

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Year of Victory

Mary Jane Staples

## About the Book

The seemingly endless war was at last coming to a conclusion. But for the country and for the Adams family, there were still many tribulations to be overcome. Flying bombs - the deadly V1 buzzbombs - appeared over London, causing dreadful destruction. The struggle continued to overcome the most powerful war machine the world had ever known.

But amongst the Cockney community there were lighter moments, too. For Felicity, Eloise and Lizzy there was the happiness of knowing that their menfolk were safe and well. Daniel Adams and his American girlfriend even had a brief meeting with Winston Churchill himself. And as the Third Reich began to show signs of collapse, the scent of victory was in the air.

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# Year of Victory

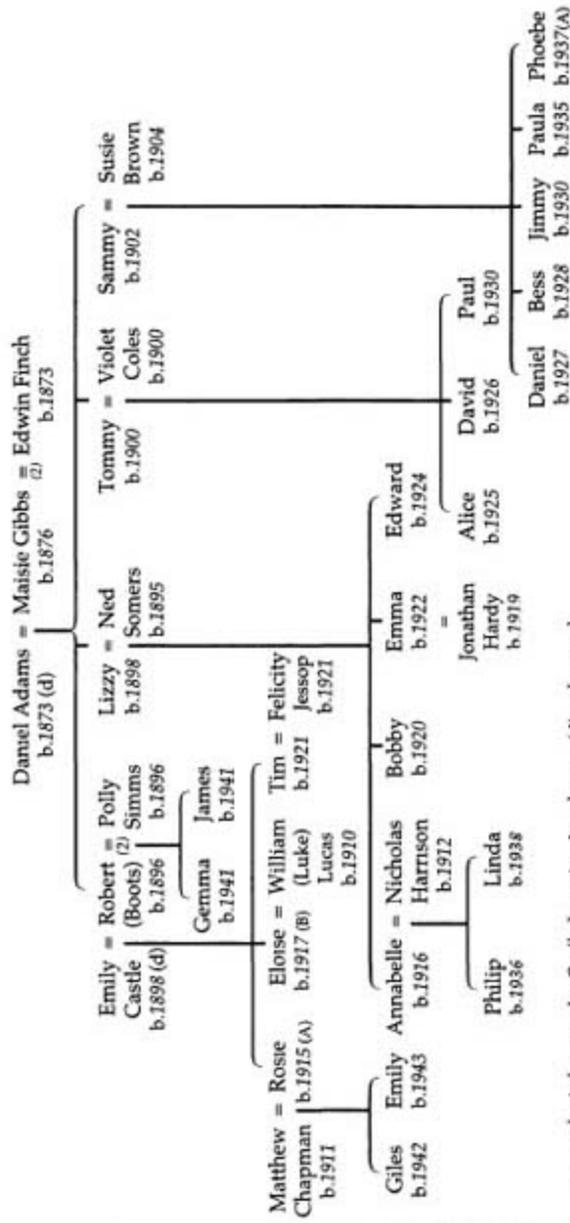
Mary Jane Staples



**CORGI BOOKS**

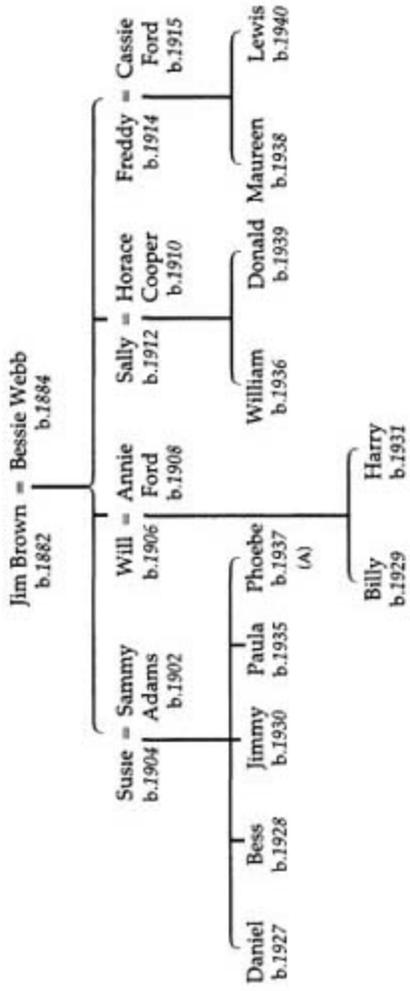
*In fond memory of my sister-in-law, Doris Wake,  
a devoted fan, with my best wishes to her son Tony  
and her granddaughters Miranda and Lucy.*

## THE ADAMS FAMILY



(A) - adopted (B) - by Cecile Lacoste b. - born (d) - deceased

THE BROWN FAMILY



# *Chapter One*

*Mid-June, 1944*

The flying object, high in the sky and heading directly north-west from the *Pas de Calais*, crossed the Channel, reached the coast of Kent and invaded the air space of the United Kingdom at tremendous speed. Members of the Royal Observer Corp spotted it but could not identify it except to say it was too small to be any known bomber, either Allied or German. The RAF fighter station at Manston was alerted, but the invader was moving too fast to be intercepted. Four hundred miles an hour.

