


Rosie
GOODWIN

One Woman's War

ZAFFRE

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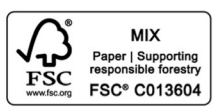
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Registered office address:
Block B, The Crescent Building
Northwood, Santry
Dublin 9, D09 C6X8
Ireland
compliance@bonnierbooks.ie

www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

This one is for my dear life-long friend Cheryl and her family on the sad passing of her lovely husband Phil, a devoted husband, father and grandfather.

Phillip Keen 2.2.1952–13.9.2025

He really was a truly lovely man. R.I.P Phil, you will be sadly missed by all who knew you.

Prologue

France, October 1914

Her eyes were adjusting to the darkness now as she peered ahead into the gloom. In the sea of mud that seemed to stretch for as far as her eyes could see, she could just make out the shapes of bodies slumped on the ground, and the sound of men screaming in pain echoed around her. It was like being trapped in a nightmare and tears poured down her pale cheeks as the stretcher-bearers raced onto the field. They stopped at each shape they came to, moving on to the next if the person was dead. They would be the last to be brought from the field if they were lucky. If not, they would be swallowed up by the mud where they had fallen. Those that were still alive were hastily put onto the stretchers and brought back to be loaded onto the back of the truck. The minutes stretched into an hour and then two until at last, Jim reappeared and climbed in beside her. He was covered in mud from head to toe with only the whites of his eyes showing and he looked weary.

'Time to go, Nurse, there's no more room in the back till the next trip.'

Annie nodded and with shaking fingers she started the engine and turned the truck around. The screams that were coming from behind her were unnerving and her heart ached as she thought of how much pain the men must be in.

'It's been bad today,' Jim confided as he felt in his pocket for his cigarettes. He offered one to her and when Annie shook her head, he lit one and took a deep drag on it to steady his nerves. It didn't matter how many times he did this job it always upset him to see

young men no older than himself with limbs blown off. Many of them bled to death before they could get to the hospital.

When they arrived, nurses helped get the injured inside, and then it was back to the battlefield to search for any remaining survivors. There were far fewer this time, despite the men scouring the field. Many were already dead, and they would be brought back on the final trip of the day and laid in the tent that served as a morgue.

By the time the last trip was over, Annie's nerves were in shreds. Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined such carnage and it had shaken her badly.

'Well done, Nurse Lilburn,' the kindly ward sister said. 'Go and get a hot drink and some rest now. And in the morning, you can go into the morgue with another nurse and collect the dog tags from the corpses so that we can get them buried.'

'Yes, Sister.' Annie shuddered at the thought. It had been bad enough to have to see their poor broken bodies piled into the back of the truck but the thought of having to touch them filled her with dread.

On legs that seemed to have developed a life of their own Annie walked to the canteen, the smell of death still in her nostrils. It had been a long, long day.

Chapter One

Nuneaton, February 1914

'Come on, let's get you upstairs so you can have a lie-down.' Annie took Maggie Lilburn's elbow and helped her to rise from her seat. She had just come home after closing the second-hand shop she ran in town to find Maggie sitting in a chair. She had suffered with mental health problems ever since losing her daughter some years before and recently it seemed she was getting worse.

Annie helped Maggie towards the door that led into the spacious hallway of the house in Swan Lane. There was no sign of a meal being ready so once she had settled her upstairs, she would have to make a start on preparing one.

Annie had lived with Maggie and her husband Levi for some years after Maggie had taken her from the local workhouse when she was a child. Levi and their son Charlie would soon be home from work and hungry for their supper.

She gently placed Maggie on her bed and put a blanket across her legs. As she turned to head for the door, she gasped. Just for a moment she could have sworn she saw the outline of a little girl standing close to the bed, but when she blinked and looked again there was nothing there. Her heart thudded with shock. She often found Maggie chatting to Penny, her daughter who had passed away, but was it possible that Maggie *could* actually see the little girl? Were there really such things as ghosts?

Once back downstairs, Annie sank onto a kitchen chair and took a deep breath to calm herself. But dinner wasn't going to

cook itself, so after a minute she went to the sink and started to prepare some vegetables.

She had just put some pork chops into the oven when Charlie came in and put his hat and coat over the back of a chair. He worked in an accountant's office in the town and was the brainy one of Maggie and Levi's three sons. When they were both at school, Charlie had been the one who helped Annie with her schoolwork and he had even taught her to speak French.

'Had a good day?' he asked politely.

She nodded. 'Busy, and yourself?'

He shrugged as he crossed to fill the kettle at the sink. 'Same as always.'

As Charlie measured some tea leaves into the pot they heard Levi's old horse, Dobbin, plod down the side of the house and, glancing out of the kitchen window, Annie saw him leading the horse to his stable.

'Better make a full pot,' she told Charlie; Levi loved his cup of tea when he first got home. It was no wonder, really, after he had been working out in the cold all day. The rag-and-bone round could be pleasant in the summer when the sun was shining but it wasn't much fun during the winter months, not that Levi ever complained. Until not so long ago Annie had gone out on the rounds with him but she now ran the shop they had opened in town, selling some of the second-hand goods Levi collected.

Outside, Levi unharnessed the horse and led him into the stable where he gave him a brisk rub down and threw a warm blanket across him. Then after feeding him, he made his way into the kitchen.

'Hello, you two,' he greeted Charlie and Annie cheerfully as he dragged his flat cap off and hurried over to hold his hands out to the fire. 'Are Davey and Spirit not back yet?'

Davey Froggett worked alongside Levi and had recently wed Annie's close friend Eve.

'Speak of the devil, 'ere they are now,' Annie told him as Davey appeared in the yard outside and led Spirit into the stable.

