Under the Apple Tree

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Chapter One

The Taylor family already knew what they would find when they crept out of their Anderson air-raid shelter on that bitter morning of 11 January, 1941. Huddling together on the two camp beds that Dick Taylor and his son Terry had set up before Terry had gone away to sea, they had listened in fear to the tumult outside and, when the ground beneath them swelled and shook, when the very air seemed to collapse in the roar of that almost unbelievable explosion, when they knew that their own house must have been hit, they had clutched each other in terror that they were about to be blasted from their hiding-place.

The sheets of corrugated iron that formed a shelter over the hole Dick and Terry had dug, had rattled and shaken about them, and earth had crumbled through the cracks between them. But they had held firm, and when the crash of falling masonry and the smashing of glass had ceased, Dick and Cissie and the others were still alive. Alive – but not yet safe. It was another six hours before the All Clear sounded and they dared to creep out and see, in the cold, grey light, what had been done to their home.

'It's gone,' Cissie whispered, covering her face with both hands. 'Oh Dick, it's all gone. Our home, all our furniture – everything. *Everything*.'

'The bastards,' he said slowly, staring at the huge pile of debris. 'The bloody, bloody *bastards* . . .' He broke into a fit of coughing and bent over, his thin shoulders shaking with the effort, while Cissie steadied him with her arm.

'We might be able to salvage a few things.' Judy took a

step up the garden path. Her fair hair, cut to a short bob, was tousled from the night in the shelter and her eyes were gritty and sore. 'We might be able to get a few bits and pieces out.'

'Bits and pieces!' Cissie shook her head. 'That's all they'll be – bits and pieces. There won't be a thing left whole. It's not even any good searching.'

Judy went forward just the same, with her Aunt Polly close beside her. Polly had been living with the Taylors ever since her husband Johnny had been lost at sea in the early days of the war. At thirty-five she was twelve years younger than Cissie, and the same number of years older than her niece, thus she was more like a sister to twenty-two-year-old Judy and they had long ago dispensed with the title of 'Aunt'. Now, as they crept up the garden path towards the mound of broken beams, shattered glass and tossed bricks, they reached out to each other and touched hands.

'It's awful,' Judy said shakily. 'Everything smashed to bits, just like that. And what for? Why us? The man who dropped that bomb doesn't even know us. Why are they doing it, Poll?'

'It's not just us,' Polly said quietly. 'You know that. Look at what's been happening in London and all those other places. We're all getting it. And I reckon Pompey got it as bad as any last night. Look – you can still see the flames. It looks as if the whole city's on fire. There must be thousands like us, bombed out of their homes. And thousands killed too, I expect. At least we're all alive.' She bit her lip and Judy knew that she must be thinking of Johnny. 'Thank God we were down in the shelter.'

Judy nodded. There had already been over thirty raids on Portsmouth. The people had grown used to the eerie wail of the siren and the frantic dash for shelter. They had heard the thunder of the explosions and felt the earth quake as craters were blasted into roads, and houses demolished. They had emerged into devastated streets, picked their way

through the rubble and seen dead and injured lying like broken dolls where they had been flung. They knew what had happened in London and Coventry. Yet they were still not prepared for this terrible Blitz. Perhaps you never can imagine the worst, she thought. Perhaps you always do think it'll never happen to you.

She had almost refused to go down to the shelter the night before. She hated the confinement of the small space half underground, with the corrugated iron curving low over their heads. But the family's insistence had forced her to conquer her fears and now, seeing the ruin of her home, she was thankful. If they'd let me stay indoors, she thought, I'd be dead now, buried in all this rubble.

They paused and lifted their heads. A pall of dust and filth hung about them like a fog, filling their mouths and noses with its grit and stench. The sky was blackened by smoke, shot through with searing flashes of red and orange flame. Judy stared at it and felt her heart gripped by dread.

'And how long are we going to stay alive?' she burst out. 'We were lucky not to get a direct hit on the shelter. They'll come again, Polly, they'll keep on coming till we're all dead.' Tears were pouring down her cheeks. 'Look at that. Our house. Our *home*. Nothing left. All Dad's books and Mum's sewing things, and our Terry's gramophone and all our records, and your Sylvie's dolly that she left to keep you company while she's away, and – and . . .' Sobbing, she ran forward and began to tear at the rubble.

