

Excerpt from The Promise

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**THE
PROMISE**

A Historical Romance
Novel

Prologue

Rose Elliot

Summer 1939
Whitby, England

We ran down the street hand in hand. Our fingers parting as Will increased his speed. He looked over his shoulder at me dallying behind.

“*Come on, Rosie!*” The wind carried Will’s voice to me, as he ran down the steep embankment that zigged and zagged down to the promenade and the westside beaches of Whitby.

I laughed at him as the wind took hold of his dark blonde hair, sending it flying upwards like a plane’s propeller. His brown check trousers blew around his lean legs, showing off the tops of his brown Oxford shoes. A pair of braces were clipped onto the high waist of his trousers, preventing the wind from catching hold of the blue cotton shirt, and from billowing out around his slim body. Over his shoulder was a brown hessian sack containing kindling, matches, and hopefully a blanket to sit on. I didn’t want to get my dress covered in sand.

Will was gaining speed from the steep decline of the embankment, as he ran, turning sharply as the path zigged the other way. If he wasn’t careful, his momentum would outrun his legs and he’d be tumbling the rest of the way down. Me, I wasn’t in that much of a hurry. I’d take my time. Keep upright.

Slowly, I made my way down, fighting against my legs’ requirement to move faster. The skirt of my green gingham dress flapped behind me, outlining my slender legs. The capped bell sleeves were tight against the tops of my arms, as I spread them out wide at my sides, to keep from tumbling forward, down the embankment.

I looked below to see Will stumble onto the concrete surface of the promenade. He regained his balance and ran towards the steps to the beach. I stopped as I hit the promenade. Bending down, I slipped off my white canvas sport shoes, undoing the T-strap, and pulling off my white ankle socks. He’d have to wait for me. I wasn’t prepared to let the sand stain my new canvas shoes. Stuffing the socks inside, I began running after him. My long black hair started to unravel from the pins that held it up in Victory curls at the sides.

“*Come on, slow coach!*” Will shouted again.

He’d made it to the beach and the rocky area away from the multicoloured beach huts. The tide had come in, gone out, come in again, and was quickly making its way out. I smiled at myself as Will stood on the wet sand, flapping his arms above his head at me. His sleeves were

already rolled up past his elbows in readiness to make a fire. We'd known each other all our lives, and still, it showed how little he knew me, if he thought his waving arms could get me to the beach any faster. Besides, if I was too quick, he'd rope me into helping build the fire.

It was unusual for us to be on our own. Normally, James Chappell would tag along. We were a threesome, always had been, ever since we'd been little. Things changed ever since Will and I had become an item.

We'd been born three months apart of each other. Will had come first in April, then came Jimmy in July. I was last in October. Our parents had loved this fact, being good friends. That was until they'd realised how much trouble we could get into together... then they'd groaned like the blazers.

Over the past few months, things had started to change. My feelings for Will developed past the boundary of friendship, into something so much more. There was a magical spark between us. Selfishly, I'd wanted to see where this new spark would take us. My only problem was Jimmy. I'd known for some time that Jimmy loved me and wanted us to be more than friends. How could I tell him that I was in love with Will, without hurting him? I'd become a bit of a coward. Choosing to ignore it. Hoping that Jimmy would come to understand this on his own. I cared for Jimmy and couldn't bear to see him hurt. Knowing that I was the source of his pain made it even harder for me to endure. Mum had this saying, *'Ignorance is bliss.'* I'd latched on to that saying for my own benefit, rather than Jimmy's.

By the time I joined Will, he'd just about finished building the fire. I smiled as I walked past him, hips swaying, to sit on the blanket he'd placed, half on the rocks, and half on the sand. I watched him as he moved around the beach, collecting rocks to place around the small pile of wood. Will caught me watching him. I laughed as he playfully selected one of the larger rocks, raised his right eyebrow at me, smiled, wiggled his bum, and started to pick up the rock as though it weighed a ton.

I placed a hand on my chest. "Why, I do declare William Aarons. Aren't you just the strongest man ever?"

"And don't you go forgetting it, Rose Elliot. Otherwise, I'll be turning into the big bad wolf and blowing your house down."

I pretended to look shocked. "I'm not sure what mum would say if you did that, but she'd certainly be reminding you that *you're not too old to be placed over her knee.*"

"Your mum's one scary lady."

