



*A Time for Peace*

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London W1F 8AN  
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First published in Great Britain in 2013.  
This paperback edition published by Allison & Busby in 2020.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-0-7490-2517-5

Typeset in 11/16 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by  
Allison & Busby Ltd

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Printed and bound by  
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

# Chapter One

Hull, East Yorkshire, February 1945

Snow was falling softly. Her footsteps made no sound as the young woman, Rose Ellerby, hurried along the dark, empty, war-damaged street, lit only by the silvery, shadowy moon. Ahead of her, the door of a public house was wrenched open and an airman stumbled out.

‘Heed the blackout, you fool,’ someone shouted and the door banged shut.

The airman fell to his knees, skidding on the snow-covered pavement, mumbling incoherent words as he tried to struggle to his feet.

Rose shrank back into the gloom of a shop doorway, waiting for him to pass by, but he tumbled backwards on the pavement. She decided to run for it and stepped from the shadows, her head bent against the now-driving snow. She was too late. The airman was there, standing in front of her, staring at her, blocking her way. She froze in horror.

He was broad and towered above her. The strong smell of beer on his breath filled her nostrils. Her heart thumped as he continued to stare at her, his dark, bleary eyes looking into hers, as if he were looking into her very soul. Filled with unease, she held her breath, a sharp pain creasing across her chest. Was he going to attack her? She prepared to defend herself, but wasn't sure whether her trembling legs would respond, when he spoke.

'Ellie, is that you?' His voice was unsteady and big tears rolled down his rough cheeks as he sobbed. 'I thought you were dead.' He held out his arms to her, huge, bear-like arms.

She pressed her body against the cold pub wall as far away from him as possible.

'I'm not Ellie. I'm Rose,' she managed to stutter.

The airman peered closer at her face, his expression one of disbelief and sadness. 'Not Ellie.' He swayed against her and she felt the crush of his body against hers. She wanted to scream, but no sound would come.

'Now then, what's this?' said a stern voice. 'Is he bothering you, miss?'

The airman shifted away from her, his face grief-stricken, as the dark outline of a policeman came into view.

With relief, Rose replied, her voice a quiver, 'No, just mistaken identity.'

The policeman eyed the airman thoughtfully, and then turned to her. 'You get off home, miss. I'll attend to matters.'

As she moved away, fast as her shaky legs would go on the snow-clad pavements, she glanced back over her shoulder. A shaft of moonlight caught the two men and she saw the policeman take hold of the airman's arm, talking to him as if he knew him.

Out of breath, exhausted, she reached Hill Street without meeting anyone else and slowed her pace. Passing the ghostly half of the street, her eyes were drawn to where houses had once stood so proudly. Now they were reduced to rubble by the heavy raids of the German bombers on the city, targeting the docks, factories and railways. In her head she could hear her father's voice as he read the newspaper: 'Bloody cheek. Why can't they say it's our city instead of "raids on a north-east coastal town"? That'll never hoodwink Jerries. They say when it's London and Coventry, and the likes.'

Rose went down the back passage, which ran between the terraced houses, and into the yard of number 9 Church Terrace. Their house had three bedrooms because, at some stage, the second one had been made into two, and downstairs was a front room, a kitchen and a tiny scullery. Here she lived with her parents and her brother, Freddie, a soldier, who was fighting in Europe. Stamping the snow from her shoes, she leant against the brick wall to catch her breath and steady her thoughts before going indoors. She didn't want to worry her mother about the incident with the drunken airman. Dad wouldn't be home, as he was on firewatch duty in the city centre. During the day he worked in the shipyard so they didn't get a chance to see much of each other.

'It's only me, Mam,' Rose called. She hung her coat on the hook on the back of the scullery door, kicked off her wet shoes and socks, wriggling her cold toes, giving them a quick rub with a rough towel before she slipped her feet into soft slippers, her only luxury. She glanced in the tiny mirror on the window ledge, which Dad used for shaving. Her blue-grey eyes had dark circles – too many late nights, extra shifts at the factory. Pulling off her headscarf, which

was tied up in a turban, she shook her shoulder-length blonde hair loose and went into the kitchen. A warm, comfortable room, with two easy chairs either side of the fireplace, a polished oak sideboard and wooden stools arranged round an oak table covered with a clean, checked cloth over a green chenille cloth. The walls were distemppered cream – plain with no adornments.

Mary Ellerby looked up from where she was sitting by the fireside, knitting socks for the troops. Once a pretty woman, the austerity of war and coping with make do and mend had etched worry lines on her kindly face, and her once-fair hair was flecked with grey.

