



Whirl of the Wheel

Catherine Condie

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Chapter One: An unwelcome encounter

Connie stretched her arms, her gaze meeting with the plume of white-grey smoke curling from their kitchen chimney.

‘Race you home!’ she yelled into the wind.

Charlie-Mouse tore away towards the old house, whipping up a whirl of grass cuttings, twigs and leaves, and without even a glance behind.

‘Run around the tree!’ Connie shouted.

Charlie-Mouse reached out, grabbing the trunk of an apple tree. ‘I’ll make it . . . at least three . . . times round,’ he called.

Connie brought her jazzy coloured wheelchair to a halt.

Her brother grinned, chest heaving. ‘Beat you . . . by miles,’ he said. ‘Don’t tell me . . . grass too . . . bumpy?’

Connie smoothed her shock of golden hair and rolled her rainbow bracelet back in place.

‘You’re *so* sad and immature, Charlie. You always say that. Anyway, you were ahead from the start!’

Charlie-Mouse leaned over, resting his knobbly elbows on her shoulders and bending to her ear. ‘Then you should always be *prepared!*’ he whispered, and jumped away.

Straight into the path of the gangliest boy in class.

Connie’s insides crawled as the boy Malcolm Mollet lurched past them to hook a yellow notice onto the swirls of their back gate. He forced his sneeze all over it as if to cement it there, then turned round and smirked. ‘Mister Charlie *Boring* Mouse wants to know what this says?’ he crowed.

‘Not particularly,’ muttered Charlie-Mouse.

‘Betcha do.’

Malcolm Mollet faced him square, taunting with a crooked smile. ‘I’m gonna tell ya anyway. We’re gonna smash it all up!’

‘Smash all what up?’ demanded Connie.

He spun with a menace in his eyes. ‘Your house.’

She followed his finger in disbelief. Claybridge leaned out to them, its peg-tiled roof climbing and falling along the length of the dwelling. She laughed. ‘Don’t be mad!’

‘Suit yourself,’ said Malcolm, twisting his nose away.

‘You *are* joking aren’t you?’ she said. ‘They’d never allow it! It’s over 300 years old. It’s got history and it’s . . .’ She pulled at the pendant around her neck.

‘You are *so* wrong!’

‘We can, and we are. So there!’ Malcolm struggled with an asthmatic cough, swinging his body back and forth on the pillar of the Victorian lamp post. ‘And your stupid treehouse, Dracula’s Castle or whatever you call it – that’s coming down too.’

‘You idiot!’ said Charlie-Mouse, pinning one of his solid stares straight into Malcolm Mollet’s small eyes. ‘You don’t know *what* you’re talking about.’

‘Read it yourself, *Boring*, and wait and see,’ threatened Malcolm. ‘My old man’s got the bulldozers lined up to flatten the lot. Then he’s going to put stacks of new houses all over the top.’

Flicking over and over at his ash-blond fringe, the boy turned to go. He spat

in the direction of the house and stalked off along the ruts on the muddy side of the path.

‘You’re disgusting!’ Connie shouted after him.

Corberley City Council

Notice of Receipt of Planning Application

Provision of new housing on the site known as Claybridge Farm

Demolition of the aforementioned house and outbuildings . . .

As she read further, panic burned in the pit of her stomach, firing up to launch an attack on every strand of her twelve-year-old body. *This is a mistake. No, don’t cry – whatever you do, don’t cry.* She tensed up to fight it off and, breathing hard, held onto her tears and clenched her teeth. She tucked her hair firmly behind her ears and flashed her brother a determinedly explosive look.

‘This time the stick insect has gone too far,’ she said. ‘It’s the meanest trick of all.’

Chapter Two: The next move

Connie's mum flustered around the kitchen, her soft olive complexion blotched with pink. 'There's been a mix-up with the lease of the house – something to do with the sale of the farmland, the war . . . and the church no longer has control,' she said, bending to open a bottom cupboard. 'The solicitors tried to help but things were messy . . . and we've decided the house is far too grand for us anyway.'

'That can't be the reason,' Connie snapped. 'We belong here. Dad's work is here. We can't let those creeps get the better of us!' Her staccato breaths shortened with increasing desperation, her bright blue eyes clouding. She stopped. The silence bit into her anger and the words spilled out – 'We're not leaving the village are we?'

'No, we're not leaving the village – that's the blessing at least,' sighed her mum. And she began to talk at greater speed, as if her words protected her. 'The vicarage can go anywhere, as long as your father goes with it. The good news is we have the keys to Number 25, on the corner. It's nice enough – plenty of space. We'll start moving as and when.' She turned her face and started to sort kitchen utensils into large plastic boxes.

As and when! She meant right away by the looks of it.

Connie left her wheelchair and moved to a kitchen chair. Her mum's face crinkled. A hand whisk clattered to the floor as they held each other tight.

'Hey, hey.' Her mum spoke softly into her shoulder. 'This isn't my strong, courageous girl is it?'

Charlie-Mouse fixed his eyes downward as he stood flexing his calf muscle and kicking his foot to dent the leg of the kitchen table. 'Unbelievable,' he said. 'I wouldn't mind so much if it were a case of someone else moving in. But this is mega bad.'

'Jim,' Connie's mum called out. 'Do come and see the children.'

A flurry of sound, like that of distant voices, nestled with the creaks and murmurings of the old house, and the solid beat of her dad's footsteps echoed on the stone floor of the hall corridor.

Dad pushed open the door. His face matched the grey of his beard, his forehead fixed in furrows from trained and concentrative thought.

'Ah.' As he stretched out his hands towards her, the furrows relaxed a little. 'You know, you two – it's not all bad. At least they can't knock down head office,' he said, motioning at the church.

'But it *is* all bad,' answered Connie. 'It's a total disaster. I can't believe they're allowed . . .' She rapped her knuckles on the tabletop, giving a glare that demanded some sort of resolution from her dad's tired eyes.

It didn't come.

'I know, Darling. It's difficult to understand – even for me. I've asked for divine intervention, left a fair few messages, but no one's come back to me yet,' he joked.

She couldn't utter a sound in return. She picked at the stitching on her pink-and-white-striped shorts, and glared watery-eyed at the quarry tiles on the floor until they submitted to double vision.

A sharp knock at the back door threw her thoughts back together.

'Oh, Wendy, so good of you to come,' said her mum, brushing her hands over

her eyelids and lashes to greet her friend and neighbour with a polite kiss on the cheek.

‘Not at all,’ said Wendy. ‘Afternoon Vicar – sorry if it’s a bad time. Hello Connie. Hello Charlie. I had to come . . . Mollet’s plans are the talk of the village.’

‘Sadly,’ said her mum. ‘So very sadly.’ She gestured for Wendy to take a seat and started to fill the kettle. ‘Tea?’

‘Please,’ said Wendy. ‘Blueberry, if you have some.’

The water on the bottom of the stainless steel kettle sizzled on the Aga.

‘I’ve a special supply, especially for you,’ answered her mum. ‘You know that.’

Wendy twirled her layered skirt over the empty chair seat next to Connie and sank on top of it. The skirt drifted down after her like a silk parachute, throwing up a powerful aroma of blueberry burst body lotion that swelled in Connie’s nose.

Don’t get too close to the Wendlewitch or she might turn you into a purple frog.

Connie gave half a secret smile. At school they called her Wendy the Wendlewitch. It suited her.

Connie looked upon the Wendlewitch’s shining, moon-shaped face and her sympathetic (almost purple) eyes. The woman’s chestnut hair jumbled out from a tie-dyed cotton hairband that matched the deepest purple hue in her clothing. She had a good aura about her . . . if she were a witch.

‘Anything I can do to help,’ said their guest, reaching one of her clay-spattered hands to Connie’s forearm and sparking a static shock. ‘You only have to ask.’

Connie shook her head but willed her to turn Malcolm Mollet and his dad into a pair of frogs.

‘How about helping us to pack?’ said her mum, with a wry smile.

‘No dear, that’s *not* the spirit,’ said the Wendlewitch, raising her hands in some sort of a mini-trance. ‘There are some great vibes about.’ She swirled her head wildly before whipping open her eyes. ‘Mind you, I do have a good supply of cases back at the pottery.’

Her mum almost laughed. ‘I suppose we could do with some more. I’ll send the children over after six.’

‘It’s not a defeat just yet. We’re not going to let Mollet win this, are we?’ The Wendlewitch leaned in closer. ‘Not with the history of this place.’

Her mum pursed her lips.

‘My dear – things are never as bad . . .’

Connie lost track of their conversation as it drifted to the subjects of objections and planning committees. Wishing for a miracle, she fell deeper and deeper into a daydream, savouring the wonderfully satisfying image of Malcolm Mollet transforming from a human stick insect into a plump purple frog.

Chapter Three: Packing cases, pots and purple tea

Six o'clock had come and gone when they arrived at the pottery to collect the cases.

Connie's eyes jumped from the window display of jugs, bowls and the scattering of stilled moths and dead flies, to the Wendlewitch leaning out above with her purple mobile against one ear and her hair harassed by the afternoon breeze.

'The door's open – I'll be right down,' the Wendlewitch called, closing up with a flash of purple-painted nails.

'Come on, Charlie-Mouse,' encouraged Connie. *'Push me in.'*

Her nervousness tugged inside her chest, much as it did when she came here as a small child, clinging to her parents' sides and feeling their chat thud back and forth across the scary witch's cavern.

She shuddered. The room hummed with the same mystic curiosity – from the crouching blue and gold spotted china cats eyeing her from a top shelf, to the odd crowd of old and dented copper kettles and the collection of dusty antique fire screens cluttering the chimney breast at the far end of the room.

And *so* many pots – old pots crammed full of tools, new pots to be painted, pots waiting to be fired, and pots ready to sell. Pots of all shapes and sizes, in peculiar passions of purple and blue, teetering expectantly on every available surface.

'You wait here while I search for those cases,' said the Wendlewitch, stooping to the floorboards and shuffling a gathering of pencils, pens and brushes into her skirt. She delivered them onto a thick spread of sun-curved notes and scraped a heavy wooden stool with carved lion's feet away from her potter's wheel to make way for Connie's chair. *'You can give her a whirl—'* she said, idly twisting the wheel to-and-fro. *'She won't bite.'*

When the Wendlewitch let it go, the old wheel inched its way to a stop in its battered wood frame. Connie saw how it slotted into a modern construction of pinewood and metal. Wires trailed beneath, and disappeared into a switchbox at knee level, then to a floor pedal like the treddle her mum used on her electric sewing machine.

Persuasion sparkled from the Wendlewitch's eyes, and she proceeded to drop a ball-sized lump of wet brown clay into Connie's open hands.

The soft mass glooped as Connie passed it palm-to-palm. Sort of clammy. Sort of slimy. She curbed a serious urge to squeeze, to see the stickiness worm through the gaps. Reluctantly she cupped it into a firm ball, cradling it with her slender fingers, not wanting to let go.

'Cool,' said Charlie-Mouse. Sitting with his chin balanced in his hands at the adjoining worktable, he had that look, as if he were about to set off one of his badly staged throat-clearing fits to put her off.

Connie narrowed her eyes, *'Don't you dare,'* she mouthed, sensing the bite of clay in her mouth. But there was something else, and the feeling surprised her. It hit her with all the thrill of a fairground ride – the excitement and the fear pulling her chest tighter still.

The Wendlewitch gave the potter's wheel a helpful and determined spin using the tips of her ring-clad fingers. *'Ready?'* she asked.

Connie nodded. Throwing down her clay, she dipped her fingers into the water bowl. But as she drew them back to the wheel, a rush of air swirled out from its centre

and around her body. She forced her eyes from the mesmerising spin to fix upon the mystical outline of the Wendlewitch's face. Scattered particles of light teased the air about her into a haze.

In an instant of purple confusion, the Wendlewitch whirled out of view and her pottery workshop went with her.

A new atmosphere pervaded.

The musty smell of wood and chalk dust hit Connie's nostrils. She fell forward onto a sloped wooden desk, knocking hard into her funny bone.

'*What on earth . . . ?*' exclaimed Charlie-Mouse, his voice echoing around the empty room. He slid off the back wall and into a seat behind her, scraping hard at her combats. But she didn't move a muscle. She couldn't – even though her elbow ached madly and she wanted to shake away the pain ricocheting through her body. Neither could she make a sound – her mouth was sealed tight and her tongue glued to the back of her teeth. She moved only her eyes. Hanging portraits of kings, queens and prime ministers glowered back. The background scream of the overhead gas lighting, the whipping of the wind and the shrieks from outside added their challenges to her senses.

Stay calm, breathe, and relax. Everything's fine.

Someone came into the room. Startled, she nodded and smiled politely, clicking her heels in perfect time across the polished floor. The outside noise built to crescendo as the lady opened the door and blew sharply on her whistle. At once the shrieks fell and the playing children – with small boxes dutifully strung across their bodies – hurried into line. '*Be quick about it,*' the lady instructed.

The room filled – they moved along the lines of desks – shoes plain and practical, laced and buttoned, and polished in black or brown. Two to a bench seat – their backs a combination of coloured cardigans, pinafores, pullovers, shirts and tanktops.

'*Settle down please.*' The lady cleaned the blackboard with a damp cloth and swung it over to the dry side. She took up a chalk and headed, *Monday, 18th September, 1939.*

A half-breath warmed at Connie's neck as Charlie-Mouse stifled another gasp. He clenched his grip on her hair.

'Be calm and considered in your writing – your parents will expect it.'

The children dipped their inkpens. As they drew the pens across the page, the background hiss of silence changed its tone and the invasive sound of a low-altitude propeller aircraft took hold. A girl with bobbed auburn hair looked up with apprehension, only to be waved down by the lady with the chalk. '*One of ours,*' the teacher said.

'*Do something!*' hissed Charlie-Mouse.

'*I can't.*' Now Connie wanted to cry, or to laugh. Charlie-Mouse pulled harder at her hair. Her head was spinning . . . then she heard a clash of teacups.

Connie found herself back in the pottery, at the potter's wheel, and with her brother by her side.

Nothing had changed from the moment they had left, except that three steaming cups of strong smelling tea enticed her from the trolley and, strangely, she could still hear the sound of the propeller aircraft. It had followed them into the present day – its sound gradually melding with the quiet whirr and the click from the

wheel as it slowed to a stop.

‘Sssshh,’ breathed the Wendlewitch, with one artistic finger placed to her lips. ‘I have something to confess.’

Chapter Four: Of magic and history

‘*Ouch!*’ Connie howled, wincing at several sharp pulls to her temple as Charlie-Mouse released the final few strands of hair.

The Wendlewitch passed two cups of tea over the top of the potter’s wheel and took up her own. She crash-closed her eyelids and sipped. With a tilt of her head she swallowed, and appeared to stretch her thoughts to the top of the chimney breast. Connie fixed upon the flickering concentration in the mauve creases of her eyeshadow.

‘My oh my, and after all this time,’ the Wendlewitch muttered. ‘No wonder the whispers were spinning me a merry dance.’

‘Where did we go to?’ Connie demanded.

‘That’s for you to say, my dear.’

Connie sent the Wendlewitch her hardest stare. ‘You knew it would happen. You planned it. You wanted Charlie and me to spin the wheel!’

The Wendlewitch put down her cup and held up her hands in surrender. ‘Can you admit you wished for something extra special, in your heart, my dear?’