"She sure is, Will."

Still smiling I turned my face into the wind, as Will continued to collect the rocks. I loved how the wind softly caressed my face and pulled at my hair. I began removing the rest of the pins from my hair, letting it hang loose down my back. The wind caught it, sending it flowing out behind me like a cape. I became conscious of Will's eyes on me. He liked it when my hair was down. He said that there was an untamed wildness about me when I left it unattended. It was one of the reasons I kept it so unfashionably long. I'd come to recognize the heat of desire that shone within his deep blue eyes as he looked at me, just like he was doing now. It made my stomach flip, as though I was on a ship as it sailed the wild waves of the sea. I avoided looking at him directly and stretched out my legs, leaning back against the rock, allowing Will's eyes further access to my body. I liked the way that he looked at me, eyes full of hunger and need. I also loved the fact that he found me attractive and that I could make him feel this way.

I lost myself to my musings for some time. However, once my mind returned, I began to feel impatience set in as I watched Will mess about with the bits of wood. The romance that I'd felt earlier was starting to die away to irritation, as time ticked on and the sun dropped lower in the sky. It seemed to be taking Will ages to light the fire. I was getting fidgety and cold. Silently, I cursed my eagerness to meet with him. Wishing that I'd been sensible and grabbed my cardigan off the kitchen stool when Will had come looking for me earlier in the afternoon. The sun had been high in the sky as we'd hidden from Jimmy within the tall wheat on the Armitage Farm. We'd cheerfully giggled into our hands, too wrapped up with hiding and the thought of being on our own, to think about how quickly the warm air would turn cold.

A small sigh escaped my lips as flames finally began to leap up, eating at the wood. Drawing closer to the fire, I spread out my hands towards the heat, and warmth instantly licked at my skin. Will came to sit next to me.

"Crikey Oh Will, I was beginning to think you were going to make me catch my death of cold, the length of time it's taken you to get the fire going."

Will pulled me into his arms. "I just wanted to be the one to warm you up."

I rolled my eyes at him. "I'm not sure what type of girl you think I am, William Aarons."

"I think you're my type of girl." I giggled at him.

Contentedly, I leant against his chest. Will rested his chin on the top of my head. Absently, his left hand gently stroked the side of my face. The gesture made me smile.

Everything was so perfect. Will's hard body against my back, his hand brushing my skin. I wanted the moment to last forever.

"Do you think we'll always be like this?" I asked as I drew pleasure from the simple closeness of our bodies.

"I don't know, but I hope so." The sound of the wood cracking under the flames drew my eyes to it. I watched the orange and yellow flames as they flickered in the wind.

Beyond the dancing fire was a feeling of dread. It sat deep within the pit of my stomach. My unease grew from recent news reports informing us of what was happening to the Poles, and all the stories of the Great War that the old folk seemed to be recalling with a lot more frequency, now more than ever before. It all made me feel very nervous. Something big was happening. The Government wasn't saying much. The doors to Parliament were closed. Still, I could feel fear rise inside my chest, and my heart began to pound.

I turned to look at Will, my eyes searching his. "What happens if we go to war? What then, Will? I don't think I could bear it, here on my own, wondering if you were coming back to me."

His beautiful blue eyes met mine. While there was a gentle, reassuring smile on his lips, we both knew that should there be a war, things would change forever. I was scared that the happy, idealistic dreams I had of our future together would never come to pass. Not all dreams are meant to come true, and reality is often different from how imagination works. However, I wanted this dream of Will and me to be one dream that came true. War would end that. I just knew it would.

In that moment, I knew I had to make Will understand the pain I carried deep inside me, put there by Granny Elliot's death.

"I'm scared, Will. I don't want to be like Granny Elliot. I know mum calls Granny Elliot's death a love story, but it wasn't a love story at all, Will. It wasn't. How could it be when Granny

Elliot was in such pain as she waited for Grandad Elliot to return from fighting in the Great War. She spent day and night wondering, worrying, thinking, "Is this it? Is this the day they come and tell me that he's dead?" When they did come, she broke, Will. There was no mending her. She died a year later. I don't want to be like that. I won't be like that. She became only half a person when Grandad Elliot died. And so terribly young. It was such a waste."

Will cupped his hands around my face. "It won't come to that, Rosie. Chamberlain's doing everything he can to stop it from happening."