Polly gripped her arm tightly and drew her back.

'Leave it, Judy. Cissie's right – we won't find anything here, and it's dangerous to try. We'd better—' She stopped abruptly and her voice rose with a touch of panic. 'What *do* we do now? What *do* people do when they've got nowhere to go?'

They stared at each other and at the jagged ruins of their entire street, then turned their heads and saw their neighbours, also homeless, coming out of their own shelters,

and they heard the wail of fear and grief and anguish that must surely be echoing around the entire city – perhaps in every city in the land.

'It's hopeless,' Judy said, her voice trembling. 'We can't win against this, Polly. They're going to invade. They must be. They might be here already, for all we know. They're going to do the same to us as they've done to all those other countries, and we haven't got a chance.'

Polly stared at her. Her grey eyes, so like Judy's and Cissie's too, hardened, and her mouth drew tight. She shook Judy's arm and her voice was low and fierce.

'Don't say that, Judy! Don't *ever* say that. We're not going to let them win. We're not going to give them the chance. Remember Dunkirk! They didn't beat us then and they won't now. They'll *never* beat us. Never!'

Gradually, the people who had been bombed out of their homes that night began to sort themselves out.

'There was an ARP man round just now with a loud hailer. He says we've all got to go to the church hall,' Mrs Green of number three told Cissie as the Taylors straggled out of the back alley at the end of the street. Everyone was out now, standing and staring in dumb stupefaction at the destruction. Of the houses left standing, none had a single window with glass in it, most had lost their chimneys and several had their fronts torn away, so that the rooms inside were exposed for all to see, like those of a dolls' house. Mrs Green's bedroom wallpaper, that she'd been so proud of when she'd had the room done up just before the war started, was ripped and dirty, and there was a mass of laths and plaster all over the bed. The bath was full of broken slates and the lavatory hung half off the wall, with water pouring out of the cistern above it. The floors had broken away and there were boards, ceiling joists and all manner of rubble piled in the downstairs rooms.

'Look at that,' she said bitterly. 'We put all we had into

that house. Our hearts and souls. And look what they done to it. All smashed to bits.' She turned away, her face working. 'We'll never get it back to how it was, never.'

Cissie shook her head. 'How many d'you think have been bombed out like this? What's it like in the rest of Pompey?'

'Gawd knows. That ARP bloke says the whole city's been blasted away. All the big shops out Southsea way have gone – Handley's, Knight & Lee's, all them – and the big Co-op down Fratton has burned to a cinder, *and* the Landport Drapery Bazaar, *and* Woolworth's, *and* C&A.'

'And the Guildhall too,' someone else chimed in. 'He said the Guildhall's still burning. So are the hospitals – the Eye and Ear, and part of the Royal – and the Sailor's Rest, and the Hippodrome and—'

'Blimey, ain't there nothing left?' Dick asked, his chest wheezing.

Judy stepped forward quickly. 'The Guildhall's gone?' She turned to her mother. 'I ought to go there.'

'But we don't know where we'll be. If we've got to go to the church hall . . .' Cissie stared at her, white-faced and frightened. 'What can you do anyway, if it's all burned down? You can't go off now, Judy.' Her voice rose. 'And there's your gran too, all by herself up in April Grove – what about her? Someone ought to go round to see if she's all right.' She shook her head worriedly. 'I just don't know what to do first. I don't know what to do for the best. Oh dear.'

'I'll go to Gran's first, but I really ought to try to get to work. There must be all kinds of stuff to sort out.' Judy gazed back helplessly, and Polly came to her rescue.

'People have got to try to carry on just the same, Cis, you know that. It's the same for me. I ought to go round the salon to make sure things are all right, though I can't think there'll be anyone wanting their hair done today.' Automatically, she put a hand to her own hair, dark like her sister's and still tousled from the night spent in the shelter. It felt

gritty from the dust that still hung in the air, and she grimaced. 'Well, maybe there'll be a few. I reckon mine could do with a good wash, for a start . . . But Judy's right, the Guildhall's important, it's where the city's run from. If you can go into Mum's first, Judy, it would set our minds at rest. I'm sure she'll be all right, mind, she's got a good shelter.' She turned back to Cissie and took her arm. 'You and me and Dick'll go to the church hall and see what's what, and Judy can come over once she's found out what's going on. Come on – Dick's getting shrammed with cold, stood out here with all this dust getting down into his lungs and all.'