Once he'd got her settled, he popped his head round the door and winked at Annie. 'All right are you, love?'

'I'm fine,' Annie said with a smile. 'Will you come in for a cup of tea afore you get off?'

He shook his head. 'No, I won't, ta, I'd best get 'ome to me wife.' He chuckled. 'I still can't get used to sayin' that. Ta-ra for now.' Then with a cheeky grin he closed the door and was gone.

'Have a good day, did you?' she asked Levi, as she laid the cups out.

He shrugged. 'So-so. It's allus quieter in the winter, as you know. But where's Maggie? Havin' a lie-down, is she?'

Annie nodded as she strained the tea into the cups. 'Yes, she's, er . . . not 'ad a good day from what I could see of it.'

'Oh.' He frowned. 'Chattin' to Penny again, is she?'

Annie nodded as she handed him his drink.

Levi had caught her doing it himself a few times lately and was sorely concerned. 'Hmm, I reckon she's gettin' worse again. I wonder if I shouldn't get Dr Brain in to have a look at her?'

'No, don't do that,' Annie said quickly. 'What I mean is, he'll just say she needs to go to Hatter's Hall again an' you know that does her no good. It makes her worse if anythin'.'

Maggie had already had one stay in the local mental asylum, and it had taken her a long time to get over it.

Levi looked unsure, so Annie rushed on, 'Look, I could cut my hours at the shop down through the winter. Peggy or Eve could manage on their own and then I'd be here more an' the missus wouldn't 'ave to be on her own so much.'

'But you already do more than yer fair share,' Levi pointed out.

Annie shrugged. 'I'm not complainin', am I? I could keep on top o' the book work while I'm 'ere an' give Maggie a hand wi' the household chores. *Please*, mister . . . Don't call the doctor in again just yet. Let's give 'er a bit longer an' see 'ow she goes, eh?'

Levi nodded. 'All right, so long as yer sure.'

Charlie drained his cup and stood up. 'I'm off to get ready then. I'm going to Coventry tonight.'

'But what about your dinner?'

'Oh, don't bother wi' anythin' fer me. I'll get somethin' while I'm out,' he said, avoiding Annie's eyes.

'Is, er . . . everythin' all right atween you an' Charlie, Princess?' Levi asked when he had left the room. 'Only I can't 'elp but notice there seems to 'ave been a bit of an atmosphere atween you two fer the last few weeks.'

'We're fine.' Annie felt her cheeks flame as she busied herself at the cooker, and thankfully no more was said. Until recently, Charlie had been her hero and she'd been quite smitten with him. That was until she'd found out about his friend Peter and he'd confessed that he was a homosexual. Annie didn't know what to think. She dreaded how Maggie and Levi would react when he told them and just hoped that it wouldn't push Maggie over the edge mentally.

Half an hour later, after Levi had washed and changed and fetched Maggie from upstairs, they sat down to eat together.

'Mmm, this looks delicious, hinny,' Levi said as he forked a piece of juicy pork chop into his mouth. He glanced at Maggie who was pushing her food about the plate and urged her, 'Come on, pet. Eat up. You ain't as far through as a line prop.'

'It's fashionable to be skinny now,' Maggie told him dully, and he chuckled. No matter how ill Maggie was she was still a slave to fashion. She had to have the latest gowns and the best of everything. It was a far cry from when they were first married and barely had two ha'pennies to rub together. Moving to Swan Lane from the little courtyard in Abbey Street some years before had been a huge step for them and Levi had hoped it would satisfy Maggie. But then she had insisted that the house be furnished to a high standard too, and over time he had lost count of how much

she had spent fulfilling her dream. Sadly, none of it had compensated for the loss of their only daughter, Penny, who had been killed in a road accident at just four years old. At the time Levi had feared Maggie would not survive it, and she had suffered ever since, speaking regularly to the dead child as if by doing this she could cling on to her.

'So,' Annie said brightly, hoping to keep the mood light, 'Davey and Eve certainly seem very content in the rooms above the shop.'

Levi smiled. 'When you marry someone yer love – *really* love – yer'd be happy livin' in a shed, wouldn't yer, Maggie? Why, we were poor as church mice but it didn't bother us back then.'

When she didn't reply he lowered his head and concentrated on his meal in silence. Annie was glad when it was over.

'I think I'll pop round to Peggy's an' tell 'er that I'll be finishin' at lunchtime each day now fer a while,' she told Levi when she had washed and dried the dinner pots. She still felt shaken after the strange vision she had seen in Maggie's room.

He looked up from the newspaper with a frown. He was greatly concerned about all the trouble abroad and was praying that it wouldn't affect the family, but he forced a smile as he told her, 'Aye, you do that, pet.'

Some minutes later, as Annie walked down the side of the house, she noticed someone standing at the bottom of the drive. When she saw that it was Reggie, their neighbours' son, smoking a cigarette, her stomach sank.

'Ah, I thought you'd be out if I waited long enough,' he said, flashing her a smarmy smile. 'I thought perhaps we could go for a drink or something?'

'Thanks, but I 'ave things to do, and I'm seeing Monty later,' Annie answered shortly and strode straight past him. Monty was Reggie's younger brother and Annie was very fond of him, but Reggie was a different matter entirely. He made her feel uneasy

with his constant pursuit of her. She often wondered how two brothers could be so different.

Scowling, Reggie dropped his cigarette and ground it out with the heel of his boot. Jumped up little bitch. Who did she think she was anyway? She was just a kid from the workhouse, a nobody, the lowest of the low, yet she wouldn't give him the time of day! It didn't stop him wanting her, though. In fact, the more she rejected him the more of a challenge she became and one day he'd have her, by God he would, by fair means or foul. Thrusting his hands deep into the pockets of the expensive overcoat he stormed away.