I looked at Will for a long time, searching his eyes. "Nothing's certain, Will. You know that."

I looked down at my hands, then I raised my eyes to meet his. My breathing was shaky. My voice all but a whisper. Sadness, fear and frustration ate at my insides.

"I won't forgive you, Will, if you go and fight. I simply couldn't suffer the torment. Each day, wondering if you were still alive. If you were coming home to me. I'd be only half alive like Granny Elliot. I couldn't bear it.

"I don't want to waste my life wishing for what was or what might have been. I'm not that strong. I want to be free to live and be happy, not moping around the place, always thinking and worrying about you." Tears filled my eyes. "I sound quite selfish, don't I? Everyone keeps saying '*you're only young once.*' If that's the case, I want to make sure that I live my life to the fullest. Not spend it sitting at home with regret."

I felt Will's lips upon my own. I breathed in the scent of him. My tears kept falling as I kissed him harder, desperately wanting to remember the way he smelled, and the feel of his lips upon my own. I didn't question how I was going to stop thinking and worrying about him if he went to war. If I started asking too many questions, my head would do somersaults.

I threw my arms round his neck. Drawing him closer to me. "I love you, William Aarons. Don't you dare leave me."

"I'm not planning to, Rosie."

Chapter 1

Rose Elliot

11:00 a.m.
3rd September 1939
Whitby, England

I followed my parents, Jean and Michael, through the front door, as we returned home from St. Hilda's Church for morning mass. We didn't speak as we walked. Church was more of an obligation for dad and me. A duty towards mum, then the church itself. We were wise enough to keep our opinions to ourselves and be grateful that another Sunday service had passed. It was time to relax and enjoy our Sunday lunch.

While Father John gave his sermon, I'd often drift off thinking about Hilda, the church's name sake. Hilda of Whitby was a very important figure in the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity and is recognised for her wisdom that drew kings to her for advice. I quite liked this fact, being a woman myself. To me she was someone to aspire young women away from the home. Not that I would ever say this to my parents. Mum and dad would laugh at me. There was this old-fashioned belief that a woman's place was in the home, bringing up their children. I didn't entirely disagree with this but felt that women were more than just their children and home. I had yet to find my own way in life, unlike Will's sister Betty, who was a nurse. I was trained in nothing. Still, I was young and had a lot of time on my side to find my place in this world. It wasn't as if I didn't want children, I did. I just felt that there was more to life than a husband, kids, and home.

Mum's calfskin shoes echoed on the Victorian tiles as she walked purposely down the hall to the kitchen, grabbing her pink flowery apron from the stool that sat by the chopping bench. She strung it on over the top of her blue Victory dress with its short puff sleeves, preventing it from becoming spoiled as she prepared our Sunday dinner. I closed the front door behind me. I didn't bother to lock it. Whitby wasn't that type of place. Like most families here, we only locked our door when we went up to bed.

I turned and followed dad's limping form into the back-living room. I swear the gout in his left foot was getting worse. I could hear him complaining under his breath as he stripped off the jacket of his dark blue suit, revealing a pair of red braces on top of a white shirt. He loosened the tie, undoing the top three buttons of his shirt as he made his way to his chair. Dad hated wearing a suit for Sunday worship. He always complained, saying that God didn't mind how he looked, so long as he paid his respects and was a good Christian. Mum continued to ignore his complaints. I liked getting dressed up. It was probably the best part about going to church.

Father John was old and stuffy. His sermons were more like lectures on our morals, or lack of them, than the bible and the stories it contained. I didn't have a problem with the bible. One of my favourite passages was John 20:29 about Doubting Thomas: "*Because you have seen*

me, you have believed. Blessed are those who believe without seeing.” Being the romantic type, I often thought that this related to love as well. Love was an emotion you felt in every fibre of your body. From the blood that heated your veins to boiling point when you were with them, right down to the tingle in your toes.

My only other liking for Sunday, other than roast beef and Yorkshire puddings with roasted potatoes, was that it was the one day when putting on your best dress and the shoes with the little heel, impractical for a seaside town with its uneven paths and sandy beaches, actually made sense. I loved Sundays for this very reason – not that I ever voiced this. Mum would string me up for such thoughts, Sunday being God’s day and all.

