking on adult life. The family strife had continued concerning army signups, but since Hitler's preparations for the invasion of Czechoslovakia had made it evident that war was on the horizon, the parental protests dwindled in the face of the inevitable. The grim headlines on the front pages contrasted with the sunny forecasts within.

Lucy had not seen much of Henry during the last few turbulent weeks of exams and school leaving, but remembrance of their brief encounter by the lakeside, and of his brown eyes as he smiled at her, was often in the back of her mind. It was not until they both found themselves sitting together on a hay bale in a large field dotted with tents and pens of bleating animals that they really had the chance to talk again. It was the annual county show, which always attracted crowds from across the region, whether involved with agricultural matters or not.

The pair were watching the junior show jumping competition - mostly young girls on diminutive ponies tackling fences at a suicidal pace, to a chorus of encouraging shouts from dotting parents. It was not an activity either of them had ever attempted.

'So, you're away soon for army training?' she said, her face turned up to the August sunshine.

'Mhm. Next month. Off to Catterick.'

'Are you nervous?'

'It's tough training, but I'm looking forward to it.'

'Do you think you'll get to be an officer?'

He shrugged. 'It's easier these days to come up through the ranks. Tommy and I both want to try, but... we'll have to wait and see.'

They were silent for a while as they watched the event. A small girl who looked as if she had just left junior school fell off a Shetland pony to a chorus of squeals from the

onlookers. She picked herself up in floods of tears, but otherwise unhurt. The pony cantered off, happily relieved of its burden.

'What about you, Lucy?' he said. 'Have you decided what to do?'

She loosened the top button of her dress in the warmth. 'I think I want to get away from here now. It's time I saw more than mountains.'

'So, what...?'

'I was thinking of going to a secretarial college. If you have those skills you can work anywhere.'

He grinned. 'Good for you. What do the parents say?'

'I haven't told them yet. They're still upset about Tommy leaving. If I tell them I am too they're going to be distraught.'

'You have to make your own life, Lucy.'

She nodded, and picked a daisy that was growing by her feet. She twirled the small flower in her fingers. 'I'm not sure where to go though. I'm still too young for adult college. I thought maybe next year I could go to Liverpool or Manchester. They must have secretarial schools there.'

'Don't go there, Luce. They're pretty grim places. Set your sights higher.'

'How?'

'Go to London.'

She turned her head and stared at him. 'London? How would I get there?'

'Same as you get anywhere. Just pack a bag and go.' He put his hand over hers. She felt again its hard strength. 'You've never been to London, have you?'

She shook her head.

'I've been twice. You won't believe it. The buildings, the parks, the river, Buckingham Palace. It's so huge you won't know which way to turn. There's so much to do there, so many people. People from all over the empire, people of every colour and creed. And the money! Hotels and restaurants posher than you can imagine. Shop windows that look like Hollywood film sets. Rolls Royces on every street.'

She laughed. 'Sounds too scary for me, Henry. How would I cope there?'

'Of course you'd cope. You'd soon get into the swing of things. Start going to the clubs where the poshos go. Probably end up married to a duke.'

She giggled again. 'Yes, sure. I doubt I'd get into college there, let alone a night club.'

He thought for a moment. Then he said, 'You know my sister, Liz, is in London.'

Elizabeth Collins was three years older than Henry, working as a receptionist in a law firm. Lucy only knew her as a distant, confident seeming woman, sporting a sophisticated hair style, who spoke in a king's English voice with little trace of her Cumberland accent.

'So?' she said.

'I'm sure she could show you the ropes. Tell you where to go, how to find digs. Why don't I write to her?'

'It's a bit premature, Henry. I wouldn't be going until next year. And then only if Mum and Dad agree.'

'No, but when the time comes.' He grinned mischievously. 'Then I'd have an excuse to come to London too when I'm on leave. And you'll be old enough for night clubs, and a proper kiss and titty fondle.'

She slapped his arm. 'The sooner you get in the army and learn some discipline the better, Henry Collins.'