‘Hello, love.’ She put down her busy needles and got to her feet. She reached for the pan warming on top of the side oven plate. The oven was the old, traditional type, which was fuelled by the open fire and great for keeping meals warm, especially as members of the family would arrive home at different times. She lifted the lid and gave it a stir, filling the room with its tasty aroma. ‘Nice bit of broth. Just a few carrots, onions, potatoes and an Oxo cube,’ Mary said.

But Rose was distracted as she looked on the sideboard. ‘No letter from Harry?’ She couldn’t keep the disappointment from her voice. Harry was her sweetheart, a soldier, fighting somewhere in Europe. They had met at a dance and fallen in love all within the space of a few weeks before he was posted abroad. Letters were their only contact.

‘Afraid not, love. If things are bad, Harry won’t get much time for letter writing. I saw his mother in the butcher’s queue and she hasn’t had one either.’

Rose knew her mother was trying to make light of the situation

and give her comfort, but hearing Harry's mother also hadn't received a letter didn't quell the longing and ache of the loneliness in her heart. What man would write love letters or pour out his heart to his mother? Yes, she sighed inwardly, Harry was a dutiful son and did write to his mother, but never about the secrets that she and Harry shared. They wrote to each other, sharing their innermost feelings of love and desire, and she had no wish to reveal them. They were engaged, although not officially, because Harry was saving up to buy her a special ring. Often they wrote about their wedding plans, dreaming of the day when they would be together in their own home. She sighed again. The war seemed to be going on for ever. Then a terrible thought struck her.

'Mam, you don't think anything has happened to Harry?'

Hearing her daughter's troubled voice, Mary glanced towards her, saying, 'Of course not, love. You'd have heard. It's probably as I said, his regiment is caught up in operations or something and there's no time for letter writing, so stop worrying.'

'We had a letter from our Freddie last week and he's in Europe.' Rose pouted. Then she immediately regretted her outburst, for she dearly loved her brother. On seeing her mother's despondent face, she went to hug her. 'Sorry, Mam,' she said.

Mary sighed, heavily. 'I understand your concern, lass, but I never could understand the cruelty of war.'

As they sat down to supper, anxious to change the subject, Mary asked, 'Anything happened at work today?'

Rose worked at Clarke and Sons' factory on a production line, filling soldiers' first-aid packs of surgical dressings into small tin containers. The cuts on her fingers were a constant reminder of her work because the tin was so sharp. She endured

what she did because it was war work and, like everyone else, she did it without complaint.

Rose told her mother snippets of gossip of a light-hearted nature, but she didn't mention anything about the sad, drunken airman who had frightened her earlier. After a while they were both quiet and Rose caught Mary's thoughtful expression.

'What's on your mind?'

Mary pushed away her empty plate, smiled and responded, 'Perhaps it would be nice for you to go to a dance once in a while.'

'But I've promised Harry . . .'

Mary cut in, 'It isn't natural for a girl of eighteen to shut herself away from a social life.'

Rose stared at her mother. What had brought this on?

'I go to the pictures with Sally every week, and I go to Mrs Carter's once a fortnight. I work extra to save up for when Harry's home for good. I want everything to be nice, so we can enjoy our life together.'

Mary stood up. 'I know, love, but a dance once in a while won't hurt.'

Later in bed, Rose always turned her last thoughts before going to sleep to Harry and her brother, Freddie. But tonight, another face appeared: that of the distressed, drunk airman, and she wondered what had caused his sadness.

A few mornings later on the early work shift, over the din of the factory noise, Sally Wray, Rose's best friend, yelled, 'Rose, are you coming to the dance at the barracks tonight?'

Rose shook her head, calling back, 'It's my night for going to Mrs Carter's.'

‘Lucky you.’ Sally grinned, rolling her large, brown eyes upwards.

Rose wished Sally would stop asking her to go dancing. It unsettled her. She didn’t want to break her promise to Harry. He wanted her to be true to him and not to think of her dancing in another man’s arms. For the rest of the day, she was content to indulge in daydreams about her and Harry’s future together.

Leaving work, she didn’t catch the bus to Mrs Carter’s, but walked to save the fare for her and Harry’s nest egg. She trudged along the street, still daydreaming. The snow had turned to slush, and she wished she had worn her old wellington boots.

Mrs Carter lived in a two-bedroom terraced house down Burleigh Street, off Holderness Road. Hungry, cold and shivering, Rose knocked on the door, which was always locked, even though Mrs Carter knew she was coming. Rose heard the shuffle of feet and the bolt being drawn back before the door inched open.