I ran my hands over my plain yellow Tea-dress. It fell along my body, slimming down my waist. My brown sandals added three inches to my height. I felt pretty and even if the main thing about Sunday was praying and reflection, the best bit for me would always be feeling pretty. I’d left my hair unbound and the black thickness spilled down my back like ink. I placed my small brown handbag on top of the walnut sideboard as I came to stand by dad’s old wooden framed chair, with its thick, dark green cushions.

Being an only child, I was conscious of the fact that I was spoiled. Unlike most girls my age, mum and dad didn’t make me help around the house like other parents did. Mum had had three miscarriages before I came along. They had left their mark on her. Especially since she had been unable to have any more children after me. It never occurred to me to offer mum some assistance while she prepared our meal. She’d probably be so shocked she’d have a heart attack if I offered.

Dad bent and turned on the radio, which sat on a small table in the corner of the room. Picking up his pipe, he moved yesterday’s paper off the seat, and shook it out, loosening the pages, ready to read it. *Deep Purple by Larry Clinton and His Orchestra* filled the room. I hummed along, swinging my hips to the rhythm. The sun shone through the window, lighting up the dark yellow, flowered wallpaper. It was another beautiful warm day. I smiled happily to myself. After dinner I’d go find Will, and we could hide in Tom Armitage’s wheat field. Harvesting took place between August and September. If we were lucky, Tom would be running slightly behind schedule and we’d have a lazy day within the wheat. If not, we’d be forced to relocate.

The clock on the sideboard signalled the quarter hour. We’d been home for fifteen minutes when the music stopped, and Neville Chamberlain’s voice filled the room.

Mum took the few steps from the kitchen into the back-living room, wiping her hands on her apron, her face tight with concern. I lowered my hands off the wooden chair. My heart forgot it needed to beat as a chill of fear ran down my spine. Dad lowered his paper, removing the pipe from between his lips. Together we stared at the radio.

“This is London. You will hear a statement by the Prime Minister.”

The radio crackled and hissed briefly, filling the quiet silence as we waited to find out what the Prime Minister was about to say. Each crackle sent my pulse beating harder. The skin around my face tightened in fear.

“I am speaking to you from 10 Downing Street. This morning, the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German Government a final note stating that unless we heard from them by 11 o’clock, they were prepared to withdraw their troops from Poland at once, and a state of war would exist between us.

I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently, this country is at war with Germany.

You can imagine what a bitter blow it is to me that all my long struggle to win peace has failed. Yet, I cannot believe that there is anything more or anything different I could have done that would have been more successful.

Up to the very last, it would have been quite possible to arrange a peaceful and honourable settlement between Germany and Poland, but Hitler would not have it. He had evidently made up his mind to attack Poland whatever happened, and although he now says he had put forward reasonable proposals which were rejected by the Poles, that is not a true statement. The proposals were never shown to the Poles, nor to us. Although they were announced in a German broadcast on Thursday night, Hitler did not wait to hear comments on them, and ordered his troops to cross the Polish frontier. His action clearly shows that we cannot expect this man to give up his practice of using force to gain his will. He can only be stopped by force.

In fulfilment of our obligations, today, we and France will go to the aid of Poland, who is so bravely resisting this wicked and unprovoked attack on her people. We have a clear conscience. We have done all that any country could do to establish peace. The situation in which no word given by Germany's ruler could be trusted and no people or country could feel themselves safe has become intolerable. And now that we have resolved to finish it, I know that you will all play your part with calmness and courage.

At such a moment as this, the assurances of support we have received from the Empire are a source of profound encouragement to us.

The Government have made plans under which it will be possible to carry on the work of the nation in the days of stress and strain that lie ahead. But these plans need your help. You may be taking your part in the fighting services or as a volunteer in one of the branches of Civil Defence. If so, you will report for duty in accordance with the instructions you have received. You may be engaged in work essential to the prosecution of war, for the maintenance of the life of the people - in factories, in transport, in public utility concerns, or in the supply of other necessities of life. If so, it is of vital importance that you should carry on with your jobs.

Now, may God bless you all. May he defend the right. It is the evil things that we shall be fighting against - brute force, bad faith, injustice, oppression and persecution - and against them, I am certain that the right will prevail."