They didn't speak much more after that, but it left her with her brain churning.

The year passed in a contrasting succession of unusually fine days and increasingly dark news stories. The nation indulged itself with the pleasures of the jazz age whilst enduring the privations of urgent recruitment and rearmament. It was clear that the relaxation of defence measures after the termination of hostilities twenty years previously had been a mistake. The 'war to end all wars' was proving a delusion. Man's proclivity for murderous confrontation would, it seemed, outlast all experience, however harrowing.

The two boys, along with thousands of others, went off to the huge training camp in Yorkshire to familiarise themselves with the art of slaughter, and the young women adapted to new ideas about employment. There were large gaps left vacant in the trades and professions.

Lucy mourned the absence of Henry as much as her brother, but now she had other matters on her mind. Late one morning in the April of 1938 she was alone with her mother in the shop, arranging the products from the early morning's bakery shift. Her father was off in the van doing the first delivery round.

'Mum, what do you think about me doing a secretarial course?' Lucy tossed the question in casually whilst arranging sausage rolls, still warm, in the counter display case.

Her mother placed her work-worn hands on the bench top and stared. 'Where did that idea come from?'

'I've been thinking about it for a while.'

Minnie Armitage went back to kneading dough, ready for the afternoon's bake, and was silent for a long moment. Lucy began to fear another confrontation similar to that with her brother. But then her mother said, as she picked up a rolling pin, 'Well, it would open doors for you, Luce. I never got the chance, but I've always thought you were too clever to be baking bread all your life.'

Lucy turned to her and smiled, a smile of relief. 'How do you think Dad would take it?'

'Oh, you leave that to me. I'd break it to him gently.'

'I'd be leaving you both on your own.'

'Well, it's the modern way, isn't it? Families don't stick together the way they used to. Where are you thinking of going?'

'London.'

Her mother really did stop working then, her eyebrows risen as high as they could reach. 'London?'

'It's where all the best opportunities are. Henry's sister Elizabeth is there, and he says she could help me find somewhere to live. There are dozens of colleges in London.'

'I don't know if we could afford sending you there.'

'There are governments grants. I might even get a free course. I could work evenings. They must have bakeries in London.'

Minnie put a hand on her hip. 'You've worked it all out, haven't you?'

'I've been thinking about it.'

Her mother's eyes beneath the lined forehead were wistful. 'Well, to be sure I don't want you married to a sheep farmer, or shovelling bread loaves for the rest of your life. You're worth more than that.'

So it transpired that five months later Lucy found herself for the first time in the nation's vast capital, enrolled in the Mayfair Secretarial College, and sharing a small attic room in a hostel a bus ride away with an intense bespectacled girl from Ipswich, with whom she had nothing in common whatsoever. Elizabeth Collins had provided the required guidance, but then disappeared from her life, rarely to reappear.

CHAPTER FOUR

London had been all that Henry had described. The immensity of its scale - in width, in buildings, in parks, in population - was something that Lucy had never conceived. For the first few weeks there she had wandered in a daze. She rarely ventured beyond the hostel, the bus route to the college in the most affluent part of the city's West End, and the classrooms of the college itself. Homesickness was her companion.

But gradually she became more bold, and began exploring further afield. At weekends she took lonely bus rides to the various semi-rural suburbs – Chelsea, Hampstead, Wimbledon. She roamed the parks and commons, admired the historic village high streets, even treated herself to café teas. Once she took the underground to the East End and Docklands, where she gazed in wonderment at the squalid acres of slums bordering the turgid River Thames. Another time she found herself rambling the profusely flowering acres of Kew Gardens, the world's most illustrious botanical laboratory. The city was ever a revelation and an education.

As for the Mayfair Secretarial College, housed in a large Victorian house fronting a street near tree-lined Hyde Park, it was there that the education expanded to the myriad aspects of the secretarial profession. Not only the essential shorthand and typing, but the proper layout and headings of countless letter styles, the phraseology of addressing persons of every vocation and social level, the syntax of properly worded official papers, and finally the modes of dress and hairstyle employed by clerks to the movers and shakers of the British Empire - shaking on its foundations though that mighty edifice may have been. She quickly learnt to lose her Cumberland accent, after initial mockery from her fellow students and raised eyebrows from the imperious staff. Secretaries in the capital were presumed to be the epitome of British correctness in every detail.