‘Take them wet shoes off. I’ve just cleaned the floor,’ was Mrs Carter’s greeting.

Rose fixed a smile on her face and said, ‘How are you, Mrs Carter?’

‘My lumbago’s playing up,’ she sniffed.

Rose moved into the kitchen to get near to the meagre fire in the grate, holding out her frozen hands to catch some warmth. The main reason why she was saving hard was because there was no way she was going to live with Mrs Carter once she and Harry were married.

She moved away from the fire and sat at the kitchen table, placed centre and dominating the cramped furnished room. What was for tea? There was no tantalising smell of food. Her stomach rumbled and she longed wistfully for her mother’s cooking.

She kept her pledge to Harry to visit his mother regularly, to see that she was all right, but it wasn't always easy being pleasant to Mrs Carter. Rose sighed inwardly and said, 'I haven't heard from Harry for a few weeks, have you?'

'No, I haven't. What does he care if I'm all right or not?' Mrs Carter sniffed.

Ignoring the whining tone, Rose asked, 'Do you think his regiment is on a mission?' Rose's heart contracted, hoping her beloved Harry wasn't in danger.

'How do I know? They don't tell me anything. I'm just his mother, left all on my own with no man to care for me.' She went to the pantry bringing back two cold meat pasties, bread and margarine, and a cake.

'Eggless sponge,' Mrs Carter said, placing the food on the table. 'If I had money I could get eggs on the black market, but I haven't so this will have to do.'

Rose glanced at the cold food, wishing for something hot, especially on such a wintry day. Instead she said, 'It looks nice, Mrs Carter.' She thought of Harry in some dark, dismal place. Was he thinking of her?

The next couple of weeks passed slowly. The sirens had sounded on several occasions, and Rose and Mary went down to one of the rows of air-raid shelters at the bottom of Hill Street, thankful each time that their lives were saved, though Ted Ellerby suffered a knee injury. Ted was a robust man, having fought in the Great War, so there wasn't much which would keep him from his duties of firewatching. He rarely missed a night, and Mary often feared for his safety. Frequently, as she sat of an evening, sewing or knitting,

with only the radio for company, she dreamt of happier times before the war. The nights when Rose and Freddie were young and tucked up asleep in their beds, she and Ted would talk together or have friends round for supper and a game of cards or dominoes.

Mary glanced at the clock. Rose would soon be home and with any luck so would Ted. It was a rare treat for all three to sit down for a meal together. She'd made a cottage pie with a tin of stewing meat she had been so lucky to buy from her grocer. It made tasty gravy, which Ted loved, and Mary had also managed to buy a crusty cob. She glanced up as the back door opened and Rose entered the kitchen.

'You look tired, love,' she said, sympathising.

Rose slumped on her father's armchair and replied, 'I'm shattered and I feel itchy and grubby. I'd love a bath in hot, bubbly water, just like I saw in the American film last week. But it will have to be a strip wash in the cold scullery,' she added miserably.

Her mother's cheery voice said, 'You have the next best thing.'

Rose looked up to see her mother with the biggest smile on her face.

'There's a letter.'

In an instant, Rose's whole being changed from one of gloom to one of delight as she jumped up, eagerly snatching the letter from the sideboard, recognising Harry's familiar writing on the envelope.

'I'll take it up to my room,' she announced.

'Tea in ten minutes,' called Mary, as Rose disappeared up the narrow staircase.

In her bedroom, Rose drew the blackout curtains and switched on the light. The thin beam of light disguised the

faded wallpaper and the worn patchwork quilt, but the highly polished chest of drawers shone brightly. She sat down on the edge of the bed.

‘Harry, my sweetheart,’ she said, kissing the envelope. It was then she noticed how thin the envelope was. Perhaps he had been in the thick of the fighting and only had time to pen a few lines. At least it showed he cared and knew she would be worrying about him. She tore open the envelope.

*Dear Rose . . .*

She sat on the edge of the bed in the cold room, her body bathed in sweat, her head spinning, her heart in turmoil. The letter, the words – they didn’t make sense. Was it a cruel joke? Then, in slow motion, she looked down at the single sheet of paper crushed in the palm of her hand. Releasing it, she held it between trembling fingers and forced herself to look at the letter again. But the words seemed to jig about the page, and she couldn’t focus, her mind was too numb.

From a great distance, Rose heard her mother calling her name. But she seemed incapable of replying because all her strength had gone from her body. She felt only a vast sense of emptiness and unbelievable despair as she curled up on the bed, buried her face in the pillow and wept.