I stared at the radio in stunned horror. Dad got up, leant forward, and turned it off. I felt as though I was drowning as the silence in the room became oppressive, settling over us like a thick black smog, cloaked and undetectable by the naked eye. It sucked the air out of the room, until my lungs burned from lack of oxygen. Too scared to move. To breathe. Too shocked to react to the fear that burned inside me.

"Well, that's that then." I winced at mum's words.

The air returned and I took a mouthful of oxygen. I knew she was thinking about Granny and Grandad Elliot. I hadn't been born when the Great War had ended, but still, it had left its mark on me, as well as those around me. I watched mum, conscious that my perfect world was about to unfold before me. I couldn't think of anything to say that would make what was happening right. I simply watched in stunned silence as a tear rolled down mum's cheek, unable to comfort her, frozen in place as my fear held me captive. I could offer no comfort that would erase the memories of loss and hardship playing in mum's head. Inside my chest, my heart beat out a solemn song. I hated each beat. My hands shook. I didn't know what to say or do. I felt

lost on a tidal wave of emotions I couldn't control. All my fears were falling around me. Like hot volcanic lava, my fear burnt away at my hopes and dreams until there was nothing left of them but brittle little promises.

The front door crashed open, and Will came running into the back-living room, followed by Jimmy. They were still wearing their Sunday best – dark grey suit trousers and white shirts with the black braces clipped into place. Their ties, like dad's, had long been removed, and were probably disregarded and littering up their homes somewhere. My heart beat faster, pounding in my chest at a wild pace. I looked from Will to Jimmy. I could see the excitement shining in their eyes. While I understood that they didn't have a choice if they went to war or not, I couldn't help but feel angry at the buzz of excitement that radiated off them like an electric charge. They probably thought that by fighting, they were doing something worthwhile. Like Richard the Lion Heart galloping off on yet another crusade, while his people were burdened down with taxes.

What about those that would be left behind? In their eagerness, Will and Jimmy didn't see the destruction or death that war would bring. Mum did. I could see it in her eyes as they glistened with tears. She'd lived through it. I felt the shock that oozed off her. The disbelief. The uncertainty that cast its net round the room, threatening to erupt with emotion. I looked from Will's blue eyes, to Jimmy's brown ones. Different colours holding the same unforgivable excitement. Stupid fools with their eagerness to die. No thought for those they would leave behind. Of the worry that would cloud each day as they tried to carry on. Picking up the broken pieces that war brought.

“Don't you dare, don't you dare!” I screamed at them. “How could you, Will? You know how I feel.”

I stared at them both, their hair flopping into their faces. They were too young to go and fight. Too young to walk away from life. To lie dead in a trench or field somewhere. That's all I could think about... all I could see. Their lifeless eyes shining back at me. I couldn't take it.

“Don't be like that, Rosie. They need us. We've got to fight.”

Will tried to grab my hand. I pulled it away as though his touch burned my skin.

“That's not true. You don't have to fight, not if you don't want to. You could be one of those conscientious objectors. See, they can't make you fight, they can't.” I'd heard dad talk about conscientious objectors once. Little ears had listened and taken the information in, ready to be stored and recalled when needed, and I needed it now. I couldn't care less about the stigma that would taint them, living in such a small coastal town as we did, where most of the young men would be leaving to fight. All I could think of was keeping them safe and alive. That a stray bullet wouldn't break their skin and pierce their hearts.

“I can't do that, Rosie. I won't. You can't expect me to do something that isn't me, that I don't believe in.”

I looked into Will's blue eyes, searching for something to reassure me that everything would be ok. I saw nothing. It made my heart hurt.

I pulled myself together. Straightened my shoulders. “I won't wait for you, William Aarons.”

I thought back to when we were sitting on the beach, just the two of us. Our arms wrapped around each other. Life had seemed so simple. Now, only days later, as I looked at Will, everything I had believed in crashed to the floor and shattered into a million useless pieces. It would be impossible to put them back together. The pieces would no longer fit.

This time, when Will reached out for me, I let him. Gently, he lifted my chin. “You have the right not to wait for me, Rosie. I wouldn’t deny you that. But whether you like it or not, things are going to change around here. I’ll take up my role in this war. I lost my uncles and grandad to the Great War, and I stand here today proud of them. One day, I’m hoping to leave that legacy to my children. Our children. I’m not giving up on you, or us.”