It passed over the village of Brabourne Lees, over the town of Ashford, and with its power system, a tubular jet engine, loudly buzzing, flew on to Maidstone. Its noise heralded its visible arrival over the shopping area. People stared up at it, suspicious of its heavy buzzing noise while gaping at the speed with which it came and went.

On it flew, dark and squat, tearing through the sky over Swanley, Eltham and Lewisham towards the centre of London. Its loud buzzing flight caught the attention of Londoners. With straight front wings, and a small cross-section tail, it looked like a plane of rudimentary design, a black silhouette streaking fast and noisily against the canopy of high clouds. A group of people on the south side of Waterloo Bridge saw it coming and watched its approach. There was no great sense of alarm, for it obviously wasn't a lone German bomber. Comments were exchanged.

'Look at that, me old Dutch, what is it, some kid's toy plane that's escaped from Clapham Common?' asked a

stout man.

'I saw my dad's shirt tails flying in the wind once, and Mum after him with the coal shovel,' said his old Dutch, 'but I never saw no toy plane from Clapham Common.'

'Take it from me, there's no toy plane that's as big or as fast as that,' said a soldier on leave.

They all stretched their necks as it began to pass overhead.

'Funny-looking, I call it,' said an off-duty bus clippie.

'I ain't laughing yet,' said the stout man cautiously.

'Christ, nor is the pilot, his engine's failed,' said the soldier, tensing.

'Blind O'Reilly,' breathed the stout man.

The engine had fallen silent. The machine, crossing the river, seemed to falter, and then it plunged earthwards, revealing the absence of either cockpit or pilot. The watchers held their breath as the mysterious flying object disappeared behind buildings on the north side of the river. It struck Aldwych, close to Fleet Street, and exploded with a tremendous roar. A bus, carrying several passengers, was blown over. Hundreds of windows in nearby buildings disintegrated. Shattered bricks showered the area like jagged missiles.

Hitler had launched his secret weapon, a jet-propelled flying bomb fashioned by his rocket scientists. The V-1.

At regular intervals, others followed the first. Since they could not be primed to strike a specific target, they were aimed at London generally as an instrument of terror. Devastation and havoc on an indiscriminate scale occurred, and was repeated daily.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill was suddenly aware that he had what he could have well done without at a time when huge efforts were being made to sustain the impetus of the successful invasion of Normandy - he had a major headache. This headache was no help at all to the programme he had been working on for years, that of

ensuring Britain's war machine was formidable enough to compare favourably with the might of the Russian and American forces. His present endeavours consisted in assisting Russia to take Germany out of the war, and then smashing the Japanese, all with the massive help of the vigorous and dynamic Americans.

The advent of Germany's V-1, designed to win the war for Hitler at a time when Germany was beginning to sense defeat, was aimed at shattering the morale of the British people, particularly millions of obdurate Londoners, and thus reduce their long-standing determination to back Churchill all the way in his quest for victory.

Churchill sought new defensive measures.

RAF and USAF Fighter Commands, hugely supportive of the Allied offensive in Normandy, were forced to detach some squadrons and use them to patrol the Channel in a bid to intercept the V-1's, and by the end of June one thousand of these fearsome flying bombs had been blown up in mid-air. The defence offered by the fighter planes was augmented by ack-ack guns positioned along the coast between Newhaven and St Margaret's Bay, and the barrage balloons hung in clusters between Limpsfield and Cobham in Surrey. Fighter pilots quickly realized it was suicidal to shoot at a V-1 from close range. They improvised by allowing the missile to fly past and then giving it a burst from a safe distance, or, in a particularly daring fashion, by placing a wing tip beneath the buzz-bomb's wing tip and knocking it off course with a flip and a roll.

However, a discomfiting number were still getting through, and Churchill knew it was asking a hell of a lot of the people of London to put up with this new menace from the skies. Nevertheless, ask he did when he went among them. If some cockneys frankly and reasonably expressed themselves as being bleedin' fed-up with being bleedin' blown up, a heartening number responded with the two-finger 'V for victory' sign that Churchill himself had

originated. In its own response, Allied Bomber Command made tremendous efforts to search for and destroy the V-1 launching sites.

Hitler was crowing. Not only did he announce that the V-1's were decimating London and tying down hundreds of Allied aircraft, he overcame his critical lack of a sense of humour by ending up with a funny ha-ha line.

'Our V-1 needs no fuel for a return flight.'

### *The 30th of June*

Mr Sammy Adams, well-known businessman of Camberwell, stood looking at the ruins of his old Southwark Brewery, destroyed by a bomb during the time of the 1940-41 Blitz. His business manager, widowed Rachel Goodman, was with him. They were both forty-two, both worth a penny or two. Sammy was tall, well-dressed in a light grey suit and dark grey Homburg, blue eyes still reflective of his mental energy. Rachel, in a beige dress and a round brimmed hat defiant of wartime's severe lines, was vividly brunette, with large eyes of velvet brown. She was what Sammy called a well-preserved female woman. Born a Jewish cockney girl, she had been sent by her father to a finishing school when she was nearly sixteen, and she emerged a young lady. Her relationship with Sammy was that of a long-standing friend, and never at any time did she intimate she had always been in love with him. His marriage to Susie was precious to him, and no way was Rachel going to spoil that for either of them.