Connie thought of the house – her mother’s tear-stained face and her dad’s anxious expression. ‘Yes,’ she conceded.

A click sounded from one of Charlie-Mouse’s knees. ‘OK, so *are* you a witch?’ he said.

The Wendlewitch peered over the top of her purple-rimmed glasses then threw back her head, laughing. ‘Goodness gracious me, no, my dear! But you can call me the guardian of the wheel. And I suppose over the years some of her magic has rubbed off on me.’

The Wendlewitch cast her hand over the top of the potter’s wheel, picking up a bright purple flash of electrostatic energy and drew it through the air with her fingertips. Everything around her jumped to life – the wood in the woodstove burst into flame, the copper kettles steamed, the pencils, pens and brushes danced themselves into an empty pot, and the spotted cats began to play.

‘None of it’s very . . . funny . . . whoa . . .’ Charlie-Mouse said, backing into a pile of packing cases.

Connie kept one hand gripped to her wheelchair and grabbed his T-shirt to pull him forward.

‘Not funny,’ said the Wendlewitch, clicking her fingers. ‘Useful, maybe.’ The purple glow about her dimmed and all fell still.

The last warming drops of radiance awakened Connie’s hopes. ‘We were here,’ she said, letting go of Charlie-Mouse. ‘In this room . . . and it was 1939.’

‘Aha,’ the Wendlewitch replied. ‘When the world changed again and people were displaced.’

‘What has that got to do with anything?’ Charlie-Mouse said.

‘Sssshhh!’ said Connie, shoving her hand over his mouth.

‘My dears, your house is whispering of it too. What I can say is, not long into the war, the owners had to move. It was a standard military thing, they said. But the rumours spread fast.’

‘Rumours?’ whispered Connie. She caught sight of her mum collecting in the last of the washing. She pictured bulldozers advancing across the lawn with menacing

speed – it twisted her insides and stabbed at her heart. She tempted her fingers over the wheel. ‘Then we need to know what they were about.’

A look of fear folded its way into her brother’s expression. ‘Hang on. These things are written in record books, aren’t they?’

The Wendlewitch shook her head. ‘You would think so . . .’

‘No. The house is calling for help. We *have* to go back,’ said Connie.

‘But . . .’ said Charlie-Mouse.

‘But not today,’ said the Wendlewitch. ‘The wheel’s energy is truly spent – anything might happen. You sleep on it – we’ll meet again soon enough.’

Chapter Five: Rewind 1939

Claybridge Farm

Wednesday, 13th September, 1939

Dear Mummy and Daddy,

It is exactly as we remembered it. Claybridge Farm is so very big! Bert got lost when we played hide and seek yesterday. I found him in the end; he was in the attic room. He said he would like it for his bedroom when Auntie Evie moves her sewing machine and the trunks full of old clothes. (She says she is going to send the clothes to the Red Cross because then other people can use them.) Bert likes the view from up there, he says he gets a good look at the planes going over to the airfield at Castle Camps, but I'm more than happy to stay in the guest bedroom because it used to be yours. It has the highest ceiling I've seen. I sometimes have to pull the light cord over my head in the middle of the night because I don't know where I am. Bert always gets cross and turns the light off again. It's funny that you are not in the room next to me but I imagine that you are.

Thank you for our going-away presents. My lovely doll is sitting on my bedspread right now. Bert is delighted with his matchstick cannon. He keeps firing matchstick pieces along the windowsills and out of the window at Uncle Geoffrey.

Daddy, I hope you have done your packing. Please write to us soon because we want to know what you are doing and where you are sleeping. I hope there isn't going to be any bombing or fighting where you are.

It is quite exciting here. We started school this week. Miss Regent is an excellent teacher. She is kind and funny, and sometimes strict! She lives in the village too, so Auntie Evie says.

Auntie Evie is going to teach us some first aid. She wants to make sure that everyone in the village knows what to do in case of an emergency. I'm quite glad she is a nurse.

We miss you loads and loads and will write as often as we possibly can.

Lots of love from Kit and Bert xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

BON VOYAGE DADDY !!!!

P.S. Daddy, Bert has drawn you a picture of the view from the attic room to take with you. You can see the whole village from up there.

P.P.S. Mummy, Bert says please could you send his slippers. They are at the back of his wardrobe.

Chapter Six: In Dracula's Castle

A cloud haze covered the morning sky and the sun strained to break through. As Connie tapped a mass of wartime search words into her laptop, a wet and sticky paper pellet shot through the open window of the large treehouse, landing between the keys.

'I don't know how he even dares!' she seethed. 'He wants attention – he doesn't get enough of it at home.' She poked her scowling sun-freckled face out of the window to see Malcolm Mollet's lanky figure scuttling off down the public pathway towards the pottery. 'Ugh, *so vile!*' She screwed up her face harder. 'I feel sorry for the Wendlewitch. Fancy having *him* as a nephew.' Piercing the sticky pellet with a pencil, she huffed and shook it violently out of the gap it came through.

She froze. Malcolm Mollet's dad was parading his awkward six-foot figure up their bricked garden path. She watched him wander along the back of the house, checking his designer suit every now and again in the window panes. 'They're not in,' she said, in a harsh whisper. 'Go away.'

But Malcolm Mollet's dad didn't go away. It seemed he wasn't bothered whether there was anyone in or not. As the church clock chimed he began to nose around the outside of the house, making scribblings in a large black portfolio. Drawing out an enormous tape measure, he trounced over lawn and shrub beds to get from one side of her dad's beautifully kept garden to the other. He shoved his file onto the side of a large terracotta pot brimming with lavender and extracted his mobile phone, wobbling as he stood with one polished toe resting on their doorstep. 'Is that the planning office? Good, yes. No time to chat – take this down,' he said. 'Forty houses. Terraced. Courtyard gardens. *No, no, I've changed my mind – fill in the stream and make it eighty. Scrap the courtyard gardens, just give them an outside cupboard for a dustbin – we don't want the new residents to leave a mess.*' Malcolm Mollet's dad tossed his head towards Dracula's Castle. Connie fell back from the window. 'Shame about the church,' he continued, giving its patchworked tower a torrid glance. 'It's always in the way. But I'll pray for it to fall down.' He snorted a laugh before regaining his self-control.

Connie's eyes widened until they moved no more. She put her hand over her mouth to stop herself from calling out.

'Perfect business strategy – we are to be congratulated.' Malcolm Mollet's dad snapped his phone shut and flicked again at his perfectly plucked moustache. '*Out with the old and in with the new, lots of money for me and you!*' he crooned in a cringeworthy caterwauling of tunelessness, and disappeared around the corner.

Connie groaned. 'He thinks he's won.'

Mollet the Wallet strikes again.'

'This is no time for jokes, Charlie,' she said, pushing her laptop into a bag and thrusting it at him.

'Let's put it off a bit longer.'

'*No!* It's late enough,' she called.

She slid down the ramp in defiance of her weak leg muscles. She hadn't forgotten the ladder burn on her hands and knees from the last time they raced each other down. Her hands had stung every time she turned her wheels.

This time, the Wendlewitch didn't lean out of her top window. They waited for

several minutes but nobody came.

‘Look, it says it’s open,’ said Connie. ‘It’ll be OK.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘Come on, Charlie – where’s your on-field courage now?’

She flung the pottery shop door wide open and wiggled her nose at the smell of blueberry burst body lotion. It drew her right across the room, her wheels hardly making a sound on the old boards. She looked fearfully at the laden shelves climbing upwards and over her head. The flickering turquoise in the eyes of the china cats made her jump. ‘Oh,’ she exclaimed, pushing Charlie-Mouse ahead.

To her shock, he knelt on the lion stool, gripped the wheel with both hands and started using it as a steering wheel.

‘Dodgems,’ he said, forcing a grin.

She slapped her hands on his. ‘Time travellers don’t do dodgems. Be sensible,’ she hissed.

He huffed. ‘All right, which way does it spin?’

‘Anti-clockwise of course. Use the motor.’

He put his foot on the pedal. ‘Bet nothing happens.’

The wheel started circling and Charlie-Mouse pressed his foot all the way down. Connie shuddered as its magical energy began to encompass her body.

Chapter Seven: The kitchen front

*Claybridge Farm
Saturday, 11th May, 1940*

Dear Mummy,

We bought sweets with our ration books yesterday. It was quite exciting. I haven't eaten them all yet. We are having a competition to see who can save the most sweets for the longest time. I am not doing as well as Bert! Uncle Geoff told us that even Princess Elizabeth has a ration book! I wonder if she has competitions with Princess Margaret. Bert says he's going to buy hundreds and thousands next time because they'll last longer. I'm not sure I will, I much prefer pear drops. I wouldn't mind finding out whether or not Princess Elizabeth likes pear drops.

We have been helping in the gardens, converting some of the rose beds into vegetable patches. I planted onions and radishes. Bert planted runner beans. Uncle Geoff didn't risk potatoes this year; he is using the fields for wheat and barley. He is hoping for a good supply of apples and damsons from the orchard. So are we.

There's been talk in the village about a Local Defence Volunteers group. It will be a mini army, I think, and will make us all feel safer. Bert wants to join but he is too young.

Lots of love from Kit xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

P.S. Some important visitors came here yesterday. They all wore uniforms and badges and arrived in several big cars.

Summer 1940

Chapter Eight: 'Spitfire Summer'

The outdoors rushed at her, crashing into her face and over her bare knees. She opened her eyes to see a surprisingly more fragile Claybridge reaching out through the heat haze – its walls paled, windows darkened. The door to the kitchen tipped open and a warm wafting of baking and a comforting clink of china brought life to her senses.

Her eyes drifted past Charlie-Mouse to follow the long winding driveway to the road – a collection of barns and a cart-shed confused her. She looked for the pottery shop. 'Thank goodness,' she said, releasing her brother's damp hand from hers. She pulled her wheelchair back, and tried to relax from the tension stressing her from head to toe.

'Scary,' Charlie-Mouse whispered. 'I mean more than before.'

'Sssh,' she said.

Through a low stile, not far away, a boy and a girl of about her age lazed on the soft grass. The boy rolled over and looked at the sky. The girl she recognised from the schoolroom pored over the front-page of the newspaper, her bobbed auburn hair dropping over her face.

'France falls, now the battle for Britain,' the girl said aloud. She folded up the newspaper with a sigh. 'Whatever is going to happen?' The girl sat up. 'Hello there!' she cried in welcome delight. 'Wait, I'm coming over.' She grabbed the paper and her gas mask box. 'Have you come from abroad?' She looked them up and down with clear uncertainty.

In a worrying moment, Connie straightened the hem of the blue lycra T-shirt she was wearing. 'Er, yes, no, well it's the latest fashion . . .' she said, thinking of her cousins. 'Er . . . in Canada.'

The girl in red and white skipped with delight. 'How lucky to go to Canada. I've never been on a liner.'

Charlie-Mouse swayed uneasily.

The girl talked on merrily. 'We don't know anyone here yet, apart from Uncle Geoff and Auntie Evie, that is. Do you know them? We've been evacuated from North London. We were so lucky to come together. 'Our whole school has been evacuated to Dorset. Mummy thought about it but Auntie Evie wouldn't hear of us going. So *here we are*. Are you thirsty . . . there's apple juice in the larder.' She climbed through the stile, the pleats of her cotton skirt blowing in the breeze.

The boy in long shorts jumped to his feet.

'They've been abroad,' said the girl.

'Good show,' he said, offering his hand. 'I'm Albert Arthur Tyler, Bert for short, and this is Kathleen Rose, my sister.'

'Do call me Kit,' the girl invited, her red hair ribbon shining.

Connie offered her hand. 'I'm Connie and this is Charlie although everyone calls him Charlie-Mouse.'

'A school joke,' Charlie-Mouse explained.

'He's not a mouse, as you can see!' said Connie, raising her eyes to meet his.

Kit smiled – her face animated with interest and her eyes alive. Bert mirrored her fun, standing as tall as Charlie-Mouse but a contrast in looks. Bert's porcelain skin shone brighter than any boy's she had ever seen, and he didn't have that all-together

serious expression like Charlie-Mouse often did.

‘You will stay awhile, won’t you?’ Kit continued. ‘We’ll get that drink.’

She took hold of Connie’s wheelchair by the handles. ‘I know a boy in our street at home but his wheelchair doesn’t look as handy as this. In fact I’m not sure where he is right now. Do *you* know, Bert? He might be in Dorset. I do hope he’s OK.’

‘I’m sure he’s fine,’ nodded Bert. ‘His mother went too.’

‘Yes, you’re right.’ Kit opened her arms and surprised Connie with a flourishing embrace. ‘Well, this is certainly the nicest surprise we’ve had for absolutely ages,’ she said.

Connie’s heart pattered as they went into the cool of the kitchen. The array of scones and biscuits on the cooling trays along the counter set her mouth watering. She turned her face from one wall to the other – the room had hardly changed – the glass-moulded lampshade, the light switches, the colour of the doors, and even the chairs under the kitchen table stood out with haunting familiarity.

‘Hello,’ Auntie Evie said, glancing curiously at the top of Charlie-Mouse’s head.

Her brother made a quick attempt to flatten his spiked hair.

Auntie Evie dropped the heavy glasses from her face to hang over her bosom and washed her hands before going into the larder. She reappeared smiling with a large jug of juice – her fresh-featured face and smooth apple-rosy cheeks aglow. Her wavy hair – the same auburn shade as Kit’s – was tied loosely behind. Her patterned dress was buttoned and simple, and covered on top with a sleeveless housecoat. Her dark shoes laced and her legs bare.

‘This is what’s needed, isn’t it,’ she beamed. ‘I’m expecting Uncle Geoff to come in soon – we’ve things to talk about.’ Her cheeks dimpled with anxiety then bloomed once again. ‘I’ll bargain he can smell fresh-baked biscuits from five miles.’ She smiled as she poured. ‘So what have you got planned for this hot afternoon? Something cooling?’

‘We could go to the stream,’ Kit said. ‘Now that we have such good company.’

‘Sounds the best idea of all. You can ask your uncle to help you find the fishing nets.’

‘That’s a *perfect* plan,’ Kit said.

Connie only smiled while her insides churned – she wasn’t sure they should go too far away.

As her eyes adjusted to the shade of the barn, Connie made out several baskets of plums laid out on a stony earth floor adorned with stray lengths of straw. Sunlight filtered like golden raindrops through the wooden rafters, creating shimmering pools of light. Gradually a large mound of straw loomed into view.

‘Look out!’ Kit shouted, as someone tumbled over the top of the mound and landed with a bump at Connie’s feet.

Bert pulled the straw from the collar of his blue cotton shirt and ruffled his light brown curls to get rid of the bits. Connie ducked her head to hide her amusement.

‘See any nets on yer way down?’ chuckled Uncle Geoff.

Bert straightened up and brushed dust from his bare shins. ‘Yes, Sir,’ he said, with a wink.

Uncle Geoff took off his hat to reveal a kindly smile on a face crazed by the sun. Stretching out a browned arm to reach a collection of nets, he unlooped a length of rope and lowered two small pails. ‘Yer set,’ he said, ‘Apart from one thing. I’ll get some spare Mickey Mouse masks – they’re all I ‘ave I’m afraid.’ He disappeared and returned a few moments later with two small cardboard boxes. ‘Want ‘em back mind, they belong to the school.’ The man retrieved a sturdy black bicycle from the shadows. ‘So many comings and goings,’ he sighed, and put on his hat.

