

joined in, you could feel the panic building.

I took a deep breath, trying to keep calm. 'Stay here, Cliff. I'm going to find—'

A hand came down heavily on my shoulder. 'You, lassie, and you, laddie.' It was the man in charge. 'What you dithering here for?'

I tried to explain: 'My sister's in the toilet.'

'I've just checked the lavs. Ain't nobody left inside but us, sweetheart.' The second voice was a woman's.

Two sets of hands steered us towards the door. Before I could shrug them off, we were out on the pavement. The noises, the smells of burning hit me at once. I felt a jolt of pure, cold fear. Up in the sky, searchlight beams criss-crossed the darkness. Already, I could hear the faint *crack-crack* of our guns as the German aircraft got closer, and fought the urge to cover my head protectively with my arms.

'I don't like it, Olive,' Cliff muttered.

I didn't, either. And until we found Sukie I was the big sister, the responsible one. That was pretty alarming too.

'Don't worry,' I told him, a stupid thing to say but it was all I could think of. 'Sukie's probably waiting for us in the shelter.'

We hurried down the street after the last few

stragglers. By now the roads were almost deserted. On the corner, an air-raid warden waved frantically, the white stripes of his uniform dimly visible in the blackout.

'Hurry up, you lot!' he shouted. 'What you waiting for, Christmas?'

Still holding Cliff's hand, I crossed the road. Thankfully there in front of us was the tube station, busy with men, women, a few little children, who were heading through the entrance with packets of sandwiches and pillows under their arms. Moving amongst the crowd was a Women's Royal Voluntary Service person in her navy blue uniform, hurrying people inside.

'Come on, you two,' she said, seeing Cliff and me on our own without a grown-up. I was glad to have an adult take charge. 'There's going to be cake and board games laid on tonight. It'll be quite a party down there!'

Cliff, liking the sound of it, reached out to take her hand; in doing so he let go of mine. He was only a few paces ahead of me, going down the steps with the nice WRVS lady. I just happened to glance behind. At a sound. At a sense. *Something*.

There was Sukie, looking around in panic. The relief made my legs go weak.

'Sukie!' I yelled, waving madly. 'Over here!'

She was running away from the shelter. And fast too – faster than I’d ever seen her run before – her arms pumping like pistons. She didn’t turn, or slow down. I don’t think she even heard me.

The air-raid warden was yelling now. ‘Bomb incoming! Get down!’

He threw himself on to the pavement. I wasn’t quick enough. The telltale whistling came next . . . An eerie silence . . .

Then a *WHUMP* as the bomb hit just a few hundred yards away. The ground rocked underneath me. Air was sucked from my chest, making me gasp and stagger backwards, though somehow I stayed on my feet. Glass smashed, bricks fell, planes droned onwards. Everything swirled dizzily together. For a moment I didn’t know which way the sky was.

As the dust cleared, my stunned brain did too. Twenty yards or so up ahead was my sister. She was limping slightly, with one of her shoes missing, but still rapidly disappearing down the street.

‘Sukie!’ I cried again in frustration. ‘Wait! We’re here!’

She was searching for us, I was certain, and knowing her, she wouldn’t think to keep herself safe. She’d stay out here, not giving up until she found us. This was what terrified me. Cliff would be all right in the shelter

with the WRVS lady. What mattered was getting hold of Sukie.

Side-stepping the air-raid warden as he got unsteadily to his feet, I ran after my sister. The warden shouted something, I didn’t hear what.

‘Sukie! Slow down!’ I cried, gas-mask box bouncing at my hip.

She was too far ahead. A silly, random thought came to me of how nice her hair still looked as it swung against the green of Mum’s coat. Then panic. I’d never catch up with her. I’d a stitch in my side and even hobbling with one shoe, she was still too quick for me.

This part of the road had already been badly hit. The air was thick with brick dust and smoke, making me cough horribly. The road, full of potholes, was lined either side with blackened, shadowy shop fronts. Smashed glass from blown-out windows scrunched beneath my feet, and there was water everywhere, gushing past my feet. My ears were ringing. I felt light-headed too, as if everything was unreal – like I was watching myself in a film.

Still the planes kept coming. *Whoosh*. Silence. You could count the beats between. Then *thud* as a bomb hit. I was angry at my own feeble legs for not going any faster, but eventually I had to stop. Doubling

over, I gasped for breath. Up ahead, at last, Sukie was slowing down too. Thank goodness.

It was then I saw why.

Emerging from an alleyway was a man I didn't recognise. He was tall, with slicked-back hair, wearing a mackintosh belted tight around his middle. He looked wet through, like he'd waded through a river to get here. Sukie went right up to him and shook his hand. I stopped in the middle of the street, confused.

What was she *doing*?

They were talking now. It didn't look like a normal chat about the weather either, because their heads were close together and the man kept glancing behind him. He gave Sukie a piece of paper before taking her hand and squeezing it in both of his.

*Was* she out here searching for us, then? It didn't look that way.

All I knew was she'd left us in a hurry, and this was where she'd gone – not to the toilet or the tube station but to meet a young man. It was probably why she'd got glammed up in the first place. I didn't know whether to laugh or burst into tears.

'Sukie!' I yelled.

She spun round. A strange look flitted over her face. As the man shrank back into the shadows,

Sukie hobbled towards me, shaking her head.

'You shouldn't have followed me!' She sounded furious. Frightened. It made me scared too. I grabbed on to her coat sleeve; now I'd found her I wasn't letting go. As more planes droned overhead, she glanced worriedly at the sky: 'Oh hell! Get down!'

A terrific *WHUMP* pitched me forwards on my knees. All round I heard cracking sounds as windows bent inwards. Another bomb hit with a *THUMP*. Something heavy was falling nearby. I cowered down, too terrified to look.

A minute passed or it might've been an hour. I was too disorientated to be sure. When I did lift my head to look around the street was full of glass and water – a burst main soaked everything like a downpour. Sukie was nowhere to be seen. The ringing in my ears was deafening. Where the shop fronts had been before was now just a heap of smoking rubble.

I tried to stand. Only suddenly, there was nothing to stand *on*. The air filled with screaming and a horrid smell like burning hair. The sky flashed brilliant white. I felt myself lift up. Up and up like I'd never stop. There was no air to breathe. Then I was falling down again, very hard and very fast.

I don't remember the landing part.