By his side, she surveyed the ruined premises, at the end of which stood a shop, closed and shuttered, but with two storeys of living accommodation above it. It was separated from terraced houses by an alley. It had been only slightly damaged when the adjoining brewery was destroyed, but the damage had been made good.

'There's your site, Sammy,' said Rachel 'but you won't be able to think of development until after the war.'

'Right,' said Sammy, 'but what d'you think about me idea of erecting a three-storey block of good-sized flats for young couples to purchase?'

'Sammy, people here in Southwark don't purchase, they never earn enough for a mortgage.'

'I was thinking of starting a loan company and undercutting building society interest by a mouthwatering quarter-of-one-per cent,' said Sammy.

'A quarter-of-one-per cent is mouthwatering?' smiled Rachel.

'That's me fond conviction,' said Sammy, 'but first I'd like to extend the site, which we can do if we buy that shop.'

'Who could resist a generous offer, Sammy?' said Rachel. 'Who would want to live there if they could buy something far better?'

'You might well ask, not half you might,' said Sammy, 'and the answer's a lemon.'

'Lemon?'

'In person, a Mrs Delilah Harman, who owns the place, lives in it and is highly obstinate,' said Sammy.

'Delilah, Sammy? Delilah?'

'Well, Jessica, actually,' said Sammy, 'and one of your own.'

'You mean she's a Jewish lady?' said Rachel.

Sammy said yes, and that he'd made an offer, a generous one, a week ago. Well, any offer is generous, he said, considering that only some barmy geezer with no head would want to live in the place. It shook him to the core, he said, when the old biddy turned him down flat on her doorstep. Didn't even invite him in for a cup of tea and a friendly chat. Be off with you, that was what she said.

'Pardon?' said Rachel.

'Fact,' said Sammy. "'Be off with you, yer saucy boy.'" That's what she came out with. Rachel, are you laughing?'

‘My life,’ gurgled Rachel, ‘she called you a saucy boy?’

‘Me, Rachel, yours truly. Me. I tottered, and she shut the door right on my hooter. I told meself I was having a bad dream, and that I’d got to let her know I’m Sammy Adams, not the local paperboy.’

‘Sammy, I’m fascinated,’ said Rachel, a picture of blooming life against the background of dead bricks. ‘What did you do?’

‘I stiffened me sinews, and knocked again,’ said Sammy, ‘and then what happened, you’ll ask.’

‘I am asking,’ said Rachel.

‘Well, old Delilah was upstairs by then,’ said Sammy. ‘She opened a window and poured a large jug of soapy washing-up water down over me. Fortunately, most of it missed, but me titfer caught a pint or so. There were words as well.’

‘What words?’

“‘Hoppit, yer saucy young monkey.’”

‘Oh, my life, Sammy, I’m having hysterics.’

‘Help yourself,’ said Sammy, ‘but it’s not funny, y’know.’

‘No, Sammy.’

‘Now you know why you’re here, and why our old friend Eli Greenberg should turn up any moment. You and Eli, well, you’re both related to old Delilah in a manner of speaking, and can talk to her in Yiddish. The place is only worth a couple of hundred smackers, but I’ll go up to three. Start at two-twenty.’

‘Sammy, I honestly don’t want a jug of washing-up water poured over me and my hat,’ said Rachel, ‘but for you I’ll risk it. And here’s Eli. I’m sure he’ll risk it too.’

A horse and cart drew up alongside the site, and Sammy let a smile show. There it was, Mr Greenberg’s lifetime mode of transport. All the bombing raids, and now the flying bombs, had failed to deprive him of the horse and cart dear to his heart and his daily round. These days he was on the lookout for scrap metal that house-holders wanted to get rid

of. There was an urgent industrial demand for it while the war went on.

'Here I am, Sammy my friend,' he said, climbing down and putting a feed bag on his nag's nose. 'And ain't I pleased to see Rachel too? Vhy, I never saw you looking younger, Rachel, nor more expensive. Ah, expensive is high-class, ain't it, and vasn't you always high-class, my dear?' Mr Greenberg beamed. His ancient round black hat, rustier by the year, and his handsome black beard, flecked with white, were permanent features. He was sixty now, having entered the UK as a young boy in 1890, when Queen Victoria was aged and revered. His parents had brought him and his brother and sister out of Czarist Russia, away from the pogroms and the knout-wielding Cossacks, to face a new life of struggle and hardship in London's East End. But there was freedom to be oneself, also good-natured bobbies and people who were resolute despite poverty. Before the war, Mr Greenberg had seen them pour into the streets to fight Mosley's blackshirted, anti-Semitic thugs. Such a pity, he often thought, that the German people of Berlin hadn't fought Hitler's thugs in the same way.