‘Follow me!’ called Bert.

Charlie-Mouse gave Connie a lasting look, then ran after Bert at speed through a scattering of geese and ducks, with a sleek black Labrador in tow.

‘Let them go,’ laughed Kit.

It was far too sticky to follow at any other pace than slow. Kit opened the gate and they started to brush through the grasses in the direction of the stream. Warm summer scents swirled through Connie's throat as she wheeled through the turning stalks. Insects jumped, spiders scurried, flies hovered and invisible grasshoppers gently ground their back legs. The sun powered onto her forearms and pulsed her mind with questions she wanted to ask.

‘I think I saw you in school,’ she said.

‘Are you joining us?’ Kit said. ‘How lovely to hear it. I’ll introduce you.’

They crossed a dusty boundary, emerging on shorter, greener meadowgrass. Connie spoke again. ‘Do you think you’ll be staying at Claybridge for long?’

‘Gosh, we don’t know,’ Kit replied. ‘It depends how the war is going. We’ve been told to expect more bombing – they hit Norwich last week and that’s the frightening thing. Some of the evacuees come from the centre of Norwich. Teddy Bacon’s grandpa is lying seriously injured in hospital. Teddy’s so worried he keeps crying in class. It makes us even more nervous.’

‘It’s hard to be away from home.’

‘So very hard. We miss our parents terribly. Mummy writes every week and we write back. We write to Daddy too. But he can’t always reply. But he’s fine because we heard last week,’ she said, taking charge of Connie’s handles. ‘Are your parents far from here?’

‘Oh . . . I really don’t know.’

‘Oh you poor thing – in the services are they? It’s so difficult.’

‘It’s OK,’ Connie replied, knowing she owed Kit a more truthful explanation.

‘We have to keep on being brave don’t we, like our parents and everyone else in this war. Daddy said he thought it would take a few years to reach peace. Mummy said it wouldn’t be as long. It’s good we have Auntie Evie and Uncle Geoff to look after us, but I do miss my normal life and I do so want to go home . . .’ She drew a long breath and closed her eyes. ‘One day soon, for all our sakes,’ she murmured, leaving her special dream floating in the air.

Kit’s dream drifted into Connie’s consciousness, filling her heart with fear. For she too wanted to go home, and it scared her she didn’t know when that might be. Pressing on, she summoned her resolve from somewhere deep inside, pulling new

strength from the beauty around her. She curled to stroke the drying flower of a bee orchid peeping at her through the sweeping of grass. Quietly above, a formation of planes drew parallel lines across the vivid blue.

Now she heard Charlie-Mouse's laughter and the sound of stones landing in water. A more sudden bark and a sharp crack from behind jumped her head towards the house. Several vehicles turned their wheels along the driveway.

'Oh, it's a meeting, I think. They come and go quite often now,' explained Kit. 'I don't know who they are, and I don't think Auntie Evie truly knows either. If so, she doesn't say.'

Summer 1940

Chapter Nine: Secrets abound

'Oh fish, where are you?' Bert sang out, dragging Connie's attention from the driveway.

The boys braced the grassy bank looking into the sparkling water, and by the depth of it she knew the weather had been dry for a time.

Bert stripped off his shirt and jumped in. He stood motionless as his rough splashes turned to ripples and smoothed into the flow. He beckoned to Charlie-Mouse. *'Come in quietly and we'll catch them by surprise,'* he said.

Charlie-Mouse stretched his legs into the water. Connie saw by his grimace the cold bit cruelly into the backs of his knees.

'There!' Kit pointed. *'Sticklebacks, and they're coming your way.'*

'They'll do,' said Bert, poising his net.

Out of nowhere, the black Labrador nudged past her, leaping carelessly into the stream.

'Hey!' Charlie-Mouse exclaimed. *'I'm soaked!'*

'He wants a game!' Connie replied. *'Can't you tell?'*

'Not now!' said Bert. *'He'll have to wait.'*

'Come on Solo,' encouraged Kit. *'You're not wanted.'* She found a stick and hurled it. Eagerly, the dripping dog clawed his way to the bank and chased over the meadow.

Connie settled herself in the casual shade of a weeping willow. She kicked off her pumps and stretched her toes to tickle them in the grass. Rhythmically with her heel, she smoothed a patch of thicker green grass growing close to the edge of the water. She welcomed the cool touch of the blades under her legs. *'It's so peaceful,'* she said, her words blending with the breeze, *'you wouldn't guess . . .'*

'That's the thing,' said Kit. *'At the moment it's peaceful, but you never know do you, there could be air strikes anywhere and at anytime. Gas attacks, Uncle Geoff says. I wouldn't want to be back in London right now either, but I do want to be with Mummy. She says we're better off here.'* She rattled her sandals to let the grassy bits fall onto the water. Connie watched as the flecks moved with the flow, creating shadowy speckles on the gravel bed of the stream. Kit spoke again. *'You know she's been sleeping in the underground – one of the safest places to shelter, some say. And I'm glad, but I worry about her catching a chill, even so. I tell Lucy, sometimes, late at night.'*

'Who's Lucy?'

'My doll,' she laughed. *'Mummy gave her to me as a going-away present – she's like a little sister to me and I tell her my worries about the war. It makes me feel better.'*

Both girls turned to lie over the waterside. Connie dipped the tips of her fingers. *'Where are your school friends now?'*

'My best friend Margerie was billeted to a family living north of Lyme Regis on the Dorset-Devon border. Mummy tells me the news. It was lovely at first, Margerie said, but now she is fed up with walking up and down the coast, and especially with the sight of the twisted coils of wire on the seafront. She wants to go home, and if you ask me I think her mother will collect her soon.'

'Can she go home?'

'There's nothing to stop her is there?'

Connie didn't know what to say. She didn't know the rules of evacuation, if there were any. Her knowledge of wartime life had its limits and she couldn't pretend she knew about the things going on around her. Butterflies danced in her stomach as she threw a small twig of willow into the water and watched it drift away under the brick-and-clay footbridge.

'Do you believe in magic?' she dared to ask. 'Real magic?'

Kit laughed. 'I believe in dreams coming true.'

'Have you ever dreamed what life might be like at another time?'

'I think I have wondered,' Kit answered. 'Yes, I suppose I do. I sometimes dream we are in the wrong time. That we'd been born long before the war. That we'd never left home. I sometimes dream that the newspaper headlines read that war is over and we have won. I imagine I can see Mummy holding the paper to show us, and it's as plain as day.'

'That's a good dream, and it'll come, I'm sure,' said Connie.

Kit started to pull strands of grass from a tussock. She built a small mound and covered it with daisies. 'My dream castle,' she laughed. 'I'll wish upon my dream castle.'

'And if you realised you could see life in another time, without dreaming?'

'Don't be silly,' giggled Kit. 'My goodness, to travel through time, that *would* be headline news. Even more than victory itself.'

Connie's fervent gaze had stopped her dead and she sat bolt upright, drawing both her hands up to her head and pushing her fingers into her hair. 'Do they believe it in Canada?' she asked, half laughing.

Connie's silence was potent. Kit reached out with a quivering arm. 'You're scaring me,' she said. 'You look so very serious.'

Connie unhooked her pendant and laid it in the palm of her hand.

For Connie, 22 October 1997

Kit gripped at Connie's hand.

'It's the day I was born.'

Kit sat back on her heels, her mouth gaping wide. 'But it's not possible. You haven't been born yet!'

'I'm not a *ghost* that's for sure. I am real. A hundred per cent,' Connie declared. 'Just like you . . .' She pulled a daisy and pushed it into the dream castle.

'Real? Who's *real*?' came a voice. Bert splashed down a pail of water.

'But . . . *how? How on earth . . .*' Kit stumbled, dragging her auburn hair behind her ears. Moisture glistened in her green-flecked eyes and rising to her knees she clutched at her brother's legs.

Connie watched her friends' emotions chase to keep up as she spoke of the magic of the potter's wheel, the Wendlewitch, and of a different time spent at Claybridge. Bert fidgeted, flitting his eyes between the circling fish and Charlie-Mouse. Whole tears clung in the corners of Kit's eyes, and when at last they began to tumble to wet the corners of her smile, Connie floundered. She hated herself for even thinking she were able to explain about Malcolm Mollet's dad, and bring yet another fear into their unstable world, right now. 'We need your help,' she said, when she could hold it in no longer. 'We have to find out what's happening here – it's *very*

important.’

The late afternoon sun stripped through the trees to dance across Connie’s face as she retraced her path over the shadow-draped meadow. Bert pointed to the two large cars starting up ahead – shrouds on their headlights and white paint along the edges of the wings. A man of imposing stature in military uniform nodded the peak of his cap in the direction of the front door of the farmhouse. He paused to light up a cigar, looking upwards to see the profile of an aircraft marking a trail across the early evening sky. He got into the back of the car and the vehicles moved off.

Once again, the dark green propeller aircraft drilled into her thoughts – it passed overhead, seeming to draw a shroud of dark cloud over the rich mauves above her. A chill took to the air. Connie rubbed at the goose bumps on her arms but as she raised her head, her senses swirled out of control. She thought she heard a girl’s voice but by now she was unable to place it.

Chapter Ten: Missing you

*Claybridge Farm
Tuesday, 17th September 1940*

Dear Mummy,

It's raining again and I feel many more miles away from you than usual. I can't tell you how relieved we all were to hear your voice. We miss it very much, and Daddy's too. Kit cried when you said that our street had been one of the lucky ones.

After your telephone call, Auntie Evie told us how Mr and Mrs Dougan's house near the docks had disappeared in the smoke. I hope they are being looked after. How lucky nobody was hurt when the bombs blew the windows out at Buckingham Palace.

Kit says "thank you" for knitting her some new gloves. They arrived yesterday. Thanks very much for mine too. We will need them soon. We've already been busy helping Uncle Geoff to store everything for Winter.

We are having a good time back at school but we still have home work to do. This isn't so good.

Hope you and Granny are well. Please tell us when you hear again from Daddy. He hasn't been able to reply to us yet.

We hear the planes at night and pray that you'll be all right.

Love from Bert xxxxxx

Chapter Eleven: Back to earth

Something pulled them through the twilight chill and into the stuffy heat of the pottery shop. The noise of the aircraft dropped away and she found herself following the final few turns of the potter's wheel before it stopped dead.

'Oh no!' Connie said, aghast. 'It's too early to be back.'

Charlie-Mouse sat entranced. She pinched him. 'Charlie! Are you even listening to me? Spin it again!'

He shook his head. 'We don't know what'll happen. We could end up anywhere.'

'But we need to be *there*,' she shouted. She put her hands up to her cheeks – heat burning through the gaps between her fingers. 'We've only got until . . .' Clay dust teased inside her throat and she coughed until she hurt. 'Oh . . . why do you *always* spoil things?'

A hush fell between them and the cluttered room closed in on her. The sun-drenched china cats looked as if they would leap straight down into her lap.

'We can wait,' Charlie-Mouse said.

'I've changed my mind,' she growled. 'Right now I'm hot, tired and I need a drink.'

'Then I vote we go home.'

'Well it won't be for *tea*.' She pushed her watch in front of her brother's face. 'No time has passed at all!'

They made their way along the shaded pathway. Connie tickled her toes in the itchings of grass wedged into her pumps, Kit's pretty voice replaying in her mind. So immersed was she that she nearly collided with two removal men coming around the corner with a large piece of furniture. She reversed hurriedly, knocking into the notice on the gate. 'Good,' she said.

Mum looked more cheerful, meandering between assortments on the lawn. 'Sally Army collectors,' she explained. 'Taking away a few things that won't fit in. Someone will want them. Now where was I?' She pointed at the piles. 'Charity, rubbish, recycling, and Wendy will have that I'm sure,' she said, putting down an oversize copper kettle. 'I should have done this years ago. I don't know quite why we've been keeping all this stuff.'

'Because it might be useful some day?' offered Connie.

'It might be, or it might not – I have a new philosophy anyway,' said her mum.

'Don't tell me,' said Connie. '*Out with the old, in with the new?*'

'Precisely.'

A good attempt at putting on a brave face

Her mum bent to kiss her forehead. 'I'll bring you a cold drink and a piece of flapjack,' she said. 'Your dad's getting some papers together for the planning office. In case. But we're running out of days.'

Connie got out of her wheelchair and sat with her head resting against the tree trunk at the foot of Dracula's Castle. She could hear her dad in the study, rustling papers, but she couldn't see him. The dark emptiness of the room lunged at her through the open French doors. She strained her eyes further. Charlie-Mouse's rugby trophies and her riding rosettes had been tidied from the mantelpiece and her dad's

disordered piles of books and stacks of papers were gone, replaced with a neatly positioned collection of packed boxes beneath the fireplace and around the desk.

One of her earliest memories was of crawling in from the garden to look at the shining brass microscope on the enormous study desk. How exciting it was when her dad opened the bottom drum to reveal a secret compartment of homemade slides.

‘The sign of an enquiring mind,’ the vicar said to his children. ‘Shall we see what’s inside? *Bat Hair*,’ he read, taking out the first one. ‘Or there’s *Bee’s Wing* and this one is *Horse Hair*. Which do you fancy first?’ Four-year old Connie placed them on the heavy writing desk. ‘This one,’ she said. Their dad put *Bat Hair* on the circular plate under the lens and tilted the mirror to catch the light.

‘There it is,’ Charlie-Mouse said. ‘Looks fluffy.’

‘Poor, poor bat!’ Connie remarked and crawled underneath the desk. And while her brother looked at the slides, she happily slipped her tiny hand behind the drawers and into all the darkest nooks and crannies to explore for hidden treasure. She found a shiny coin. ‘Daddy, Daddy, let’s put this under the magnifying glass,’ she said, emerging with renewed excitement to sit on top of the desk and look into the microscope.

Now the microscope was packed, along with the trophies and the rosettes, and the desk surface was bare. She slipped off her shoes and closed her eyes – for a moment or two. The house whispered to her, and her mind started to play with the conversations she had shared with Kit, and with image of the two large cars pulling away from the driveway.

Chapter Twelve: Gathering pace

The next day she couldn't get Charlie-Mouse out of bed early enough. When at last she heard him thumping about, it sounded as if he were scrambling over an assault course.

Something made her look out of the kitchen window. She clasped her hand over her mouth. There was Malcolm Mollet climbing down from Dracula's Castle with a sleeping bag cast over one shoulder. She flung open the kitchen door and pushed herself onto the path.

'Hey!' she shouted. 'Get out of there, *now!*'

Malcolm turned his head but didn't connect.

'*What are you doing?* This is still *our* house, you know!'

Still no reply. Malcolm dragged the sleeping bag over the rosebeds, catching it on thorns as he headed towards the gate.

'Come back and explain! *Coward!*' she called out.

A mumble met her ears. 'Dad,' was all she caught.

'*Can you believe it!*' she said. She looked up at Charlie-Mouse's window. He stared down at her, and vanished.

The stairs clattered to the sound of his arrival.

'His dad might've chucked him out,' he said, scraping his chair to the table.

'I don't reckon,' Connie replied. 'He's all he has. Mrs Mollet got shot of them both.'

'OK so they had a fight about something and he crashed out here.' He crunched into his toast.

'Makes a change from the pottery,' Connie said. 'The Wendlewitch must be sick of him.'

'You're joking aren't you! He won't set foot inside. He thinks she's a total crackpot.'

'Then do you suppose he went home?'