It was after ten months of the tutelage, with the world now tottering on the cliff edge, and when she had almost finished the year long course, that the event happened that altered her life beyond all imagination.

The letter 'S' had broken on her typewriter. Such a negligible incident. Yet how ironic that these can change the course of an existence. How paradoxical that large consequences can ensue from such a trivial accident. For it was that small occurrence which led her, a simple baker's daughter from a village on the edge of nowhere, to finding herself in the thick of global events.

Germany, after months of suspense, had invaded Poland. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had informed the nation in his despondent tones that it was at war. The country was urgently preparing for the imagined invasion of Teutonic legions and the onslaught of gargantuan bombing raids. The long college work day had ended, the early autumn evening was closing in, the students had mostly left the building and scurried through the darkened streets to their various burrows, in constant fear of the promised bomb drops. Lucy however had broken the 'S' key on her battered Imperial typewriter with the sheer force of her speed typing, and had stayed behind to try and replace it from the motley collection of spare parts that the college stored in its many cupboards.

As she tinkered ineptly with the machine, the classroom door opened and Deputy Head Mrs Simms put her head in.

'Has everyone else left?' she asked, scanning the room through steel-rimmed spectacles.

Lucy nodded. 'Yes, Mrs Simms.'

'Lucy Armitage, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'What is your shorthand speed?'

'Um... two hundred.'

'Typing?'

'Seventy... about.'

'That's good enough. I've got a job for you. Emergency.'

Lucy frowned. What kind of emergency could there be at six o'clock on a quiet October evening? 'A job?'

'Yes. I don't know how long for, but you will be paid. You have to go to the Admiralty. I'm authorised to put you in a taxi cab. Someone will pay the cabbie at the other end.' She didn't enquire as to whether Lucy had other plans for the evening, she just assumed that if so they would be abandoned.

Lucy stared at the woman. She had never done a 'job' in her life. At eighteen she had never earned so much as a shilling, except for what her father had slipped her from time to time for helping out at the shop. Girls in the pre-war days considered themselves lucky if they could get a job earning half what most men brought in.

'Don't worry.' Mrs Simms was brusque but not unkindly. 'They want a fast typist, but I imagine it will just be typing out naval orders or instructions of some sort. The navy is in the thick of things in the North Sea. It's the only part of the armed forces that's fighting a war

at the moment. You'll handle it all right.' She looked Lucy up and down. 'Not exactly dressed for a government secretary, but you'll do. You can tidy your hair in the cab. Get your coat and hat. Come along.'

As Lucy sat in the back of the vibrating taxi cab – the first time she had ever been in such a vehicle – she with difficulty touched up her chignon and make-up in the small mirror she always carried in her handbag, checked that her blouse and work suit were modestly arranged, and practised in her mind the indoctrinated King's English vowels that had almost completely usurped the rural inflexions of her previous life.

The cab navigated an unusually quiet and darkened Trafalgar Square, its lions huge black silhouettes guarding Nelson's sacred monument, drove down Whitehall past the towering headquarters of government institutions, and pulled up outside the entrance to the equally vast Admiralty building. Two naval ratings in battle dress, surely younger even than herself, were on guard outside the pillared entrance, surrounded by sand bags and barriers posing as defence against invading German hordes. But it was a tall suited official who emerged from the building and met Lucy as she descended from the cab.

'You're a qualified typist?' he demanded in clipped tones as he paid the taxi driver through the cab window.

'Er... well nearly.'

'Right. Well, we must hurry. The old man's getting rather impatient.'

She didn't think to ask who the old man might be. Her mind was in such a turmoil that she did not dare to enquire about anything at all, for fear of being exposed as completely inadequate to the situation. She simply hurried after his long-striding figure into the depths of the huge complex of offices and state rooms.