'Welcome, Eli old cock,' said Sammy.

'Sammy, vill you tell me vhat today's business is?' Mr Greenberg's tongue caressed the word he and Sammy cherished.

'It's about extending this site,' said Sammy.

'For a block of roomy flats, ain't it?' said Mr Greenberg.

'Right,' said Sammy, 'and I need to buy that shop and its premises, to knock it down and get the extension I require. But I'm having trouble with the owner.' He recounted details, which brought forth a rolling chuckle from Mr Greenberg. 'Eli, I've just had to tell Rachel I don't regard it as funny.'

'Sammy, there's tears in my eyes, ain't there?'

'I can't see any,' said Sammy, 'and it's to me regret that Rachel's still laughing.'

‘But, Sammy, all that washing-up water and calling you a saucy young monkey,’ said Rachel. ‘I should lose my sense of humour about it?’

‘Mine went for a long walk at the time,’ said Sammy, ‘and it’s not come back yet. Probably fell off the white cliffs of Dover. But I’m not giving up. So you and Eli talk Yiddish to the old biddy to let her know you’re her cousins, and that you’re thinking of building a new synagogue on this site.’

‘Sammy, Sammy,’ said Rachel.

‘All right, say a home for Jewish orphans.’

‘Why not a block of flats for people in need?’ suggested Mr Greenberg.

‘Well, of course, people in need of a flat count as people in need,’ said Rachel.

‘I like it,’ said Sammy. ‘Right, I’ll leave it to you two. Two’s better than one, seeing the old girl’s tough. Try to get her singing fairly quick, as I’ve got a busy day in front of me.’

Rachel smiled. The country was in its sixth year of war, but Sammy never let go of his business wheels and deals, and for some time now he’d been looking ahead. There had to be a rebuilding and development programme in every bombed city after the war, and Sammy was on to it, even if on a long-term basis. He’d made money already for the firm’s property company by selling acquired bomb-sites to other companies with post-war development in mind. Capital was available for long-term investment simply because industry always boomed in wartime, and Adams Enterprises and its associated companies were banking their fair share of profits. Rachel knew that.

‘Come along, Eli,’ she said, ‘let’s see if we can get on the right side of Mrs Harman.’

‘A Yiddish lady, you said, Sammy?’ enquired Mr Greenberg.

‘So I did,’ said Sammy, ‘which means you and Rachel can talk to her like fond relatives.’

‘Sammy, it’s a business deal or for friendship?’

‘Call it a business deal for a fiver,’ said Sammy.

‘I’ll be happy to, Sammy,’ said Mr Greenberg. ‘Friendship is precious, but a little hard on my pocket sometimes, ain’t it?’

‘Come along, Eli,’ said Rachel again, and she and Sammy’s old friend and business help made their way to the shuttered shop. Sammy put himself out of sight, but kept within earshot. Rachel knocked on the door at the side of the shop. After a little while, quick footsteps were heard, suggesting that Mrs Harman might be old but far from infirm. The door opened and the lady appeared, angular, grey-haired and sharpeyed. ‘Mrs Harman?’ said Rachel with a friendly smile.

‘That’s me. What d’yer want? If you’re selling something, I can’t afford it, so be off with the pair of yer.’

‘My dear lady,’ said Mr Greenberg, ‘ve—’

‘I ain’t your dear lady,’ said Mrs Harman, and Sammy heard Mr Greenberg say something at length in Yiddish. That didn’t please her, either, for she said irritably, ‘I ain’t spoke that language for fifty years, so talk English. No, yer needn’t bother. I’ve lived ’ere all me life, as me father’s daughter, me late husband’s wife, the mother of me children, and the keeper of the shop till I had to close it for want of stock. So I ain’t moving and I ain’t selling. What’s yer game, eh? I ’ad some young saucebox make me an offer last week, and I ain’t liking you any more than I liked ’im. Who are yer? You ain’t this young woman’s husband, are yer? You’re a disgrace if you are, seeing you’re old enough to be her grandfather.’

That’s made Rachel purr a bit, thought Sammy.

‘Veil, missus,’ said Mr Greenberg, ‘I ain’t her grandfather, nor her husband—’

‘I still don’t like yer, nor yer face. Hoppit.’

‘Mrs Harman,’ said Rachel, ‘our offer—’

‘I told yer, I ain’t selling to no-one, so take yerselves off.’

Sammy heard the door slam. I don't believe it, he said to himself, two old friends like Rachel and Eli can't make a Yiddisher momma sing? I've got serious problems.

'Sammy?' Rachel appeared, Mr Greenberg at her elbow. 'My life, you heard all that? She won't play.'

'I'll think of something,' said Sammy.

'Sometimes, Sammy, there's vun nut that von't be cracked,' sighed Mr Greenberg.

'I'll think of something,' said Sammy again. 'It might take a week or so - oh, hell, watch out.'