'S'pect. He'll probably go and hang out at the green with his gang. Not that *they* like him either. They only stick with him because *their* dads worship *his* dad,' Charlie-Mouse sneered.

'Who told you?'

'I've heard it from the bus crowd. Will Long and those older boys dare him to be rude to everyone, then jeer behind his back.'

'That's a bit sad.'

'*He's* sad.' Charlie-Mouse tipped his orange juice into his mouth. 'But to be honest I don't give a stuff about any of them.'

Connie slammed the fridge door. 'Good, then you're ready to come with me,' she said.

The tang of hot blueberry tea tipped in and out of Connie's nose with the gentle gust circulating the maze of potted plants sitting on the floor of the conservatory at the back of the pottery shop. A peculiar purr curled around her head and was swallowed up into an enormous 'A . . . *tish* . . . *shoo!!*'

The Wendlewitch brought her purple handkerchief to her nose. 'Typical,' she complained, 'On a luddly suddly mornig.'

‘Can we get you anything?’ Connie asked.

‘Do, danks,’ replied the Wendlewitch. ‘I’ve taken a dose of lincludus and now I feel quite woozy.’ She tried to draw air through her nose, then fluttered her lids and exhaled as a dragon would breathe fire, sinking with a ‘pew’ into the cushions on her rattan sofa. Connie was sure she glimpsed a sweep of purple sparks following behind.

‘*Waid the hour the magig wanes, and time will brig you back again,*’ the Wendlewitch burred cryptically, waving her arm past the leaves of a gargantuan cheese plant towards the door to her pottery workshop.

‘Are you saying that’s how we come back?’ questioned Connie.

No answer returned – the Wendlewitch’s eyebrows twitched, her lids fluttered and a succession of lightly stuffed-up snores resounded.

‘*That* doesn’t seem very definite,’ said Charlie-Mouse. ‘I’m not sure if I trust this magic.’

Connie ignored him. She rolled her wheelchair wheels back and forth and pointed firmly at the door to the workshop.

There he was again! Malcolm Mollet with his sticky forehead and greasy nose splayed tightly on the window glass in front of her. He eyeballed her then pulled his face away leaving a larger and a smaller splodge. ‘Yuk!’ she exclaimed, hoping he might hear. The boy thrust his chin into the air. ‘Go home!’ she mouthed. Malcolm turned his head and disappeared out of sight. She huffed, edging up to the potter’s wheel. ‘Now keep close, Charlie,’ she said.

Chapter Thirteen: Christmas is coming

*Claybridge Farm
Tuesday, 17th December 1940*

Dear Mummy,

We have been spending the morning helping to paint the edges of the window glass with black paint and sticking on some more tape. Auntie Evie says that we need to make sure our blackouts are good because there are so many windows here. It was very funny, Mummy, Bert got his arms and his hair completely covered in paint and had to have a bath to soak for more than three-quarters of an hour. I didn't want to go in after him this time!

This afternoon we started to make some extra decorations for the tree. Auntie Evie gave us some coloured paper and scraps of material. I have sewn a star especially for you in case you can't come to see us next week after all. Uncle Geoff has dug the tree from the garden already and says he'll bring it inside tomorrow, a day earlier than usual. We can't wait!

Daddy wrote to us this week! He drew a beautiful picture of Father Christmas laden with a sack of presents. The woman at the Post Office was almost as excited as we were. We are taking it in turns to keep the letter by our beds. It's been the best time ever.

With lots and lots of love and Christmas kisses from Kit xxxxxxxxxx

P.S. I am so very thankful that Margerie has returned to Dorset. I think she will be pleased to be able to go to school again in the New Year.

P.P.S. Auntie E. has some important news to tell you when she telephones.

Winter 1940

Chapter Fourteen: Winter arrival

'Whoa!' Bert shouted out, careering into Connie at the bottom of the stairs. His Wellington boots went flying from his hands and into her lap. He straightened up, blinking his eyes from underneath a woolly hat and a fringe of curls. 'Hello stranger,' he said. 'Thought I wouldn't see you again.'

'Ditto,' she said, laughing with shock.

'Wow!' shivered Charlie-Mouse, his body quaking. 'I didn't . . . expect . . . *this*.'

'Come into the kitchen,' Kit said from the doorway. A look of motherly concern crossed her face and she relaxed her arm around him, pressing his loosely dressed figure into her duffle coat. 'Gosh, where *have* you been? It must be six months since.'

'But how can it have been?' Charlie-Mouse asked, his cheeks starting to redden. 'It's only . . .'

'It's nearly Christmas,' she said.

'*Christmas!*'

'And there's snow . . .'

'It came yesterday evening,' said Kit. 'We haven't been outside yet.'

'Time's moved on,' Connie said. 'In a single day.'

'We didn't tell a soul that you'd come,' Kit whispered. 'We knew you'd be back.'

'Did you?' Connie answered.

'We hoped,' Kit said.

'You faded into the dusk,' Bert said.

'The wheel pulled us back, we couldn't say goodbye,' Connie said.

'I called,' Kit said.

Connie pondered. 'I heard you.'

'The clouds blew over – it was as if you had never been.' Bert said.

'But we *were* here, weren't we?' Charlie-Mouse said.

Bert nodded. 'Four fish – remember?'

'Like yesterday,' said Charlie-Mouse.

Connie watched the snow stacking itself on every available surface. Tracks and footprints rose and fell as a web over the yard. Three cars waited – crouching, half-buried. Suddenly, Bert hurtled past. He stooped as he ran, casting snowballs back at Charlie-Mouse as he stumbled to do up his coat buttons. Charlie-Mouse ran for shelter around the back of the cars. Connie watched him take off again to follow Bert over the stile. She laughed, pulling one of Kit's bobble hats over her head and tucking in her hair.

Kit finished wrapping her scarf. 'Look at all this snow!' she said, pushing Connie across the yard to the stile. 'Makes you feel . . .' Her voice came through in muffled tones. She pulled the scarf away from her lips. 'Makes you feel safe from the enemy,' she said.

Her heart crushed with shame. She had almost forgotten the threat of the war. She waited – snow fell into the boys' footprints on the other side of the fence, then lifted over her in a fine spray. She turned her face away and followed the forlorn

contours of the snow-covered house. 'I've something to tell you,' she said.

'Then it's utterly disgraceful!' Kit's voice grew angrier as they took shelter in the barn doorway. 'That someone could even think of doing that to Claybridge.' Her scarf slipped – she grabbed at it and started to shake away the ice drops. 'They can't possibly take it away. Mummy and Auntie Evie grew up here. *Besides* . . .'

Connie ripped her eyes from her wheel tracks.

Kit pointed at the cars. 'The officials,' she said. 'I used to think they came from the airfield but Bert says they're from all directions – some from London.' Suddenly she looked as if she might cry – her lids and lashes flashing with snow crystals. 'I'm not sure I should say this,' she continued, her voice wavering. 'But they're setting it up right now.'

Shivers exploded inside Connie's chest. 'What . . . *what* are they setting up?' 'We're sworn to secrecy,' Kit whispered. 'And when I tell you, you must promise not to speak of it while you're here – if Mrs Pritchard ever got to know, it would be round the village in a flash.'

'I promise,' Connie replied, her heart pounding.

'Claybridge is to be used for special training,' she said.

The wind turned again and a flurry of excitement and hope flew straight at Connie with the wintry wet flakes hitting at her face and mouth.

'*Secret operations*,' Kit squeaked.

The mantle swirled and loose powder sprayed down from the barn roof. Connie fumbled at the collar of her coat, folding it over in an attempt to stop the snowflakes from slipping in.

'I heard Auntie Evie say they want agents to stay here as they wait to fly abroad,' Kit said.

'Out of Castle Camps?'

Kit nodded. 'I imagine so. Bert says they'll parachute into Europe from a Lysander because it's less of a target and the plane can land on rough ground.'

'Wow,' Connie said. 'I read of this.'

'And about Claybridge?'

'No.' Connie let her feet fall from her footrest.

Kit fell silent, then bubbled with excitement. 'So you'll have to tell . . .' She took off her hat and sparkled. 'Uncle Geoff has a letter from Whitehall – I caught a glimpse of it—'

'Do you mean that?'

'Of course. And we'll find it.'

Kit shook her auburn hair, as threads of voices weaved their way through the falling snow. Men in a mix of RAF uniforms and dark overcoats trudged across the patterns beneath their feet. They ushered the man in the peaked cap into his car.

Connie couldn't see clearly enough. And if the military officials did notice the girls in the barn, they didn't seem to show it. They wiped their headlamps, cleared their windscreens, and guided their cars silently away.

Winter 1940

Chapter Fifteen: The unexpected visitor

In the glow of the farmhouse kitchen, Connie's cheeks tingled with excitement and she started to wiggle her toes. She was enjoying the feeling of putting a warm cup to her cheek when the back door flew open and Uncle Geoff stooped in from the gloom – with a snowy Malcolm Mollet in tow. Charlie-Mouse and Bert followed.

How on earth . . . How could *he* be *here*? *He* was the cause of it all. How she wanted to blurt out the news to Charlie, but now she couldn't. Not with *him* here.

Malcolm's shivering face stared back. Was it Malcolm? Yes, she was sure of it – even with his dark-ringed eyes shallowed with tears and his nose rubbed to red-raw. The cold and the fear had buried into his complexion, making him look even more pale and pathetic.

'The dog found the lad shivering in school,' said Uncle Geoff. He stamped several times on the mat and bent to ease his feet from his wet and snowy boots. 'Wouldn't stop 'is barking 'til I went to see what it was 'e'd found. Staring out of the window at us, the boy was. 'Asn't said a word to me though.'

To Connie's surprise, Charlie-Mouse spoke up. 'He's with us,' he said.

'Decent clothes and a proper coat,' said Uncle Geoff. 'That's what 'e needs. *I* don't know, and on a day like today.' The man hung up his own coat and hat. 'Sit down lad. You look like you could do with some 'ot milk.'

Malcolm gave a nod amidst a stifling of sobs and a struggle to draw breath.

'There y'are,' said Uncle Geoff. 'Drink that and get back some of the colour. We must see about getting you into something warmer and off 'ome. Corberley, ain't it? Who are you staying with?'

Connie winced.

'We'll make sure he gets there,' Charlie-Mouse fired, breaking the silence.

Connie pitched a frown.

'Right y'are.' Uncle Geoff tutted as he pushed the kitchen door tight shut and steered the draught excluder over the gap with his foot.

Malcolm coughed his tears to a stop and jerked his head semi-upright. He lifted his fringe from his bloodshot eyes. Although he appeared to be looking on, he didn't talk. The farmer turned up the volume of the wireless broadcast and Malcolm listened.

' . . . and the Prime Minister finished his speech from the House of Commons by expressing gratitude on behalf of the Government to all those keeping the country running in these very difficult circumstances.'

'Cheer up lad, things aren't s'bad,' said Uncle Geoff, as the newsreader brought the bulletin to a close.

'Well *there's* good news for us all,' Bert said. 'Perhaps we can all go home soon.'

'Take each day as it comes, sonny – things change overnight and yer mothers won't want you in any danger, that's for sure.'

Malcolm stumbled over his words. 'Don't have . . . one.'

'Sorry lad, didn't mean to offend. If you've lost yer ma, I'm sorry for yer.'

'She's not . . . *dead* . . . she left.'

'There's no explaining some folks, ' said the farmer.

'Doesn't wanna know . . . s'what Dad says.'

‘Oh,’ said Charlie-Mouse. ‘It might not be like that.’

‘Malcolm rubbed at his mottled cheekbones and stared blindly.

‘But it ain’t your fault lad. Remember that.’

Connie studied Malcolm’s reaction. His streetwise arrogance was shot – he’d cried it away. He was trying to make sense of something that displayed no sense to him, including the man’s kindness.

Uncle Geoff patted Malcolm on the back. ‘It’s ‘igh time you got yourselves changed. *Off upstairs . . . go on, all of yer* – you’ll feel better after,’ he rallied. He fetched his hat and gloves from the hotplate. ‘I’ve errands to run.’

Malcolm stood alone near the top of the stairs. Looking at her. Wearing Bert’s shirt, pullover and trousers, he seemed different with his face washed and his ash-blond hair combed down.

‘I wanna go home,’ he said.

How can you say that to *me*?’ Connie replied.

‘I just wanna go home.’

‘*Well you’ll have to wait.*’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I can’t say because I don’t know.’

He held on tight at the banisters – his nerves pulsing in his forehead and she was taken aback by a momentary pang of sympathy. But still she didn’t like him.

‘You watched us, didn’t you!’ she said.

‘I had nothing to do. Dad threw a wobbly at me.’

‘Why weren’t you with your *big mates*?’

‘We were hanging out at the coffee cellar in Corberley – the manager phoned Dad, s’why he threw one.’

‘You mean you got chucked out the coffee shop then your mates ditched you.’

Malcolm slid his shoe up and down the edge of the runner on the floorboards.

‘So you followed us and spun the wheel,’ she drummed. ‘You realise if something goes wrong it’ll be because of *you*.’

‘You don’t . . . understand,’ he said, recoiling. ‘I’m meant to be back there . . . in town . . . with Mum . . . ‘til Friday.’

‘*So.*’

‘So,’ he said, pulling at his hair. ‘I didn’t wanna stay. I hate my mum even more than my dad. They both hate me.’

‘Then you don’t want to go home, do you!’ she shouted. ‘And they probably won’t miss you if that’s what you think.’

‘You hate me too.’

She knew how to reply to this one. ‘You don’t help yourself.’

‘I didn’t mean—’

‘You never do, do you.’

Malcolm put his hand towards his glistening eyes.

‘Tell me why I should feel sorry for you.’ she said.

‘I don’t want anyone to feel sorry for me.’

‘That’s all right then.’

She propped her elbows on the windowsill and cast her attention on the church. She calmed herself by imagining her dad down in the porchway, greeting the

villagers one by one as they arrived for Christmas service with a brushing of hats and a shaking of snowy umbrellas. 'If we're *here* we have to pull together,' she breathed into the window glass.

'What's here?'

'Christmas 1940.'

'This isn't a trick?' he spluttered. 'The war and everything?'

'No, it's very real.'

'And . . . *you* don't live here . . . the farmer does.'

'That's right. And Bert and Kit – they're all good people.'

'Meaning?'

'Nothing in particular.'

She meant everything in particular.

Malcolm let go of the banister and she resisted the sharp urge to move away from him as he came close. The boy bowed his head as he wiped away the condensation to see out of the window and warmed his wet palm on the radiator beneath.

'Perhaps things can make people change,' he said.

'Perhaps *things* can – like when they find themselves in strange places and can't do anything about it,' she replied.

The silence drifted like overpowering smog until the sound of a heavy wardrobe door being squeezed shut and the squealing of a cistern in the bathroom blew some of the atmosphere away. Connie pressed her nose harder against the window to see the time on the icicled church tower. Eleven forty-five.

Malcolm rubbed the window again. 'Never been in a church.'

Good job, she thought. 'Quiet, calm, and cold,' she said.

'*Boring.*'

'No, it's cool – you can see for miles at the top of the tower.'

Malcolm knocked into her shoulder as he attempted to pull at his fringe. 'If you say so,' he said, giving another sniff.

'I *can* get up there,' she asserted. 'If I want.'

'Yeah,' he replied. 'So, your chair downstairs?'

'I don't need it all the time, if I want to walk I use calipers.' She waited to see what he might say next.