Up stairs and along corridors they marched, past open doorways where voices muttered, phone bells rang, and papers shuffled, past blacked-out windows and through echoing halls, where the faces of long dead admirals stared down from stuccoed walls. To Lucy it was as if she had been transported to another world, where every opening revealed unfathomable activities.

Eventually they arrived at a lofty chamber humming with voices and illuminated by flickering lights. Charts covered the major expanses of wall, and several large table maps occupied the central space, around which naval officers prowled and young women in uniform moved coloured pins and model ships, as if conducting some giant board game. Other personnel muttered together in corners or into telephones. The whole had an air of intense and secretive suspense.

‘The Map Room,’ commented her escort. ‘We go this way.’ He continued striding through towards a door at the far end. ‘He likes to work in more secluded surroundings.’

He opened the door and ushered her in. It was a much smaller office, where stood a heavy mahogany desk, an array of filing cabinets, and another large map laid out on a table spanning half the width of the room.

Three men were present, two in the uniforms of high-ranking naval officers, and one, with his back turned, wearing what seemed of all things to be a form of striped boiler suit. A naval uniformed girl was listening to a telephone, and another was sticking coloured pins into the map. The air was filled with murmured voices and cigar smoke.

Lucy’s escort coughed politely and said, ‘The typist is here, sir.’

The naval officers looked up, the boiler-suited man turned around, cigar in mouth. Lucy blinked and froze, shocked into paralysis.

He was shorter than she had imagined. His stocky form gave the impression of a solid fixture that hurricanes would have a job to unbalance. His instantly recognisable face had a slightly cherubic aspect. His pale blue eyes stared at her over his oval lenses for fully five seconds before he spoke. Then he took the cigar from his mouth.

‘Have you got a note-book?’ No greeting, no introduction. His voice was deep in his throat as if a handful of sand was lodged there. His face showed neither disapproval, cordiality, nor curiosity.

Her brain kicked into action. ‘Um... no, sir, I didn’t have time to... I didn’t know what was...’

‘Heavens above – someone give the girl a note pad.’

One of the WRENs passed Lucy a pad and pencil. Lucy took them in hand automatically.

‘Are you ready? You can sit if you wish. There’s a lot to record.’

‘Um...’ She looked hastily around, and grabbed a wooden chair beside the table.

‘Take this down precisely as I speak, and then someone will show you a typewriter where you can type it out. As speedily as possible.’

‘Yes, sir.’ She hurled her brain into professional mode and opened the note pad.

He strode up and down the worn carpet as he spoke. There was a deliberation and a slight sibilance to his speech, which gave it a sense of casualness, in contrast to its urgent message. ‘To the members of the War Cabinet this day October the 2nd, nineteen thirty nine. From the First Lord of the Admiralty. Report on the state of the campaign against German U-boats in the North Sea...’

Lucy scribbled on her note-pad. The words flowed without interruption. A constant stream of facts and figures, sea locations and ship names, weather conditions and wind speeds, battle encounters and casualty figures. The naval officers murmured from time to time in his ear, the girls pointed to map references and pin positions. After twenty minutes Lucy had enough shorthand script to fill six pages of typing. Finally he stopped.

‘Signed, Winston Churchill, First Lord.’ He puffed on his cigar for a brief moment, staring at the ceiling. ‘Yes, that will do. As many carbon copies as you can achieve. Bring them to me as soon as you’ve done it, and then I’ll have more for you.’

‘Yes, sir.’ She turned to follow her original escort from the room.

The voice growled again. ‘You’re new, aren’t you?’

She turned back. ‘Yes, sir. They sent me from the secretarial college.’

He glanced at the escort. ‘Has she been through security?’

‘I’m afraid there wasn’t time, sir,’ said the man. ‘You needed someone urgently, and the others had all left.’

Churchill glowered at her again for a second. ‘Hah. Well, welcome to the circle. Do your best.’

‘Yes, sir.’ She turned again and left.

That was the start.