They were quite still then, tensing as they heard that which had become all too familiar, the powerful buzzing noise of a V-1, a 'doodle-bug', invading the skies over Southwark. High up in the grey clouds, it passed on in the direction of Blackfriars Bridge, and they relaxed while saying a silent prayer for whoever was going to be close to the monster when it crashed and exploded. It actually fell in Finsbury Park, its blast reaching out just far enough to lightly scorch the heels of people who had begun to run as soon as they saw the monster nosediving out of the clouds.

Sammy and Rachel returned to the firm's offices in Camberwell Green, and Mr Greenberg went on his rounds with his horse and cart.

Life had to go on, and so did business.

## *Chapter Two*

### *Early July*

Some young ladies might have glanced into a mirror and given a light touch or two to their hair while on their way to answer a knock on their front door. Not Miss Alice Adams, the nineteen-year-old daughter of Tommy and Vi Adams. Such concessions to vanity did not enter her mind. A studious young lady, most of her thoughts related to the highly satisfying fact that she was due to enter Bristol University in September. Everything else was of a minor nature. Except the war, of course.

She felt it had been sensible of the Government not to have closed the universities because of the war, and to have allowed would-be students deferment from conscription into industry or the Services. Well, it was true, of course, that the country had never allowed any war to close down its places of advanced learning. She hoped to graduate with honours and become a university tutor. Meanwhile, she naturally took a serious interest in the progress of the present war, particularly in the way it affected the lives of close relatives, such as cousins Tim and Eloise and their father, Uncle Boots. To Alice, her Uncle Boots was the most admirable of the Adams men. She saw him as mature, sophisticated and cultured, and she saw herself as much the same in the years to come. Boots would have been amused to know she held such an opinion of him, since he considered sophisticated and cultured people were those whose practical talents began and ended with feeding pennies into a gas meter.

It was a fact, anyway, that Alice glanced at no mirror on her way to open the front door to a caller. She was, in any case, always quite satisfied with her appearance. While she wasn't as photogenic as her cousins Rosie and Eloise, her looks were by no means unattractive, her hair fair like her mother's, and her figure nicely shaped by her trim dark blue dress. But she lacked the air of animation that characterized so many of her cousins.

She opened the door. On the step stood a sinewy, lanky man with the dark looks of a pirate. She knew him, for she had encountered him before, several times. They had not been enjoyable meetings. He had an annoying habit of delivering opinions that weren't asked for, opinions that in the main suggested she was not to be taken seriously.

Fergus MacAllister was a Scot who had known wartime service with a famous Highland Division. Prior to the Dunkirk evacuation, the Division had fought a tremendous battle against overwhelming odds to prevent the whole of the British Expeditionary Force being trapped. That achieved, the Division found there was no way out for its own troops, and was eventually forced to surrender. Suffering a severe wound, Fergus had been stretchered out during the early stages of the battle, and thereby escaped being taken prisoner. However, his wound was of the kind that left tiny slivers of shrapnel in his body, and caused him to be discharged, much to his disgust. He was always hopeful that the shrapnel would expel itself through his skin and leave him fit enough to rejoin his regiment, although there was always the chance a sliver might slip into an artery. He knew that and lived with the threat of what that might do to him. Meanwhile, he had this job as a mechanic with the local Gas Board, and as such was invaluable. Vibrations affecting gas mains during past air raids eventually caused fractures that led to dangerous situations. And the flying bombs were inflicting new damage. Fergus had come to know Alice when attending to a gas leak in her mum's airing-cupboard, and

the two of them had reached a point where they agreed to disagree. He did indeed think her far too serious for her age, and she thought him impertinent.

‘Guid morning to you, Miss Adams,’ he said, much more an outgoing Scot than a dour one.

‘Oh, it’s you,’ said Alice.

‘Aye,’ said Fergus. He was on the doorstep of the Adams house on Denmark Hill in answer to a phone call from Alice’s father, Mr Tommy Adams, who had informed the relevant department that the gas boiler which supplied the hot water was beginning to fail from old age. Tommy, in his cheerful way, had said he knew there was a war on, and that there were real emergencies, but if something could be done about his rickety old boiler before it blew up, he’d make a donation to the Gas Board’s favourite charity, whatever it was. The Gas Board clerk said that as there had been no serious flying bombs incidents in the area recently, he’d see if a mechanic could be sent sometime within the next two weeks. Have a heart, said Tommy. We’re very busy, said the clerk. Tommy said all right, if the boiler does blow up, don’t say you weren’t warned. Don’t use it, said the clerk. Tommy growled. Hence, the appearance of Fergus MacAllister.

‘I don’t know if we were expecting you again,’ said Alice in her precise way. ‘Are you the only mechanic employed by the Board?’

‘I’m no’ the only one, Miss Adams,’ said Fergus, ‘just the best, y’ken.’

‘One must admire your modesty,’ said Alice.

‘True, I’m a quiet man on my own account,’ said Fergus.

‘Ha-ha,’ said Alice.

‘Am I to step in, Miss Adams?’

‘I’m afraid my mother’s out,’ said Alice.