'Some sort of hi-tech stuff it's built of, your chair?'

'Titanium – and I'm sure your dad could buy you one if you wanted.' Now she struggled hard against the guilt switching between her head and her heart.

'S'pose so . . .' He left a long pause. 'S'pose this is the best I can do,' he sniffed.

'The best for what?'

'To be interested . . . to make friends . . . if you wanna . . .'

Connie's ears tingled to the tips. She knew he was looking straight at her – she sensed his small grey eyes searching out her weakness and saw his outstretched hand from the corner of her eye. She hesitated. Maybe the stick insect deserved a chance – her dad would tell her so. She returned him a glance. 'It depends,' she said.

'Yeah, it does, doesn't it,' faltered the boy. He pulled back his hand, a meek smile curving into one sickly coloured cheek. 'I can try and make up for *things*. Then maybe we're quits?'

Connie turned away, picturing the fleet of trucks and bulldozers ploughing through to the house at speed. She blinked and the scene of destruction flipped from her mind.

‘Maybe,’ she said.

‘It’s not fair,’ Kit said, closing her bedroom door, ‘Uncle Geoff and Auntie Evie can’t use the whole house any more – and it won’t be long before we have to—’

‘They were here first thing,’ Bert said. ‘I watched from the orchard.’

‘*That’s* what you were doing,’ his sister said.

‘Once I climbed the tree, I couldn’t get down without being noticed. It was jolly cold.’

Kit’s dimples rippled into a half-smile. ‘So did you work out what they were talking about?’

‘Er, no,’ he replied.

‘Bet it was top secret,’ Charlie-Mouse joked.

Bert, Kit and Connie stared. He shuffled back. ‘What are you saying?’

‘That you’re right,’ Connie said.

‘They’re arranging a secret operation,’ said Kit, raising her finger across her lips. ‘It’s been so hard not telling.’

‘Secret agents,’ whispered Bert.

Charlie-Mouse’s jaw fell apart. ‘You’re kidding.’

‘I overheard Uncle Geoff,’ Bert said. ‘He sounded completely serious.’

‘What will you do?’ asked Charlie-Mouse.

‘Nothing,’ Bert replied. ‘Except move for a few months.’

‘It’ll be fine,’ Kit said. ‘And Mummy will help.’

‘If only Daddy knew – I want to write and tell him, but I can’t,’ said Bert.

All this time Malcolm Mollet had said nothing. Every now and again he squeaked his hand back and forth over the condensation on the window glass. ‘How come *we* don’t know all this?’ he said.

‘Perhaps some of us do, and have hidden it on purpose,’ Connie directed.

‘If you mean Dad . . .’ His voice was breaking up. ‘. . . if there’s any proof of it – we’ll have to . . . find it and take it back so that you can—’

Was she hearing him properly? She stared wilfully at the back of Malcolm’s drooping blonde head but he didn’t turn to her nor speak again.

Winter 1940

Chapter Sixteen: At the far end of the house

‘Coast is clear,’ Kit called.

Connie adjusted the gas mask box across her body and pushed herself down the long, narrow hallway, feeling the sideways shift of wheels as they crossed uneven flagstones. She touched her hand against the dark oak panelling as it gave way to a tall leaning window leaking a patch of much needed sunlight to a picture adorned with holly and ivy. An icy draught chided by.

‘Be quick everyone,’ Kit called, as she opened the study door. ‘Or the heat will escape.’

The stale smell of cigar smoke flew into Connie’s face. Kit drew aside the long and lazy velvet curtains to reveal the garden in the crisp of winter and a room not long vacated – dents crushing into the cushions of the soft green armchairs. Connie’s eyes fixed upon the so-familiar shape of the cumbersome writing desk lodged in front of the French doors. Blue and gold spotted china cats lazed at each corner – one an inkwell, one a penholder.

‘I know it’s in here,’ Kit said, pulling hard at the drawers of the desk. ‘But these are locked and I don’t know where Uncle Geoff keeps the key.’

‘Feel the ledges,’ Connie said.

Bert started to run his fingers along the underside of the desktop. From the opposite side, Malcolm got onto his hands and knees and disappeared into the foot well.

Charlie-Mouse pressed against the narrow door to the little library room. Books spilled up to the ceiling. He crouched at the bottom shelf, checking in-between the gaps.

‘We’ll go in here,’ Kit said, beckoning Connie through the double doors to the dining room.

Kit pushed aside more curtains and the wallpaper pattern showered over Connie’s arms and legs in shades of green and white. It skipped from the crystals of a grand chandelier to the polished surface of the enormous mahogany dining table, laid with six leather blotting pads.

Connie shivered – a draught drew itself around her as she approached the sideboard. She pulled open a drawer. Letter opener, corkscrew, pile of tablemats . . . but no key.

A noise turned her attention to the window and she saw Uncle Geoff crunching across the snow to approach a stranger – a young airman dressed in a brown flying jacket. The airman stood lean and tall, listening with intent. He spoke a few words and the two men paced towards the house.

‘Who’s that?’ Connie asked.

‘I don’t know, I haven’t seen him before,’ said Kit, replacing a photo frame on the mantelpiece. ‘I expect he’s from the airfield.’

Connie heaved again at the drawer, and it rocked into place. The steady swing of the pendulum knocked within the grandfather clock – echoing over her ears and into the still of the moment that followed. The chimes churned, and she heard a crash.

‘It slipped out of my fingers!’ Malcolm said. ‘It was an accident.’

Charlie-Mouse glared. ‘Then you should be more careful.’

‘It’ll be all right,’ Kit said. ‘We’ll glue it.’

Connie looked at the three large pieces of blue, gold and white china cat, spread over the floor. The sparkle from the cat's eyes had all but disappeared.

Another glint caught her eye. It was the shine of a small silver key. Excitedly, she tipped forward to pick it up.

Winter 1940

Chapter Seventeen: From one desk to another

With a click the key turned and Bert pulled open the desk drawer.

PRIME MINISTER
Dieu et mon droit

*10, Downing Street,
Whitehall.*

2 December, 1940

Dear Sir,

I am indebted to your kind agreement to vacate Claybridge Farm in the late Spring of 1941.

My Private Secretary will be in contact with you in the next few weeks to confirm the date, which will suit with the arrangements being made to requisition Audley End House. You will, of course, find excellent accommodation at Golden Hill Farm, Corberley Green.

Will you also please take this letter as recognition of my gratitude.

Yours faithfully,
Winston S. Churchill

‘Well! Nothing surprises me now!’ said Kit.

Charlie-Mouse bent over the letter, tugging at his fringe. ‘There’s nothing in there about secret agents,’ he said.

‘Charlie, don’t be stupid!’ exclaimed Connie. ‘He couldn’t possibly write *that* down, could he? This is enough.’

She rushed through the prime minister’s words once more, feeling an anxious flutter of doubt as she stared at the black ink freshly imprinting the page.

‘You must take it,’ Bert said. ‘Borrow it, say. Put it in your pocket and take it to the future.’

‘Your uncle will notice . . .’ Charlie-Mouse said.

‘We’ll think of something,’ Bert replied. ‘Besides, you can return it later.’

‘Well . . .’ Charlie-Mouse began.

‘No we can’t. What I mean is – we can’t take it with us,’ Connie said. ‘You realise no one will ever believe it’s real – it’ll be too new.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Kit.

‘Then we should hide it . . .’ Bert said.

‘What good will that do?’ asked Charlie-Mouse.

‘If we hide it well, it will survive . . . into the future,’ Bert replied.

‘And you can find it,’ Kit said.

‘Only if it stays in one piece,’ said Charlie-Mouse.

‘Don’t be such a pessimist, Charlie,’ Connie said.

‘It’s cool,’ Malcolm mumbled. ‘If we find somewhere safe and dry –

somewhere only *we* know about.'

Connie flew at him. '*Oh no*, we won't tell *you* where – *you* could ruin everything,' she said.

'No, it's not like that,' he said, bursting into tears. 'I want to be part of this . . . you can trust me . . . please?'

She frowned, clasping the envelope to her body. 'What makes you think we're going to let this opportunity slip away.'

He didn't flinch.

'Or maybe we *will* trust you,' she said, tempting the envelope straight to his shaking hands. 'After all, you need to earn it . . . and we don't have much choice.'

She held tight to a bubbling excitement, skimming her eyes over the crisp, undulating ground – the snow glinted every now and again as the sun attempted to polish the angular stone of the Norman church tower, then with a change in the wind, it spat across the gravestones. Ice laced the cast iron clock hands as they pointed at ten to one.

'But we need to hurry up and decide where,' she said.

Bert unlocked the French doors. 'OK – who's coming?'

'You boys – *you* go,' Kit said. 'We'll make soup.'

Connie watched the three small figures running across the snow-covered garden and through the back gate to the church. The icy cold bit beneath her borrowed cardigan, and she rubbed at her arms.

Winter 1940

Chapter Eighteen: Wish me luck . . . Malcolm's journey

His heart was thumping hard and fast against his chest wall. Malcolm glanced silently from one end of the church to the other, upwards at the shining red and blue of the glass windows, along the white painted walls, and down at the polished brass on the floor. He shivered as his gaze came to rest on the altar, and gave a quick cough.

Bert gave him a rough tug. 'We're going this way,' he said, pulling him over the stone steps.

Malcolm stumbled into the church and onto the shiny path rubbed away by centuries of parishioners. He imagined them following close behind – touching him on his back and patting his hatted head. He didn't dare look up. Their whispers gatecrashed his head – they passed through his guilt-ridden body, spiralling up to the beams and sweeping down and around the pillars – taunting from the aisles before escaping into the spin of the winter world outside.

But still in his mind, the church was far from empty. With his eyes clinging to the floor, he shrunk past the stern looks of the men leaning over the gallery balustrade; he avoided the eyes of the villagers bowed forward from the walls; and did his best to ignore the children turning with their looks of disapproval.

For all the bad things he had ever done.

They were waiting. Perhaps God was waiting. And for the first time he sent a prayer they wouldn't judge him yet.

The others had raced ahead and Malcolm too looked for an escape. It was a small Norman archway leading to a narrow spiral stair. He put his foot on a step and grasped the centre pillar. He counted as he rose, to drown out his haunting echoes.

Following a trail of wet prints, he grew closer to the chatter of Charlie-Mouse and Bert. *Forty five, forty six.* His feet worked faster to meet it. *Fifty three, fifty four.* His echoes trailed further behind him. *Sixty.*

The freezing wind bellowed and the tower staircase sucked him upward, pushing him towards an open window. He struggled to stay standing. A scattering of butterfly wings swirled in front of his face, and with a tug his body was dragged backwards. The church seemed to let out a sigh. And it was still. He tripped with exhaustion into the dust-laden patterning of an old floor rug and over the wet-booted feet of Bert and Charlie-Mouse.

'You made it this far,' Bert said.

Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock – the sound boxed at his ears. The clock room was empty of any furniture, apart from the brass workings of the clock on the wall, and a chair draped with a fading union flag. Bert gripped him under the armpits.

'You mean this . . . isn't it?' he asked, struggling to get his words out – his throat raw as if it had been rubbed with sandpaper.

'No,' Bert replied. 'There's a stairladder to the belfry.'

He lifted his eyes to the hole above his head. 'Bells?' he sniffed.

'Don't worry – they won't ring, if that's what you're worried about,' Bert said. 'It's not allowed. War and all that.'

Suddenly, the war became very real. He stood, shaking, underneath the rickety stairladder.

'There's a pocket between the bell frame and the wall,' Charlie-Mouse said. 'Connie used to post secret messages for the angels.'

He swallowed hard, and looked up, just making out an edge of a brass bell and part of a large wooden frame.

Bert put his hand against the stairladder and pushed. It shook and the rafters rattled. 'One at a time,' he said. 'I don't think it will take any more weight.'

'Can I go?' asked Malcolm.

He couldn't see it directly, but he felt the tension firing from Charlie-Mouse's stare.

Malcolm strung an empty gas mask box across his thin body and put the letter inside. Pitching his eyes skyward, he caught his breath with a cough and grasped hold of the outside edges of the ladder with both his hands.

With every step, the warm smell of the wooden bell frame grew stronger. He did not look back, for fear of the height. Each foot movement was careful and slow. For fear of slipping. He held on tight. For fear of losing balance. He was halfway there – three more steps and he'd be able to see into the bellshaft. The ladder steadied as someone supported it from below.

Six bells rested downward. He leaned in to knock the brass of the shiniest with the knuckle of his forefinger. A dull note sounded. To be here when they rang at once must be mindblowing. *To all the children around the world* he read. Children with no choice but to be stuck in a war, but he didn't dare dwell on it.

He craned his head towards the gap at the side of the frame. The wood curved to form a perfect pocket of a hiding place.

He shot a glimpse downwards. He saw feet, far below. But they weren't following yet. He would go just a bit further – now he had got this far. He grasped for his inhaler, drew upon it and made his way up a second wobbly ladder to a trap door.

There was a sudden change in the air as propellers whirred overhead – the sound of the planes resonated through the bells and into his body – he no longer heard voices. Streaks of sunlight bounced into his eyes through the battlements. He shuffled across and dared to stretch his neck to see over to the rooftops of Claybridge. But he couldn't look for long. A sick feeling bubbled in his stomach as he recalled his father's glee at the prospect of pulling it down.

He brought his eyes to rest upon the pitiless body of a goldfinch lying frosted and motionless on the roof-felt in front of him. He fumbled to find the clean handkerchief Bert had given him, amongst the boiled sweet fragments and bits of paper crowding his pocket. He curled over to gather up the tiny bird. And as the afternoon sun warmed the snow, small drops of melted ice fell from the flagpole about them.

The steady rising call of an air raid siren stirred into his consciousness. He tumbled headlong into a maelstrom of purple.

Winter 1940

Chapter Nineteen: Caught in the danger zone

The siren started up as Connie washed the mud from the last potato.

Kit dropped her peeling knife to clatter carelessly on the chopping board. 'We have to go to the shelter,' she said, controlling her voice.

Pulling open the understairs cupboard, she produced a neatly tied pile of clothes, and flew across the room to fetch an armful of coats and hats.

'But the boys – will they know to come here? Does somebody go to get them?' Connie asked, her thoughts firing in all directions.

'Bert knows what to do, he'll bring them back.'

Connie's heart flipped over and over as she pushed herself along the corridor towards the entrance hall. She imagined her parents – their drawn, sleepless faces zooming in and out of her mind's eye – they looked as if they were searching desperately for something. A certain relief rained over her when she saw the solid figure of Uncle Geoff appear at the other end of the corridor.

'Enemy's taking a risk with this snow, ain't it?' he said. 'Scaremongering devils. It's so we don't get complacent.' He lifted the red carpet runner and folded it back on itself. Grabbing hold of a large iron handle from the floorboards, he raised a trap door. 'This way,' he said. 'It'll be easier with the weather as it is. Evie's in Corberley, she'll be in the town shelter b'now. Where are the boys?'

'At the church,' Kit answered. 'They went to the tower. They should be back.' Uncle Geoff strode past. 'I'm going over – you girls get down below.'

Connie abandoned her wheelchair by the cloakroom door.

One . . . two . . . three . . . four brick steps down, and . . . pitch black. The damp seeped into her anxious body as she crawled backwards to the bottom. Kit held a lamp aloft and explored for another. With a flick and a hiss, a match flared a sharp shock of brilliance into a passageway of about her own head height, illuminating a steady upward slope away from the house. The intensity of the matchlight fell and Connie followed the lampglow, crawling some way with her shadow hanging overhead. Soft planks of wood pressing into her knees.