“Don’t, Will, please.” If I started crying, I knew I’d never stop. All I wanted to do was throw my arms around Will’s neck and kiss him so hard, to make him understand how much I loved him.

“My prickly Rose, don’t you see that sometimes a person doesn’t have a choice?”

I stared into Will’s eyes, aware that no matter how much I wished things could be different, they wouldn’t be.

Before I could say anything, Will’s sister Betty came rushing in, her blonde hair framing her square face in soft waves. Tears were running down her cheeks and a white handkerchief was screwed up in her right hand. The cheerful colour of her lilac dress belying the graveness of the situation. I stepped away from Will.

“Oh Rosie, did you hear? We’re going to war.” I stared at Betty, unable to speak. “What’s going to happen, Rosie?”

I didn’t have any answers for her. All I could do was shake my head. For the first time, I wasn’t taking the lead in our friendship. I had no solution for her.

I caught Jimmy looking at me. Tears stung at the back of my eyes. *I’m not going to cry.* From the look that Jimmy sent me, I knew that he felt and understood my despair and fear.

I watched as he looked from Will to me. Saw the hurt that briefly fell across his face. In that moment, realisation had hit him. I was in love with Will. I looked away, unable to bear the pain so clear in his blue eyes. Maybe he felt like a fool for loving me, thinking that he could somehow make me love him. But it was impossible. I had always been Will’s. Despite the fact that his own heart must have hurt, there was still something that told me he would always love me. That he would do anything to make me happy. My heart hurt for him, but I couldn’t do anything about the way I felt for Will. As horrid as it must have been for Jimmy to find out that I loved Will, it was better that he finally knew. It would give him the freedom to look for love in someone else. Someone that could love him like he deserved to be loved. He nodded at me, as though my thoughts had imprinted themselves upon him. Did my face show the emotional torment that raged inside of me?

Jimmy stepped forward, coming to stand at my side. He placed a hand on my right shoulder. I felt its weight. It was the heaviest thing I had ever felt.

“I’ll look after him, Rosie, don’t worry. I’ll make sure that he comes back to you. I promise.”

I looked at Jimmy. He was the kindest person I knew. Despite myself, I burst into tears. I was going to lose them both.

Dad rose from the chair, the disregarded paper falling to the floor. “I’ll be there with you boys.”

Mum looked at dad, her annoyance making her frown lines deepen. “You sit back down, you silly old fool.” She pointed a finger at his left foot. “Look at you. You can hardly walk, never mind fight. You’ll be staying right here where I can keep an eye on you. There’ll be plenty of work to do when they go off to fight.”

Mums words echoed round and round my head, like they were on replay. I looked from dad to mum, to Betty, and Jimmy, and Will, with his dark blonde hair in disarray, falling across his face, his blue eyes still full of hope for us. He didn't see the end, but I did. Granny Elliot had shown me. I could see the excitement in his eyes at the thought of going to war, to fight for his country, for the injustice that Hitler was inflicting upon innocent people. I saw it all in the depth of his blue eyes. Pain stabbed at my heart.

I couldn't take it any longer. I pushed past Will, Jimmy's hand falling from my shoulder, and I ran from the room and into the street. The sun laughed down at me. Birds still sang a happy tune, while my heart broke, piece by tiny piece.

Chapter 2

William Aarons

1939

Whitby, England

I leant against the terrace house where I lived with my mum, Dorothy, and sister, Betty. The thick, wooden, brown front door with its oval window and honeycomb glass was hard against my back. Dad had died a little past my fourth birthday; Betty had been two. The thought of dad caused me to pause in my musing. Had it really been so long? I was suddenly conscious of how mum had kept his memory alive for us. There wasn't a day that passed when she wasn't remembering dad in some way. The worst was when Betty and I had done something wrong. She would look at the old photographs that sat on the tiled mantelpiece in the front living room, nod her head at dad's photo, and say "*If your father were here ... God rest his soul.*" Betty and I would know from that one sentence that we were in trouble. Dad's reach was very long, even in death.