‘Whisht, I’ve no’ come to see your mother, but to look at your boiler.’

‘I’m not sure I wish to be alone in the house with you,’ said Alice.

'I'm thinking there's a risk in it for both of us,' said Fergus.

'Both of us? What d'you mean?' asked Alice.

'I mean, Miss Adams, how safe will I be alone in the house wi' you?' said Fergus.'

'That's ridiculous,' said Alice. They eyed each other, Alice straight of face and always inclined to dress him down a bit for his impertinence, and Fergus, for some reason that didn't make sense to himself, quite taken with the hoity-toity miss. If she wasn't exactly sparkling, she was still a bonny young lady, with a fine, healthy-looking figure.

'Miss Adams, I'm still on your doorstep,' he said.

'Well, although you don't improve,' said Alice, 'you can come in and do what you have to do.'

'I'm obliged,' said Fergus, carrying himself and his bag of tools into the house. 'I'm hoping there'll be no doodlebugs chasing me off the job.'

'They're awful,' said Alice. In a matter of three weeks, she and her parents had learned how to cope with the menace, as had most Londoners. That was not to spend all day in a shelter, but to carry on with one's normal routine and dive for cover only when the engine of any approaching V-1 cut out, the signal that the explosive projectile was about to fall from the sky. 'Who thought up such ghastly things?'

'Hitler's ghastly scientists, I'm thinking,' said Fergus. 'It's a war against civilians he's been fighting since he bombed Warsaw and Rotterdam, and refugees on roads. I'll no' cry for him when the Allies hang him.' He moved towards the kitchen. Alice followed. 'I know my way,' he said, 'and I willna be bothering you if you're still at your studies.' He knew how committed she was to her academic future, and that she spent most days swotting. 'Run along, lassie.'

'Run along?' Alice took umbrage. 'Really, your impertinence gets worse, and isn't made any better by calling me lassie.'

'It's a fact that we're all a wee bit touchy about some things,' said Fergus, 'but it's no' my intention to upset you

today, tomorrow or any time. You're a young lady much attached to your dignity, and I respect that.'

'No, you don't,' said Alice, and entered the kitchen on his heels. It was ten in the morning and, as usual, her mother had left everything clean and tidy before going out to the shops. Alice was never asked to do much more around the house than keep her bedroom tidy and make her bed. 'In any case, I'm not attached to my dignity, just my coming time at university.'

'I'm no' arguing with that,' said Fergus, putting his bag of tools down. He simply thought this serious-minded young lady gave the impression of being too old for her years. 'I never knew any lassie more addicted to learning.'

'You're very provoking,' said Alice. She might have saved herself this kind of dialogue if she had simply left him to his work and gone back to her books. But, as had happened before, more than once, his attitude aroused a compulsive urge to stay and make a fight of their encounters.

'What's this noise?' asked Fergus, and opened the door of the large cupboard housing the boiler. The boiler was thumping and coughing. 'Scale,' he said.

'Scale?' said Alice.

'Aye, and likely to be inches thick on a boiler as old as this,' said Fergus. 'Out of the Ark, I'd say, and probably a problem to Mrs Noah even then. I'll place a bet on it having heart failure any moment in trying to keep the water hot.'

'Sometimes it's not much more than lukewarm,' said Alice, 'and whenever anyone has a bath it takes ages for it to heat up again. Didn't my father tell your people that over the phone?'

'So I believe,' said Fergus. 'Were you thinking of taking a bath this morning, Miss Adams? If so, take it now, for as a start I'll be turning off the flow into this ancient monument and draining it.'

'Thanks very much, but I bath at night, not in the mornings,' said Alice.

‘So do I,’ said Fergus. He had his back to her, tapping the boiler with a spanner. ‘So you could say we bath together.’

Alice supposed that was an attempt to show how witty he was. It failed miserably as far as she was concerned.

‘Well, of course, you might say so,’ she said, ‘and so might most third-rate comedians. I’m going into the parlour to continue my studies, and I hope that boiler falls on you and makes a large hole in your silly head.’

‘Whisht, is that how you feel, Miss Adams?’

‘Yes,’ said Alice. Out she went and into the parlour. The morning was quiet. There was a lull in the Germans’ despatch of flying bombs. Allied bombers brought about periods of temporary relief by sustained attacks on launching sites. Alice sat down at the table on which books were spread. The top sheet of a writing block in front of her was covered with notes. She ripped it off, picked up her pencil and made a fresh start on analysing the literature of Thomas Hardy. At least, she attempted to, but she was too conscious that that provoking beast from the Gas Board was in the house and probably having a snigger at her expense. After a while, however, she began to think she ought to excuse him because of his war wound. Some people, probably a great many, would think him a hero and excuse his every fault.

She fidgeted. She read a few paragraphs of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Then she got up and returned to the kitchen. Lukewarm water was gushing from a tap into the sink.

‘Hello again, Miss Adams,’ said Fergus, ‘I’m draining the boiler.’

‘Yes, I see,’ said Alice, and composed herself. ‘Look, would you like a cup of Camp coffee?’ Her mother had asked her to do that kind of thing for whoever turned up from the Gas Board.