After a little while, the gaslight fell into a small square space of an air raid shelter – its sidewalls supported with iron struts and concrete and brightened with hand-drawn pictures. A handful of Christmas stars, a small haversack, a collection of clean mugs and a bunch of keys hung from a metal wire beneath a white-painted shelf. In its darkest corner, Connie picked out a roll of carpet on its end beside several crates of what smelled like stored apples. A small bunk bed covered the end wall and above it, telling chinks of daylight marked the outline of another opening.

'We're underneath the barn,' Kit said. 'Uncle Geoff dug into the old tunnel.' She pushed the gas lamps onto the table in the middle of the shelter.

'I never knew,' Connie said. She sat on a small wooden chair and hugged her shins.

Kit put a blanket around Connie's shoulders. 'There,' she said. 'Don't worry – we'll be quite safe. And Uncle Geoff will be back soon.'

'Does it usually last long?' Connie asked.

'It depends – we're used to night raids. I hope it won't be too long 'til the all-clear.'

The hatch lifted overhead and Connie recognised Charlie-Mouse's socks and shoes climbing downwards.

'Charlie!' she cried.

He sat on the bottom bunk and blinked across the lit room, his face dusty and scared. 'We can't find Malcolm,' he said.

Another pair of feet came down, and Bert sat by her brother's side. 'Uncle Geoff is making a final check, but we think he's gone.'

Connie blinked hard. '*Gone?* Where could he have gone to?'

'We don't know. He took the letter to . . . to . . .' Charlie-Mouse replied, teeth chattering. 'I mean, one minute he was there . . . up in the belfry – we called madly to say we were going down – that we had to come to the shelter – bbbbut . . . he didn't answer.'

'Uncle Geoff will surely find him and bring him back.' Kit said. She passed him a hot water bottle and wrapped a blanket around him.

Connie kept looking at her watch, and hoping. After five minutes, Uncle Geoff appeared. He gave a bedroll to Bert and took off his cap to scratch his head. 'Couldn't find the blighter,' he said. 'Caused me a kindly worry, this day 'e 'as.'

'He wasn't in the church at all?' Bert asked.

Uncle Geoff shook his head. 'Climbed right up that tower I did – nothing there, not even on top. There's nowhere 'e could've 'idden 'imself – a boy that age.'

Connie's forehead quivered. She was surprised at her fear for him.

'If 'e's run off . . .' Uncle Geoff said, 'should know better. I just 'ope someone in the village has taken 'im in.'

The drone of aircraft echoed into the void of the barn above. Heavy lines bunched close on Uncle Geoff's face.

Connie held out her hand. '*Is that?*'

Uncle Geoff nodded. 'Not our planes, this time,' he said.

She held her breath. She held it longer than she had ever done before. Then she let go. Her eyes were heavy with tears, and they were waiting to fall. Charlie-Mouse pinned his back against the wall of the shelter and stared at her. She couldn't pull her eyes from him. Her mum's voice pounded her head.

The drone died away and a single tear dropped into her lap.

'It's all right, folks,' Uncle Geoff said. 'It's a scare, that's all – they can't see a dickie bird in all this snow.'

The noise came again. This time with a whiz and a whirr and the sound of something falling. Somewhere, not far away at all, glass smashed and stone blasted.

'Something's 'it,' Uncle Geoff said.

Winter 1940

Chapter Twenty: A lucky escape

When the signal for the all-clear rolled out, Connie didn't stir. The numbness, from sitting tightly still for well over an hour, pricked deep within her body. It hurt her as she forced her limbs into a stretch.

Charlie-Mouse gave her a heavy-handed high five.

'You're being brave,' she told him.

'I get it from you,' he answered.

'But I'm not brave now.'

'You're dealing with it.'

'I'm not dealing with everything,' she said, remembering the sight of the boy dragging his sleeping bag down from Dracula's Castle. She imagined his panic at the siren. 'Are you sure Malcolm wasn't in the tower?'

'Certain,' Charlie-Mouse replied. 'He must have climbed down.'

'If he didn't come back to the house, he must have wanted to run away.'

'You mean so he could stay.'

'I suppose I mean that.'

'Nah,' Charlie-Mouse said. 'He wouldn't run off – not in this weather – he's nowhere to go. Besides, he knows he doesn't belong.'

'Then I don't know.' She gained the determination to crawl. 'I need to shift my legs,' she said, lifting the remaining gaslight. Before she could, a call from the house bowled along the dark passageway . . .

'It's the tower – they 'it the tower!'

Uncle Geoff huddled with the small crowd gathered around the Victorian lamplight.

'It was a stray one – knocked sideways into the belfry,' she overheard the warden say. She was conscious of her nails digging into her cheeks. 'Doesn't look too severe.'

'We'll call the lads from the Camps,' said another man, poking his walking stick into the tufts of green now showing through the snow. 'They know what to do with unexploded bombs.'

'There'll be no church on Sunday,' said the warden.

'We'll use the village hall,' a woman said.

'*Did anyone see a boy?*' Uncle Geoff shouted.

'Goodness gracious me, was there a boy in there?' the woman exclaimed.

'No, I checked the tower m'self . . . but we don't know for certain.'

'Whose is he?' she asked.

Uncle Geoff turned. 'These children 'ere know,' he said.

'Mrs Pritchard's boy again is it?' said the man accusing his walking stick in Connie's direction. 'Up to no good – he should know better.'

About a minute later, the red-faced warden jostled his way back with a large length of rope aloft. 'We can cordon it off,' he panted.

Their shouts and calls lessened. Connie took in the piercing air. It shifted to her lungs and made her cough. '*You were in there,*' she said, moving back from the open French doors.

Charlie-Mouse didn't speak. He clutched at the heavy curtain fringe and

continued to stare.

‘I know,’ Bert replied.

‘I don’t feel safe anymore,’ Kit said – her face patched with worry. ‘Right now, I’d rather be in London with Mummy.’

Bert nudged her in the ribs. ‘Nothing’s happened though, has it, Pretty Kitty? We’re all here.’

‘We’re *not* – Malcolm’s gone,’ she said.

‘We’ll find him,’ he replied, winding his arm around her.

‘He wasn’t in the tower when the bomb hit, I’m sure of it,’ said Charlie-Mouse. ‘Anyway, I *bet* he turns up at home – he’ll be laughing at us for making such a fuss.’

The sound of aircraft hit the wind as Charlie-Mouse brought the French doors to a close. Connie looked out to see the bundle of villagers pointing into the sky. Three Spitfires tailed a Lysander, heading in the direction of the airfield. She held the curtain and watched the Lysander pull from its course to soar over the house. She had heard the sound before.

‘*No*, we can’t go *now* . . .’ she said.

The table lamp flickered and faded to grey. And as her reality swirled around her, feelings of emptiness and loss overpowered her head and her heart – she could do nothing to stop any of it.

Chapter Twenty One: Where is Malcolm?

The winter chill of Christmas 1940 softened into comfortable purple warmth, and the sound of the plane fell away – Connie’s ears met with the sustained and uncomfortable scream of the potter’s wheel in its final few revolutions. Its pull slipped away – leaving her feeling sick and dizzy.

She opened her eyes and gulped. The horrible greasy mark she had seen Malcolm make so many hours ago, looked exactly as it should – only a moment old. She so wanted to believe he was still standing at the open gate to kick stones to clank against the Wendlewitch’s metal dustbins. But the yard was empty and the gate was swinging back and forth – its corner edge tracing and retracing an arc in the ground.

‘I think a touch of oil is required,’ called a voice from the darkened conservatory.

The Wendlewitch stood like a peculiar apparition in a frizzy purple aura, with a pair of earphones draped around her neck and a small can in her hand. The aura paled as she came into the light. ‘Just . . . *here*,’ she said, twisting the wheel from left to right. ‘. . . and *here*. There, that should do it.’ A smile creased into her shining face.

‘But you’re not . . . your hayfever . . . you couldn’t . . . and you are,’ said Charlie-Mouse.

‘Completely,’ the Wendlewitch finished. ‘Time is a magical healer, don’t you think?’

Connie snatched at her watch. It was still ten o’clock. ‘It’s impossible to get well that quick,’ she said, perplexed. ‘You were quite ill.’

‘*Almost* impossible,’ the Wendlewitch said. ‘I don’t do impossible.’ She peered further into Connie’s face, ‘But my dear, are *you* well?’

The sickness gone, her mouth dried up. ‘It’s Malcolm,’ she said, before her voice went hoarse.

Charlie-Mouse rescued her. ‘He came through after us. Now he’s lost,’ he said.

She kept swallowing, and pulling at the pendant around her neck – she scraped the thin chain from side to side. ‘He just . . . vanished,’ she said.

The Wendlewitch shut her eyes, and when Connie had finished she pulled her glasses up to sit on the crook of her nose. ‘Then I need to think – about the boy *and* the letter. It changes things,’ she said, rocking her flowery flip-flopped foot backwards and forwards on the floor. ‘Goodness, that young man *has* been a challenge. I only wish his father could have let me—’ She stopped, throwing her attention to the mantelpiece, where a handful of old photographs and postcards peered from behind a row of unfired pots.

‘What is it?’ Connie asked.

The Wendlewitch pulled out a brown faded picture postcard and stood for some time, staring closely. ‘Mmmm dear? *Oh* . . . nothing that will make a difference right now.’ She slipped the picture back between the pots.

‘Do you think he will follow us here?’ Connie said. ‘Say he will.’

‘The Wendlewitch caressed the dimple in her chin with her purple fingertips. ‘It all depends,’ she said. ‘I fear that Malcolm has slipped through.’

‘*Slipped through?*’ said Charlie-Mouse, wearing his most serious expression.

‘With a whirl of the wheel, springs magic more powerful than the grace of time herself. Magic to pull us to the past, or push us to the future. But time is a funny thing. It has a habit of moving on and losing track of where it once was.’

‘God, he *is* lost.’ Charlie-Mouse said.

‘But I’m not worried . . . not yet anyway,’ the Wendlewitch continued. She placed her palm on the wheel and smiled.

‘So where is he?’ Connie asked.

‘Ah well – that I don’t know . . . *exactly*. The Wendlewitch shrugged and her earphones fell straight off her shoulders. ‘It’s all quite complicated – my guess is he may have gone *backwards* an incy bit, or *forwards*, or . . .’ She tilted her head from side to side and when her thoughts appeared to be of no consequence, proceeded to glide by, leaving an almost indescribable burst of blueberry perfume and lubricating oil in her wake. ‘I really should be more reassuring, shouldn’t I,’ she muttered.

‘We’re in a mess if you ask me,’ said Charlie-Mouse.

The Wendlewitch spun full circle. ‘*No!*’ she replied. ‘You *must* trust me.’ She swept her glossy head from Charlie-Mouse to Connie, and back to Charlie-Mouse. ‘You have to carry on. Come back after the midnight – when the magic is strong.’

‘You must be joking!’ said Charlie-Mouse. ‘Not if—’

‘Not if *what?*’ Connie shouted.

‘Not if there’s a chance of never coming home,’ he answered.

Chapter Twenty Two: In the quiet of the night

Connie lay in bed, cradling her ear to every one of the twelve chimes of the church clock. She had been dreaming of the delight of running up the steps of the tower to the clock room, of finding Malcolm sitting waiting for her on the polished oak of the study desk. He leaned over the blue and gold china cat to pass her a small white envelope, then vanished. Her magical dream became a waking dream, and their last conversation drifted casually by. The words echoed from left to right, changing like bells ringing a tune in perfect time.

'Where will you put it?'

'Oh no, we're not telling you – you could ruin everything.'

'No, it's not like that . . . you can trust me.'

Her bedroom door creaked and she heard a murmur from the hallway.

'Charlie?'

She pulled herself upright, automatically throwing all her covers off the bed. They half-covered the cat. She smiled. *'You'll come with me instead, won't you Honeycomb?'* The cat stretched his legs and clawed into the quilt. *'I hate to say this, and I know just how many times he's shot at you with his pea-shooter, but I have to try and find him.'*

She pushed a crutch at one of the pottery doors and put a foot inside. Honeycomb brushed his silky smooth coat over her ankle. She shuddered.

The moon shone into her eyes through the expanse of glass, kissing the pots with touches of silver light and shadow. Connie looked up to the top shelf, expecting to see four more green eyes shining down. But there were just two, and a dark empty space. One of the china cats was missing. Where was it? Out on the prowl somewhere? She faltered in her step. The stillness of the night swirled over her senses as the moon covered over, closeting the room over her head with the darkness. *'Don't be silly, she told herself. Turn on the light if you're scared.'*

Purple wisps of cloud chased across the sky – and as moonlight fell onto the potter's wheel, a moving pool of shadow cast itself over the fire screen and lifted again to paint the room in mauve. To her relief, she saw Charlie-Mouse's figure silhouetting its way along the glass. Not long after, his athletic strides sounded on the wood floor.

'Don't say a word,' he said, putting a firm hand on her shoulder.

She unlocked her calipers and sat herself at the lion stool. She slid her hand across the wheel, clasped hold of the edge and pulled it round with as much force as she could.

A glittering, dancing lasso picked up from the spin. In the dim light, it seemed to tighten its grip on the room as it spun faster and faster around them before crashing down in the centre of the wheel to extinguish itself in a final flash of energy.

Chapter Twenty Three Make do and mend

*Claybridge Farm
Friday, 3rd January 1941*

Dear Mummy,

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

We read the papers this week. The pictures of London looked very sad. Fifteen hundred fires! We didn't really want to read about any more firebombing in the City. Just when the man on the wireless told us that good news was on the horizon.

Thank you for calling again. We were so pleased to hear your voice twice in one week. We know that you will come to visit as soon as you can re-arrange your transport.

It is freezing today. I have put on almost all my pairs of socks at once and I am wearing two vests and two blouses under my pullover. Now that they're rationing clothes, I hope you have enough.

Bert has been learning to sew. It's quite funny; he says he isn't that good but he is. I'm sure he won't mind me telling you. We've been making new shoe bags for when we go back to school out of some old dress material that Auntie Evie says belonged to you. They are our lucky tokens.

We are so looking forward to the Spring. But it will be strange to move from here. We visited Golden Hill Farm yesterday. I like it very much. It's only a few miles from Corberley.

Please tell Margerie's Mummy to write that I am thinking about her.

Sending you all our love and kisses,

Kit xxxxxxxxxxxx

Spring 1941

Chapter Twenty Four: The stranger

Midnight lifted and the spring tumbled at her – blossom puffed over the tops of the fruit trees, spilling to carpet the tufty ground in pink and white. She picked up a small bunch and tucked it into her hair. ‘Time’s moved on again,’ she said.

There was no sign of anyone – no cars parked along the driveway and the large three-bar gate to the lane remained closed. The hole in the church tower gaped wide. Down below, the rope barrier had gone. ‘What if we’re too late?’

The French doors to the study rocked gently against their hooks on the outside wall. They slipped inside – the scent of fresh daffodils tempting each step she took. But the room wasn’t empty. The young airman occupied the writing desk. His weighty brown flying jacket hugged the back of his chair. He stretched his lean body awkwardly over the desktop as he wrote.

‘Oh, we’re sorry,’ apologised Connie. ‘We didn’t know you were here.’