Cissie stood undecided for a moment, then Dick coughed again and she nodded. 'You're right, it's not doing him no good at all being out in this cold air with all this smoke about.' She glanced up at the blackened sky. 'There's still places on fire, you can see the flames.' A fresh thought struck her and her voice began to rise again. 'And look at us, got nothing but what we're standing up in – my best coat gone, and that nice red frock you made yourself, Poll, and that warm jumper I knitted Dick for Christmas. I don't know what we're going to do, I don't really.'

'Don't worry about that now,' Polly said gently. 'Come on, let's get down the hall into the warm, they'll sort us out. I dare say they've got clothes and other stuff. Come on, Cis.'

Cissie nodded. 'All right. We can't do nothing here, that's for certain.' She took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. 'Now then, Judy, you make sure you come back the minute you can, and you will look in on your Gran, won't you? She ought to have come up to us like I wanted, not stopped down there by herself where we don't know what's happening to her . . . Dick, are you all right?'

He nodded, though he was holding his chest as if it pained him. 'This blasted dust, it's everywhere. It's plaster dust, you know – it's that fine it gets right down inside.' He

coughed again and Cissie clicked her tongue. 'Lot of use I'm going to be,' he said bitterly. 'Useless article.'

'Now you're not to talk like that,' his wife said sharply. 'You did your bit in the last lot, that's why you're like this now. Come on, we're going down the church hall; they'll have somewhere to sit down there and a nice hot cup of tea. That's what we all need.' She started to move away, her hand hooked firmly through her husband's arm, and then turned back to Judy. 'You do whatever you can for your gran, Judy, and come back once you've found out what's happening. If we get sent on anywhere else we'll make sure the people at the hall know the address.'

Judy watched them go, torn with doubt. She wanted to support her mother and help her father and she was racked with fear for her grandmother, all alone in her own small terraced house. But as well as her concern for the family there was her loyalty to her job at the Guildhall offices and her anxiety for the people who spent the nights there – the Lord Mayor himself, who had moved in when the bombing started, and the ARP staff. What had happened to them, if the Guildhall had been destroyed?

She turned and made her way through the streets, passing groups of people scrabbling through the debris in search of possessions or – even worse – for family members or neighbours who had been buried. At every turn, she longed to stop and help, but you couldn't help everyone and her fears for her grandmother grew. Suppose she hadn't gone to the shelter – suppose her house had been bombed before she could get out – suppose the Anderson itself had had a direct hit! Everyone knew they couldn't stand up to that. Suppose her granny was even now lying under a mass of twisted metal and earth and stones, crying for someone to come and rescue her . . .

It was impossible to get through some of the streets, and although she knew the city well, Judy often found herself

stopping and gazing helplessly at an unrecognisable landscape. Some streets were blocked off by fire engines and long, snaking hosepipes, with firemen and ARP wardens and police waving at people to get back from craters or suspected unexploded bombs. Time and time again she was turned back and had to find a different way through streets and alleyways she had never seen before, until she began to despair of ever finding a route out of this nightmare.

At last, when she had almost given up hope, she found herself in September Street, at the top of October Street which led down to April Grove, and she broke into a run. There had been some damage here – slates torn off, windows smashed in, and towards the bottom of the street a whole house ripped to pieces, leaving a smoking gap between its neighbours. Her heart in her mouth, Judy came to the little row of houses that ran along the end and then let out a long breath of relief when she saw that the street had been virtually undamaged.

She came to the front door, varnished and polished by her father just before the war had started, and hammered on it, calling at the top of her voice. 'Granny! Gran – it's me, Judy. Are you there? Are you all right?'

'She ain't there, love.' The voice brought her whipping round, to stare in dismay at the wrinkled face of the old woman who lived next door. Then the crumpled lips stretched into a toothless grin. 'She's gorn round the church hall, see if she can 'elp out a bit. Got all the bombed people there, they 'ave, givin' 'em soup and cupsa tea and that. I told her, I could do with a cuppa meself after the night we bin through, but she never bit. Anyway, thass where she's gorn.' She blinked her rheumy eyes at Judy. 'You don't feel like a cuppa tea, I s'pose?'