‘That’s kind of you,’ said Fergus, ‘and I willna say no.’

Alice put the kettle on. The hot water tap stopped running, leaving the boiler empty. Fergus turned off the tap, then began to rap the boiler again with his spanner, creating dull booms.

‘What do they mean?’ asked Alice, putting coffee mugs on the table.

‘Frankly,’ said Fergus, ‘they’re no’ the kind of sounds I like.’

‘What kind would you like?’

‘Clear and ringing, lassie,’ said Fergus. ‘It’s the scale, y’ken, the inside of the boiler is thick with it. That’s why the water takes a long time to heat up, and makes your gas bill a wee bit expensive, I dare say.’

‘My father will pay for a new boiler,’ said Alice.

‘A new boiler?’ Fergus took a pipe out of his overalls pocket, put it between his lips, sucked it, blew on it, took it out and looked at it. ‘It’s no’ so easy, a new one.’

‘You’re supposed to be solving our problems, not adding to them,’ said Alice.

‘Dinna worry, Miss Adams, there’s a solution somewhere,’ said Fergus. ‘By way of a salvaged tank at our depot. There’s more than a few of those from bombed houses. Badly damaged ones go for valuable scrap. It’s the copper they’re made of, y’ken. New ones are in short supply because so much copper is required for armaments.’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Alice understandingly. The kettle boiled then, and she made two mugs of coffee from the chicory-based Camp liquid. She added a little milk. ‘Do you take sugar, Mr MacAllister?’

‘I willna take any of your ration,’ said Fergus.

‘We can spare a little,’ said Alice, and added a small amount to each mug. She took one mug up. ‘I’ll leave you to have yours while I go back to my studies again.’

‘Aye, you’re a fine young lady wi’ your books and your learning,’ said Fergus, ‘and I’m coming to respect that. Haven’t I said so?’

‘Yes, you’ve said so,’ responded Alice, ‘but I find many of your remarks more suspect than respectful.’

‘No, I mean it,’ said Fergus, ‘but if you ever feel like a change from studying and would like to come dancing—’

‘Mr MacAllister, I’ve told you before, I’ve no time for that kind of thing.’ Alice avoided all pursuits she considered trivial. ‘I do realize you feel our practical needs, such as a roof over our heads, food to eat, clothes to wear, a transport system to get us to our places of work, and skilled men to keep everything in good repair, are more important than studying for a university degree, but some of us do have different feelings. Not everyone wishes to drive a train or farm the land, and I think there’s room for all of us.’

Fergus picked up his mug of coffee, gave her a sorrowful look and said, ‘Och, aye.’

‘What does that mean?’ asked Alice.

‘That you’ve a fine way of delivering a lecture,’ said Fergus.

‘You’ve said something like that before, and it’s objectionable,’ accused Alice. ‘I’m finding it very difficult to like you.’ And she left the kitchen, carrying her coffee with her.

Fergus drank his own coffee, then finished his work and tidied up. He called when he was ready to leave.

‘I’m away now, Miss Adams.’

Alice reappeared.

‘What’s going to happen?’ she asked.

‘First, you’ll no’ be getting any hot water,’ he said. ‘The boiler’s empty, and I’ve turned off the flow and the burners.’

‘Well, thanks very much, I don’t think,’ said Alice.

‘Bide a wee moment, lassie—’

‘Will you stop calling me lassie?’

‘Aye, I will,’ said Fergus. ‘And as soon as I’ve found a reconditioned boiler at the depot, and had it loaded into a van, I’ll be back with another mechanic. We’ll dismantle your antique and fit the replacement.’

‘And when will that be, next week?’ asked Alice.

‘If we’re lucky, this afternoon,’ said Fergus.

‘Oh,’ said Alice. Contritely, she added, ‘That would please me and my parents, if you could manage this afternoon.’

‘These are better times, Miss Adams,’ said Fergus, ‘wi’ the Highland laddies back in France and giving Hider’s hairy Prussians a hot dose of their own medicine. Aye, this old kingdom’s wearing a happier face, and if I canna help fit you a reconditioned boiler this afternoon, it’ll no’ be for want of trying.’

‘Thank you, Mr MacAllister,’ said Alice, deciding to be forgiving. ‘As for the invasion of Normandy, wasn’t the news exciting and wonderful? I’m sure every man was a hero.’

‘You can be sure at least that every seasick man couldna wait to get on dry land, and didna give a hoot for what the Germans were going to throw at him,’ said Fergus. His expression, thought Alice, was a little rueful, and she felt he would much rather have been over there in France with his Scots than here in her mother’s kitchen. ‘It’s a fact, though, that these flying bombs are a wee bit upsetting to our home front.’

‘Worse than upsetting,’ said Alice.

‘That’s true, lassie,’ said Fergus.

‘You should know’, said Alice, feeling unexpectedly stimulated by this latest encounter, ‘that Lassie is a Hollywood film star with four legs.’