The airman put his inkpen into the top of the neatly glued blue and gold spotted cat and pushed it back to its corner. ‘It’s fine, I’m alone,’ he said, in a low and controlled tone, ‘Really, don’t worry – I’m almost finished here, please stay.’

The young man didn’t appear to be surprised by their entrance. He stood to put on his flying jacket. ‘The house is yours for a few weeks more,’ he said. ‘And it’s my job as envoy to thank you.’ He brushed lightly at the ends of his ash-blonde moustache.

‘*Oh no*, but this isn’t . . . and we don’t—’ Connie attempted.

The airman stepped forward to shake their hands in turn, and with a strangely familiar cough and a quick salute he was gone.

She wavered – there was something instantly recognisable in his mannerisms, the asthmatic cough and the crooked smile. *No*, it wouldn’t be possible – this man must surely be in his twenties.

‘Wait a minute!’ she called out after him. ‘Don’t you want to speak to Mr and Mrs . . .?’

Kit and Bert burst through the open doors.

‘*Oh!*’ she exclaimed. ‘Did you see—’

‘A fine greeting!’ Bert said, lifting a curly lock from his eyes.

‘Oh, I didn’t mean—’ Connie said.

Kit put down a bunch of forget-me-nots and clasped at Connie’s hand. ‘Go on,’ she said. ‘Did we see what?’

‘Did you see the airman?’ Connie finished.

‘No,’ Bert replied. ‘Is he here?’

‘*Yeah*, he *was*. He just . . . left,’ Connie said.

‘But we didn’t see anyone,’ said Kit.

‘Oh,’ Connie said again. Confusion built in her brow. ‘I’m sure you would have seen him.’

‘He must have been in a hurry,’ Kit said.

‘To fly?’ asked Charlie-Mouse.

‘Hey, I’ll bet he’s the pilot of the Lysander,’ said Bert. ‘Dash it – I wish I could have seen him to ask about it.’

‘*Sssh*,’ Kit interrupted. ‘We mean to ask you about Malcolm.’

Connie shook her head. ‘We were hoping you would tell us . . .’

‘No,’ Kit replied. ‘We haven’t seen him since the day you came. They searched the church and found no sign. No one’s been in the tower since – too dangerous.’

‘Then we have to go and see for ourselves,’ Connie said. ‘There must be some sort of a clue.’

Kit fell silent – her smile faded.

‘Word went out he may’ve been a boy spy,’ Bert said.

‘A fair guess,’ Charlie-Mouse said.

Kit turned a grave look upon him. ‘We didn’t say anything,’ she explained. ‘They wanted to find you too – to ask questions.’

Charlie-Mouse laughed. ‘Did they think *we* were spies?’

‘Don’t joke, Charlie,’ Connie said.

‘The authorities can’t risk anything these days, old chum,’ Bert said.

‘And now?’ Connie asked. ‘Are they still looking for us?’

‘I don’t know,’ Kit said, keeping her eyes to the ground. Gingerly, she raised them, ‘Oh, promise me – now you’ve seen the letter – promise me you’re not spies.’

Dry tears fluttered persistently this way and that in the cavern of Connie’s chest, and she held them where they were. ‘I promise,’ she replied. She laid her crutches to one side and pressed the palms of her hands against the desk. She let her shoulders fall and her hopes followed – the weight of her body doubled in her calipers. ‘I can’t explain everything that’s happened – I wish I could,’ she said.

Kit pulled Connie’s hand to her own. ‘*I’m so sorry*, she flustered. ‘I know you can’t, if I’ve any sense at all. I’m sorry, very sorry. Can you possibly forgive me?’

Connie’s eyes drifted into the little library room. She saw the bedrolls tied up with cord in the corner – the dulled satin edges of the blankets sandwiched tightly – waiting to be taken down to the shelter. She managed a smile. ‘These are strange times,’ she said. ‘But we’re good friends, aren’t we?’

Kit nodded, her cheeks flushing with red. She offered Connie the small bunch of flowers. ‘We will *always* be friends,’ she replied.

Spring 1941

Chapter Twenty Five: The tower revisited

The worn stone steps to the tower curled away, rising sharply. Connie laid down her crutches, put a hand to the centre pillar and pushed her other hand against the wall.

‘There’s a danger I’ll topple,’ she said.

‘I’m behind you,’ replied Charlie-Mouse.

She laughed. ‘You might regret it.’

She climbed with ease – the stairs were narrow and the handrail curved into the stone acted as perfect support to carry herself up to the clock room. The brass dials of the clock turned and chased, absorbing her gaze until Kit came to her side. The girls stood in front of the stairladder.

‘Who’s going up this time?’ Kit asked.

‘Scary,’ Charlie-Mouse said. ‘What are the chances of another raid?’

‘They’ve eased off,’ replied Bert. ‘But I’m no expert.’

‘*Me – I’ll go,*’ Connie said.

‘Don’t be silly, Bert can do it,’ said Charlie-Mouse.

‘And so can I,’ she replied. ‘Help me take these legs off.’

Calipers abandoned and her skirt straightened, she wriggled one knee onto the stairladder and pulled up – building a rhythm.

How far did Malcolm get?

Her ear aglow with the heat of the sun being dragged in through the hole above. Sunlight warmed her scalp and her arms, fizzing up the rainbow colours of her bracelet. She looked across to the bell frame – some of the wood was new – cut and repaired into the old. The children’s bell tipped into the air – sparks of light flew from the shiny engraving. A pile of flintstones crowded the platform marking halfway. The window louvres opened out as she rose and found herself level with the children’s bell. She grasped the wood frame and leaned in. Grit and stone filled the wooden pocket at its side. She pulled at the flint and cement mix, emptying it out. But there was no sign of a letter.

‘*You let me down, Mollet,*’ she said, fist clenched. ‘Just when I was beginning to like you for some reason or other.’ She climbed back on the stairladder but as she did so, her right knee splintered-off part of the rung. She gripped at the sides – fear crushing the feeling in her fingers. The wood dropped twenty metres down.

‘Everything all right?’ Charlie-Mouse called up.

‘*Fine,*’ she replied, carefully. She closed her eyes and pulled herself up with the little strength she had left in her elbows. ‘*I’m going further.*’

‘*What?*’ he called.

‘*Everything’s fine,*’ she shouted.

The pounding of her heart slowed and her head steadied as she reached the narrow-boarded walkway along the edge of the tower wall.

The hole the bomb had made stretched out below her now, and she could guess it had landed to wedge itself in the metal structure of the bell frame. It was a miracle it hadn’t exploded to blow the tower away. She pushed her head against the trap door and pulled herself onto the rooftop.

Leaning against the flagpole, she looked out over Claybridge. ‘I don’t suppose the Wendlewitch ever expected *this* to happen,’ she said, aloud. Her sigh joined with the rise of new voices, carried by the breeze.

‘You were very lucky,’

She recognised the voice as belonging to Auntie Evie.

‘I couldn’t stay, I had to come early – for the children. Besides, the office was quiet,’ came the lighter tones of her companion.

Auntie Evie’s voice returned. ‘Was it bad?’

‘Sadie said Wednesday was the worst yet – the fires were fierce down her way. Even I could taste the smoke at the all clear. Several families Sadie knows were bombed-out,’ the second voice said. ‘The firebomb took the entire street . . . the hotel took them all in, mind – and they’ll stay until they get sorted.’

‘I don’t think families have been so important,’ said Auntie Evie. ‘You hear what I’m saying, Lily Parker, don’t you? There’d be something for you here if you wanted. Grandpa Joe wouldn’t have wished it any other way.’

‘I hear, but I have my job at the bank,’ replied Lily. ‘Besides it may all be over in a few months. Our Mr Churchill is seeing to that, isn’t he.’

The figures came into view and Connie watched the two women stroll away to the garden.

She descended – the distant rumble of an aircraft rolled across the brass in the heart of the tower. The apple blossom lifted from her head and disappeared below her feet. The air grew chillier – it swished at her loose hair, blowing it across her face. She wanted to keep moving but something compelled her to stay. The blossom carried high again – she moved her head with it, as if being turned in a dance, and found herself looking out of the louvres back towards the rooftops of the house. ‘*Malcolm?*’ she whispered.

‘*Well?*’ Charlie-Mouse said.

‘Well . . . there was nothing,’ she replied, rubbing at the grooves in her knees. ‘Or nothing apart from dust and rubble. No clue where he might have gone.’

‘I don’t know what to say,’ Kit said.

‘I do,’ replied Charlie-Mouse ‘He’s lost.’

‘No, he’s not *lost*,’ Connie replied. ‘He’s just somewhere else.’

Charlie-Mouse shook his head. ‘I’m glad you’re so sure,’ he said.

Shlapp . . . shlapp . . . shlapp

A soft knocking turned her head to the rafters.

‘It’s the wind,’ Bert said.

‘What? Oh, yeah, I expect so,’ Connie replied. A small yellow-gold feather drifted down and she cupped it in the air.

‘What else would it be?’ Kit asked.

‘Malcolm’s ghost?’ Charlie-Mouse said.

‘*No*, he’s not dead either,’ Connie said. She blew into the down of the feather. ‘I’m sure of it.’

‘Then what?’ asked Charlie-Mouse.

‘I don’t know. It was the feeling I had – it surrounded me,’ Connie said.

Her brother gave a nervous laugh. ‘Still sounds like ghosts,’ he said.

‘Perhaps it was an echo – Malcolm’s echo,’ Kit said.

‘Perhaps,’ Connie replied. ‘Then it’s a pity I couldn’t hear it so well.’

The smell of baking bread streamed at her as they emerged into the spring sunshine,

but at this moment Connie knew only confusion and the burning desire to go home – to be with her mum and dad and to wake up as if it had all been a dream. Malcolm Mollet's dad was welcome to win now. She didn't care any more.

Spring 1941

Chapter Twenty Six: Dreams do come true

‘Darlings!’

The voice stroked softly at Connie’s ears. She turned her head to see the sun-silhouetted figure of Auntie Evie’s companion standing by the tree swing in the orchard.

‘Mother,’ exclaimed Bert.

The lady with a cascade of neat auburn curls around her silk neckerchief bent to rest her wicker basket on the grass. She kissed the heads of her children and held them tight.

‘We’ve missed you *so, so* much,’ said Kit, her eyes filling up with tears.

‘I’ve missed you too,’ Kit’s mother comforted.

‘We weren’t expecting you for at least another week,’ Bert said.

‘Surprises are always the best. Besides, I couldn’t stay away a moment longer.’

‘I still can’t believe you’re really here,’ Kit said. ‘Does Auntie Evie know?’

‘Yes, my dearest.’ Her voice broke into a whisper, ‘I’ve brought some fudge for a special treat,’ she said. ‘And a note from Daddy.’

‘Oh, Mummy, this is an absolute dream,’ Kit said.

Connie kept her emotions at bay as Kit slipped her arm around her mother’s belted waist and pressed her head against her silky blouse.

Kit murmured – ‘Your pretty perfume, it reminds me of home – of sitting at your dressing table and looking at the brooches in the drawer while you brush through my hair.’

‘How I miss putting the ribbons in your hair, dear Kathleen,’ Kit’s mother said. She walked her fingertips tenderly over her daughter’s head. ‘And reading stories to you both – I only read to myself these days and the library’s so short of good books. It’s the simplest of things I miss the most.’ She tickled at Bert’s tousled mop. ‘Gosh, and you’ve really grown, haven’t you – you’re both at least an inch taller. It must be this country air! And my darling Bert, I hear you’re camped out in the attic – Evie and I used to do battle to sleep up there.’

Bert laughed. ‘Kit couldn’t wait to get rid of me.’

‘There’s a good feeling about this place,’ the children’s mother continued. ‘It lives and breathes like nowhere else I know, and it’s why I love it so much. I remember how we used to look forward to the holidays when we would stay here with Grandma. Little tomboys we were, climbing trees in the orchard – although I shouldn’t confess to it.’ She laughed, settling on the swing seat. ‘It was the best thing ever when Grandpa Joe hung the swing. We used to see how far we could jump into the mossy grass,’ she said. As she loosened her neckerchief, a small twisted feather spiralled to the ground. She stooped to pick it up, twirling it between her finger and thumb.

‘My dearest children . . . once upon a time we came across a boy. I spotted him first from the attic window. He stepped out of the church in a bit of a daze and wandered into the orchard. Evie was on the swing at the time. She asked him what he was doing here and he didn’t seem to know. I remember it so well because he carried with him a bird. The poor little thing had perished and not long after we buried it right here,’ she said. The boy was distraught, it was as if it was the last thing he had left in

the whole world.'

Connie's heart tensed with compassion, before spilling with a relief she had wished to feel inside.

'So what happened to this boy?' Kit urged.

'Grandma took him in and he helped for a month while she found a family to look after him. He went to Golden Hill, and after that I don't recall what happened then. Do you know . . . isn't it silly but I can't quite remember his name – Mervyn or something. Good gracious me,' she hurried on. 'I promised Evie I'd help in the kitchen. But I'll say this much – it's good to be back for a little while, especially now I have my two most precious things by my side.'

Her eyes glazed over and Connie guessed she was thinking of the children's dad.

'We have to get on, don't we,' the lady said, gathering her basket.

Kit and Bert skipped and danced ahead of their mother, their laughter filling the air.

'It was *Malcolm* . . .' Connie whispered.

'Who was?' said Charlie-Mouse.

'The boy with the bird. It was Malcolm.'

'But that was *years* ago and he was just a boy with a dead bird. It could have been anybody.'

'Yeah. But it *was* Malcolm. I know it.'

Charlie-Mouse laughed it off. 'Good story, Sis – but I reckon Malcolm found himself an escape in 1941 – one that suited him better than going home.'

'*No*,' she asserted. 'It's not a story. He slipped through – like the Wendlewitch said.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'I just am.'

'You'll have to prove it.'

'Shut up, Charlie – you know I can't.'

'Anyway,' he said, 'If he'd slipped through, he'd have grown up by now.'

His words blew with a rush of air, picking up a swathe of blossom and baying at the back of her bare heels. The roar of an aircraft charged her ears. She drew her eyes from her brother to see the dark undercarriage and robust wheel arches of the Lysander rising above.

Through the window glass of the cockpit she was certain she could make out the profile of the airman. Was he waving to her? She stared so hard her eyes fogged and her head began to spin.

Chapter Twenty Seven: Welcome home

The wheel pulled on the moonlight and whirled a collage of crazy patterns over her forearms and across the dusty floor of the pottery shop. A shadow image of the Lysander with its night-lights ablaze reflected the glaze of the Wendlewitch's pots into a sweeping magical shimmer, leading her entranced to gaze at the top shelf. The china desk companions pawed down at her in play. The magic fell away to nothing and the cats stopped still.

She held her head in her hands – feeling the electrostatic charge spiking out of her hair as it lay over the surface of the slowing wheel. 'We were so nearly there, I'm sure of it,' she whispered.

'Huh?' Charlie-Mouse said. 'Tell me I can go back to sleep.'

The floorboards twinged and creaked above. 'Sssshh,' she said.

Something mouse-size scampered down the moonlit stairs and shot towards the shop door. In its wake, the Wendlewitch hovered halfway down in her dark flowing dressing gown. The moon slipped an eery stripe onto one side of her face. She gave a tidy yawn and patted her cheeks with her hands. 'I didn't mean to make you jump, my dears,' she said.