Judy shook her head. 'I'm on my way to work, Mrs Kinch, but I wanted to make sure Gran was all right first. I'd better go and see if I can find her.'

She ran back up to October Street. The church hall was

about a quarter of a mile away, across the railway line and past the shops. It was crowded with people, all looking bewildered and lost, but she caught sight of the brisk little figure standing behind a long trestle table, wielding a teapot, and pushed her way through the throng.

'Gran! I've been looking for you! Mrs Kinch said you'd be here. We were worried.'

Alice Thomas looked round and gave her granddaughter a quick nod. 'Judy. I was wondering about you, too – thought I'd come up and see once I'd finished here, but the rate we're going it don't look as if we're ever going to finish. Must be thousands bombed out, thousands . . . How d'you get on down home? Any damage round your way? I hear the Guildhall's on fire, and the Landport Drapery Bazaar, where young Jean Foster works, and God knows what else down Commercial Road.'

Judy stared at her miserably. 'Gran, the house was bombed. Everything's gone – everything. Mum and the others have gone to our church hall – we've got nowhere to go. All we've got left is the Anderson!' She began to cry, covering her face with her hands, swept by sudden desolation. 'Oh *Gran*.'

Her grandmother put down her teapot and came quickly round the end of the table. She laid her arm round Judy's shoulders and led her back behind the table, pushing her gently down on a pile of blankets. 'You sit there, love, and I'll get you a cup of tea. I don't suppose you've had a thing to eat yet, have you?'

Judy shook her head. 'There wasn't anything *to* have. And no kettle or anything. Oh Gran, what are we going to do?' She gestured helplessly round the hall. 'All these people – all of us with nowhere to go and nothing left but what we stand up in. What are we going to *do*?'

Alice handed her a thick white cup filled with dark brown tea. 'Drink that, for a start. It's nice and sweet – good for shock. And stop talking about having nowhere to go. Of

course you've got somewhere to go! You'll come and stop with me, that's what. Haven't I got a house all to myself? I knew I was right to stay on there instead of giving it up and coming round to you. Fine state we'd have been in if I'd done that! Now, you drink that up and you'll feel better, and then you can give me a hand here.'

Judy shook her head. The tea was hot and warming, and she barely noticed the sweetness. She drew in a long, sobbing breath, then said, 'I can't stop, Gran, I've got to try to get to work. Goodness knows how long it'll take me – it's terrible out there – but I've got to try. And I must find Mum and Dad and Polly first, to tell them you're OK. If we can come to you for a few nights, while we get sorted out . . .'

'Few nights nothing!' Alice said smartly. 'You'll come for the duration. They won't find you nothing better, I can tell you that, not with all these other people needing a place. Now, you're not leaving here without a bit of food inside you. There's some bread and marge at the end of the table, and another cup of tea wouldn't do you any harm.'

'No thanks, Gran, but I'll take the bread to eat on the way.' Judy pulled herself to her feet and bent to give her grandmother a kiss. 'I'll see you later, back in April Grove. Don't overdo it, mind.'

'Cheek!' Alice said, poking out her tongue. 'I could give you youngsters the runaround any day. Mind you tell your mum and dad what I said, now. I'll expect you all for tea at number nine.' She filled her teapot from the steaming urn and turned back to the queue. 'Now then, love, you drink this. It's nice and sweet, good for shock. You'll feel all the better for it . . .'

Judy headed for the exit and set off back to the hall where her mother and father would have gone. After that, she'd get down to Commercial Road and try to find out what was happening at the Guildhall, and where the office staff should be going.

Back outside, it seemed like hours since they had crawled out of the Anderson shelter to find the house blown into oblivion. Yet the sky was still darkened by the pall of stinking smoke, and the streets were still crowded with people, wandering bewildered and stunned by all that had happened during that terrible night. It was as if day had decided not to break, as if the sun had taken one look at what was happening and turned away its face.

The sun would come back though, she thought. It would come back when the sky had cleared, and let light back into their lives. As Polly had said, they weren't going to let the Germans beat them. They wouldn't give them the chance.