‘Aye, I’m sure I’ve heard of that wonder dog,’ said Fergus. ‘I’ll be on my way now, Miss Adams, but hoping to be back this afternoon. Guid morning to you, thanks for the coffee, and I’m tickled fine that our laddies are back in France. I’m thinking Hitler’s now got his deserved fill of worries, for he’ll no’ push us into the sea this time. Aye, he’ll be a worried man right now.’

‘And I don’t suppose his Germans feel too happy,’ said Alice. ‘Good morning, Mr MacAllister.’

Alice, along with most people in the United Kingdom had no idea whether or not Hitler was still a popular *Fuehrer*. Outside of Germany, few people knew that not everyone in Germany was pro-Nazi and pro-Hitler. Not everyone was in favour of the war, especially now that the Allies had established a firm foothold in Normandy. It meant Germany was under assault on three fronts, Russia, Italy and France. It was dangerous, however, to voice criticism either of the Party or Hitler. Over the years, thousands of men and women had been imprisoned or sent to a concentration camp, or summarily executed, for speaking out of turn. The Gestapo and the SS had cowed the nation, and even now, when it looked as if eventual defeat and devastation were unavoidable for Germany, there were no influential voices raised in public protest. More than a few suffering German people felt someone of standing should denounce the man who bore the major responsibility for the devastating nature of Allied bombing raids and for placing the Third Reich in crisis.

Hitler, supported by his gang of Nazi hell-hounds, was that man.

Denouncing him was not enough as far as some people were concerned. Could no-one actually get rid of him and allow Germany to sue for a reasonable peace, at least with the Americans and British, if not with the Communist hordes of Russia?

It was a burning question which was beginning to occupy the minds of certain German generals and influential officials.

## Chapter Three

Mrs Maisie Finch, known to her family as Chinese Lady because of her almond eyes and the fact that in days long ago she had taken in washing, was sitting at a table on the stone-flagged patio of her home in Red Post Hill, south-east London. She was just finishing a letter to her granddaughter Rosie, for whom she had a particular affection. Rosie was living down in Dorset with her children, Giles and Emily, and her sister-in-law, Felicity.

*So your grandfather and me will be on holiday in Cornwall for the last week in July and the first week in August, which I'm sure will do your grandfather good as he's not been in the best of health this year. We'll be with Sammy and Susie and their children, and Daniel's young lady from America that you know about will be there too. Mind, I don't know if she's actually his young lady or if they're just close friends but I will say she's a nice respectable girl. Well, that's all for now, Rosie, except to say me and your grandfather hope your husband Matthew will come home on leave soon to be with you and the children for a while, and remember us to Tim's wife Felicity, we're glad she's still with you. I can't tell you how relieved I'll be when this blessed war is over and everyone in the family is back home safe and sound and in good health. Now that we've got these doodle-bugs to worry about, things don't get better. That man Hitler is more aggravating than the Kaiser ever was.*

Chinese Lady signed off with love, then thought, as she often did, about where so many missing members of the family were at the moment. She knew where her eldest son Boots was. In France, with the army that had invaded Normandy. It was where he shouldn't be, considering he'd been there before, in the Great War trenches. He was nearly middle-aged, he'd be fifty in two years time, and didn't ought to have been in this war as well as the last one. It had to be worrying for Polly, his second wife and the mother of his twins. Polly ought to have him at home to help her bring

them up, especially as she was nearly middle-aged herself. Chinese Lady would have rebutted any suggestion that Boots and Polly had passed the 'nearly' stage, that they were middle-aged now. To admit that would have meant she herself was old, and she resolutely refused to consider that as a fact. She didn't feel old and she was quite against looking old. Hence, she never wore granny bonnets, never sat with a shawl around her shoulders, never neglected her appearance or allowed herself to droop.

While Rosie's husband, Captain Matthew Chapman, an engineer, was in Italy, where the blessed war had been going on for ages, Boots's son Tim, who was one of them fighting Commanders - Chinese Lady meant Commandos - well, he was in hospital, recovering from a badly wounded arm. He said he'd been lucky to keep it, considering an Army surgeon wanted to chop it off and display it as a warning to the Army not to take the mickey out of German soldiers by waving at them, since they shot first and asked questions afterwards. Tim was married to Felicity, who'd been blinded in an air raid while on leave from the ATS, poor woman. And of all things, she was actually going to have a baby. Chinese Lady worried about how a blind mother could cope with an infant. Tim said she was going to manage by touch and feel, but Chinese Lady placed more faith in the fact that as Felicity was living with Rosie, her best help would come from Rosie.

Boots's other daughter, Eloise, an officer in the ATS, had just been moved to an Army supply base in the south of England. Mr Finch, Chinese Lady's husband, said the supply bases were helping to feed weapons and equipment to the Allied forces presently fighting the Germans in Normandy. Eloise's husband, Colonel Lucas, was out there, with the Army, and Chinese Lady wondered how long it would be before he got badly wounded too.

As for Lizzy and Ned's elder son, Bobby, no-one had seen him or his young French lady, Helene Aarlberg, for ages.