With a click of a light switch underneath her potter's wheel, the Wendlewitch brought a warm blush to her pottery shop. 'There – now we can see each other.'

Connie saw her own reflection twinkling in the Wendlewitch's night-time spectacles and for a moment she thought she saw someone over her shoulder. She looked round – but there was no one there.

The Wendlewitch snapped something on top of the potter's wheel.

'I want you to look at this,' she said, turning the sepia-toned postcard to catch the light of the lamp.

Connie peered in to see two fair-haired girls laughing, and leaning on the fence. A darker-haired boy of about her age sat on top of the fence beside them. A smaller boy sat lower down on the stile, looking straight to camera.

'Taken at Claybridge,' the Wendlewitch said. 'Circa nineteen-twenty-something.'

'The trees by the stream – they're so small,' Charlie-Mouse exclaimed.

Connie pointed. 'This girl looks like Kit,' she said. 'It can't be her. Not *then*. But it could be her mother.'

The Wendlewitch pulled off her glasses. She was about to speak when Charlie-Mouse whipped the picture from under her nose.

'*Look!* The boy on the stile,' he announced. 'It can't be . . . but it is . . . it's *Malcolm!*'

The table lamp flickered and the potter's wheel buzzed.

'The wheel's turning . . . *on its own!*'

Charlie-Mouse's words disappeared into a quickening of shrieks from within the chimney breast.

'Seems her power is still strong,' the Wendlewitch shouted through the din.

As Connie gripped to her crutches, the table lamp blew. In the pitch black, the wheel radiated a pale mauve over her body. Spinning faster and faster, mauve turned to silver, picking up the hollows in Charlie-Mouse's face and making him appear

skeletal. She thrashed out for his hand and shut her eyes tight.

Chapter Twenty Eight: New hope

*Golden Hill Farm
Saturday, 2nd August 1941*

Dear Mummy,

We spent today by the brook at Corberley Green, as it was scorching again. Bert made potato crisp sandwiches for our lunch basket. I took one of Auntie Evie's old magazines and lay on the rug in the shade reading it for most of the afternoon. Bert spent all the time in the water, throwing sticks for Solo. Neither seemed to tire of this game.

Auntie E. and Uncle G. are spending some weekends on the fields back at Claybridge. They tell us everything appears to be normal there and that they have some land girls coming for the harvest at the end of the month. GOOD NEWS, even the siren is sounding less often. I do hope they announce that war is over soon because then Daddy can come back and we can all go home together. I do have a hopeful feeling about the future.

I will write again on Friday. Auntie E. has been saving lots of nice things to celebrate Bert's birthday and we are going to make a layered party cake. Some of the boys and girls from nearby are coming for tea.

Today we had stewed apples and ginger cream. The whole house was filled with a delicious mix of smells after we finished the cooking.

Until next week, Mummy.

With all my love, Kit xxxxxxxxxx

P.S. Bert says to tell you that he made the ginger cream! Summer 1941

Chapter Twenty Nine: Their finest hour?

She swallowed the still night air. It calmed her heart and steadied her head. Slowly, she raised her eyes to see an aircraft passing directly overhead.

‘The Lysander,’ she said.

‘Do you think it’s been on a mission?’ said Charlie-Mouse.

‘Maybe.’

She rested heavily on her crutches as Charlie-Mouse shone his pocket torch around. The bushes and trees cowered, and as the narrow beam reached the Victorian lamplight, it dulled to a faint glow.

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘That’s that.’

A triangle of light escaped from the house as the kitchen door opened and closed. Two figures moved onto the lawn – the contours of their bodies and the rounded shapes of their heads accentuated by the plane of moonlight laid over the garden and projecting their shadows to the wall behind.

‘What’s this then?’ said a gruff voice.

Connie pinched her eyes tight shut in the glare of the torchlight.

‘We’re on schedule to leave in ten minutes,’ the woman in the headscarf said, looking anxiously at her wristwatch.

‘It’s OK, I’ll deal with these children. Tomasz has only just flown over – there’s time before the handover.’

The bearded man stood the other side of the kitchen table.

‘Tell me what are you doing here,’ he demanded. ‘On restricted land.’

The colour had all but disappeared from Charlie-Mouse’s cheeks. His face quivered in the wavering of the gas lamp.

‘You won’t believe us,’ Connie said. ‘But we’ve come to find some . . . one.’

‘No one knows anyone here,’ the man replied. ‘Who have you come to find?’

Thoughts pummelled her head. Kit and Bert, the family – for one thing, they must all be at Golden Hill . . .

‘Wait,’ the man said, taking off his flying hat. The static pulled his ash-blond hair into the air. ‘Are you looking for me?’

Connie stared from his beard up to his small grey eyes. They pinned her with sincerity and concern. But she was unable to reply.

‘Because if you are, there’s not much time. I’m flying to Poland in under the hour. Veronika has a rendezvous at 6am, she has to radio back.’

Veronika put down her small brown case and gave a meagre smile. Her thin painted lips glowed orange in the strange light. ‘Do we trust them, Malcolm?’ she tilted.

Malcolm turned. ‘It’s OK – they know this place,’ he replied.

‘Then *you’re* Malcolm . . .’ began Charlie-Mouse. ‘And you know who we are?’

‘Time does strange things,’ Malcolm said. ‘But it won’t let us forget where we came from.’

The kitchen door opened.

‘Tomasz. So soon,’ Malcolm said. ‘All set?’

The man nodded.

‘Then we must go,’ Malcolm said.

Veronika lifted her hand mid-air to gesture goodbye and followed Tomasz into the darkness.

Malcolm zipped his heavy jacket and grasped hold of his flying hat and goggles. Instead of following, he threw open the door to the hallway. ‘Wait here,’ he said.

His steps echoed on the stone floor. She strained her eyes to see. Another door grated open . . . then closed. His tall, lean figure came back towards her.

In one of his hands Malcolm held a curled and faded envelope sprinkled over with brown dots, and in the other a blue and gold spotted china cat.

‘These are meant for you,’ he said. ‘Take good care. Our futures depend on it.’ He gave a flicker of a crooked smile and walked out after his companions.

The leaves rustled, and for a moment the sleeping orchard came to life. She sat on the tree swing and swayed side to side. Charlie stood with his back flat to the tree trunk. She barely saw him in the blur of darkness.

From over the top of the church tower came the night-lights of the Lysander. Its drone deadened by the clouding sky – the deep-grey shadow shuddering through the hemisphere.

‘Why would he ever want to come back with us?’ she said.

The night air thinned – pixellating in random sequence, it broke apart and sent her tired head into a semi-sleep. She spun this way and that, through the darkness – mixing with ghostly images of the house, of Charlie-Mouse and of the silhouetted Lysander.

Chapter Thirty: Flashes of the past

'*Charlie?*' Connie called. She jumped at the sound of her voice in her head and pressed at the flesh of her ears to unblock them. '*Charlie, are you here?*' The floor lifted from her feet and rose through her body before she blacked out completely.

The house whispered and she dreamed again. She dreamed of crossing the snow to the house. She opened the French doors to find Malcolm waiting in the study. He turned from the open fire and offered her the cat. As she reached to grasp hold, she dropped it – the spotted pieces smashing again over the parquet floor. He leaned to say something . . . and this time she heard him clearly.

'You *can* save it,' he said.

Opening her eyes, she found herself back in her own bed. The morning sun crept through the crack in her curtains, slashing its trail over her quilt cover and across the two precious objects on her bedside table.

She sat up and stared.

Blue and gold spots jumped out at her from the crazed white glaze. Turquoise sparks from the cat's eyes flew like fireworks. Nervously, she reached out an arm to lift the fragile creature from its position on top of the envelope. She expected an electric shock – but it didn't come. She ran a forefinger over its smooth china back and along its tail. Something clinked. She shook gently. The penholder cat separated in her hand and something shiny and about the size of a fifty pence piece dropped onto the sunny patch of her quilt.

Chapter Thirty One: The shoot

Veronika's small silver medal warmed in her hand as the same afternoon she watched members of the local news television crew buzzing like bees over a lavender bush in front of the Friday market in Corberley town square. She gripped tightly, with rebounding thoughts. What had become of her?

What had become of Malcolm?

The producer waved his arm across her line of sight, darting this way and that over the pavement to brief the camera team. The presenter paced up and down rehearsing her lines.

'Is it someone famous?' called one lady, with gusto.

Connie didn't hear the reply – she had her eyes stuck firmly upon a familiar dark-suited figure close by.

'*How can this be?*' rasped Malcolm Mollet's dad.

A small man with horn-rimmed spectacles nodded back at him politely.

'*We . . .*' mouthed Malcolm Mollet's dad, directing his finger back and forth, '*had a deal.*'

The man ignored him, continuing to buff up his tiepin with his handkerchief, then walzing off in the opposite direction.

Malcolm Mollet's dad was left gasping. He sidled up to a window at the Guildhall where he flirted with his own reflection. He relaxed his body and practised a beguiling smile while raising one eyebrow. He tried again, putting his right shoulder forward and raising both eyebrows. After a few minutes of what Connie could only call powerful posing practice, he grimaced. He smoothed down the lapels of his suit jacket, ran his fingers through his hair and teased at his delicately lined moustache.

As if in response to the vanity, the presenter gave a lightening-quick brush to her hair and flashed her face into her hand mirror. Snapping the mirror shut she got straight down to business. 'You understand we'll be going live to camera soon, don't you,' she told him. 'Stewart's in the studio and he'll want to ask you some questions.'

'Ooh,' called the lady from the crowd. 'I see 'im on TV of an evening.'

Connie tucked in a smile.

'Quiet please,' called the producer. 'We'll go for a take with the planning man.'

The small man in horn-rimmed spectacles moved up to the public microphone.

'*At lunchtime today,*' he said. '*The Council received new information regarding the application for new housing at Claybridge Farm . . . and as a consequence is obliged to defer its decision to allow for consultation with local heritage and the war museum . . .*'

Cheers came from the growing crowd.

'*Stewart's in the studio waiting,*' someone shouted across.

'*Get the property developer!*' said the producer, wiggling his pen at Malcolm Mollet's dad.

The presenter approached Malcolm Mollet's dad, with cameraman and soundman in tow. She put an earphone into his ear. '*Look to camera please. Are you ready? And, Action!*'

Snatching a sideways glimpse at the monitor, Connie saw Malcolm Mollet's

dad turning redder, and redder still as he bumbled into a mountain of words that became only mumbles to her ears.

The sound of an aircraft cut across filming. She watched Malcolm Mollet's dad spin his head angrily to the air and clutch hold of his greased-back hair with both hands. In her mind she saw Malcolm. Her chest fluttered and strength drained from her arms and legs.

'Cut! And go once more,' shouted the producer. *'Be smart and fast about it – I want us at Claybridge by two-thirty.'*

Connie fought to bend, rubbing skin and metal through her thin tights – her calipers annoyed her intensely today. She grabbed her mum's hand and pulled it close. *'Shall we go back now?'* she whispered.

Her mum nodded and tapped Charlie-Mouse on the shoulder. *'Tell your father we're going home,'* she said.

Chapter Thirty Two: A place in time

They waited by the open door to the pottery shop – Connie’s senses kicked with the warm essence of the still evening air stirred with the smell of damp clay and blueberry burst perfume. The windows trailed off their latches, pushed wide.

The Wendlewitch reached for more water. Splashing her fingers in the bowl, she began to slip shape into a bulging brown-grey pot spinning round and round on her wheel. She used her thumbs to draw the clay upwards and outwards, and her bowl grew into a useful form. She brought the wheel to a stop, and choosing a modelling tool, began to turn it by hand. She pressed the tool firmly, and worked until she met with the start of the pattern. With a satisfied ‘Hmmm’ she drew a thin wire underneath and drifted to the fireplace to place her pot into the one remaining space on the mantelpiece. ‘Come right in,’ she called, half hidden by one of the embroidered fire screens.

‘They’ve gone,’ Connie said. ‘Everything’s quiet.’

‘As it should be,’ returned the Wendlewitch.

Connie uncurled her fingers. ‘But we have to wait.’

‘Ah, the medal. Intelligence Corps.’

‘I’ve been thinking about her,’ Connie said.

‘Veronika has a story in both wars,’ said the Wendlewitch. ‘For certain.’

‘And Malcolm’s story?’

The Wendlewitch dropped her glasses to her nose. ‘That will be a question of timing.’

Connie picked up the hesitancy in the Wendlewitch’s voice.

‘Hey, he’s got to come back – hasn’t he?’ said Charlie-Mouse.

The Wendlewitch wagged her clay-covered gemstones over the top of her potter’s wheel – a flash contacted the two, and her purple-glittered eyelids juddered until she took her hand away.

He carried on undeterred. ‘His dad’s gonna notice.’

The Wendlewitch wiped at the surface of her wheel. ‘Either you can leave that to me, *or . . .*’

‘*Or what?*’

The Wendlewitch did not answer him. Instead she collected the pieces of blue and gold china cat from her workbench and began to join them.

‘Some finely ground bone china and good glue – she’ll be as good as new,’ she said. ‘Then we’ll put her back where she belongs.’

Connie looked up at the top shelf.

‘Oh no,’ the Wendlewitch said. ‘Not there.’ She opened out her large stepladder. ‘They deserve a place on your study desk.’

‘But—’ Connie said, searching deep within the Wendlewitch’s purple eyes.

‘No buts,’ the Wendlewitch replied. She climbed up, then down, and laid the china cat with the small inkwell next to its companion. ‘Call them a thank you.’ Her smile brimmed and spilled. ‘Mother loved the cats,’ she said. ‘As she loved Claybridge – the very first time she clapped eyes on it.’

Connie returned the smile. ‘I think I know that.’

‘You do?’

‘Yesterday . . . the photocard of Malcolm and the children at Claybridge. I

thought you were going to say something.'

The Wendlewitch rinsed and dried her hands, reaching for the mantelpiece. 'It's the only picture I have of my grandmother as a young girl,' she said. 'She looks so much like dear Kit at the very same age, don't you think.'

'Kit's your mother, isn't she,' said Connie.

As the Wendlewitch lifted a fingertip to the smile on her lips, the floor shook, pots rattled and Charlie-Mouse fell hard on the lion stool.

'Goodness me, seven-fifteen, and about time!' the Wendlewitch exclaimed. Drawing a remote control from her pocket, she zapped her buzzing kiln into silence. Without further word of explanation, she tucked the photocard in her pocket, settled a floppy purple hat on top of her wild, chestnut hair, and wended her way to the front of her pottery shop. The door banged shut leaving an echo of emptiness and anticipation, and a whirl of whispers.

The thrill lay siege to her. Connie cast an eye to the potter's wheel and pushed at the lion stool with one of her crutches. 'Dare you, Charlie,' she said.

* * *

Epilogue: Summer 1941 - Malcolm's deliverance

So close to the ships on the clear night horizon, even at eighteen thousand feet Malcolm believed he could almost touch. Soon the stray lights of East Brandenburg would be flickering like the last sparks from a bed of embers.

He didn't hear a thing. The flames caught hold, curling up to his window. He judged from the ochre in Veronika's eyes, it had to be now.

His stomach jolted with the rapid downward motion of the Lysander. Letting slip the controls, 'Jump,' he shouted. 'Jump!'

'Malcolm!'

He pitched after her into the black.

Black turned to grey, then to purple. Swirling round and round, his head cushioned in air.

It seemed like forever.

*

THE END