Since Chamberlain had made his announcement, I'd found myself thinking about dad a lot more. It was hard pleasing a man long since dead, and Rosie at the same time. I loved them both. I was also aware that deep inside I was disappointing them. The problem was, I wasn't sure how I could make it right for either of them. I needed to fight in this war, not only for dad, but for me. Of late, I had found myself looking in the mirror whilst shaving, staring at a stranger. I could feel their sadness and disappointment at me shining in their blue depths. What was I doing, dallying like I was? Soldiers were needed now, not in a month or so. People were dying – allies, countrymen – and there I had stood looking in a mirror, at the man who should be fighting for what was right, and not ignoring his responsibilities. Then there was Rosie, her accusing glare ripping at my heart. There were no easy solutions. I could either risk losing the girl I loved or losing myself. The choice seemed rather harsh and unfair.

I looked down the row of terrace houses on Well Close Terrace where we lived. The rain from the last few days had finally stopped, and the sun was trying to make an appearance, if the clouds littering the grey sky would ever let it. There was an eerie silence that danced across the street, raising the hairs on the back of my neck. The cool wind blew at the dried-up leaves, their rustling the only sound that filled the area around me. The normal hum of children playing had disappeared and everything felt wrong. Was it an omen of things to come? A feeling of unease slid along my spine. I shivered.

Looking at the dark sky, I sent up a silent prayer that Rosie would forgive me. I needed to do this, for me, for dad, for my uncles. Still, I couldn't get rid of the feeling of trepidation that sat heavy in the pit of my stomach whenever I thought about Rosie. It made me doubt everything I believed in, all that I was about to do. Would signing up cause a rift between us, one that I wouldn't be able to mend? I hoped not. *This was torture.*

I lifted the collar on my dark brown, flecked-tweed overcoat, and pushed down the brown Fedora hat, preventing the wind from taking it as I waited for Jimmy to arrive with our transport. I shrugged, trying to rid myself of thoughts of Rosie and my uncertainty. My fingers touched the few coins in my pocket, and I began rattling them together.

Trying not to think about Rosie only made me think about her even more. My lips twitched and curled in a wry smile as her image appeared before my eyes. Her deep brown eyes searching mine, looking for answers that just weren't there. Her long black hair curled at the front in Victory Rolls, while the rest spilled down her back, wild and untamed, despite the curling irons. That's how I always thought of Rosie, like the flower she was named after – wild, prickly, intoxicating, and irresistibly beautiful.

It hadn't been easy for me, not signing up straight away. Not that I thought Rosie would ever understand. Life was a balance. That's what mum always said. It didn't seem balanced and fair to me now. Rosie was still upset, even two months after Chamberlain had delivered his speech. True to form, she refused to talk about it. I wanted to tell her that the war wasn't going away simply because she chose to ignore it. However, one look into those big brown eyes and my words got swallowed up, never to be spoken.

My dad, John, had been born in 1901. When the Great War had started in 1914, he'd been thirteen years old and very eager to do his bit. It had frustrated him that he'd been too young to fight, especially being the youngest of three brothers, all of whom had gone off to fight with his dad and uncles. I remember Grandma Aarons telling Betty and me about the letter dad had written to the Prime Minister at the time - David Lloyd Jones.

Dear Mister Prime Minister,

My name is John and I am 13 years old. I am very tall for my age and look a lot older.

I can ride a bicycle faster than anyone in Whitby, which is a coastal town and very hilly.

My dad has gone off to fight with my uncles and three older brothers. It seems jolly unfair that I should remain here, with mum, and while I know my mum would miss me, I would be very grateful if you would reconsider using someone with my great bicycle skills as a dispatch rider. You would not have to worry about the enemy getting any package, because they would never be able to catch me.

I know of some around here that have lied about their age and have gone off to fight. Mum has threatened to lock me in my bedroom if I tried to do this, and that she would wash my mouth out with soapy water if I were to lie. So, I have decided to be honest with you about my age, which I'm hoping you will look favourably on.

I'm sure with training, I would be a really good shot with a revolver, too.

*Yours affectionally,
John Aarons*

Despite dad's efforts, he never made it into the army during the Great War. Grandma Aarons said it had been the reason why he joined the armed forces as soon as he could – the need to fight, to continue to uphold everything that his dad had believed in, even in death, had been as

important to dad as his need for oxygen. Dad had missed his chance to fight alongside his dad, brothers, and uncles.

Thankfully, I didn't need to write a letter to the Prime Minister to allow me to fight. I was the right age already.

Children had grown up fast during the Great War and the effects of the war could be felt many years after it had ended. Even though the Prime Minister had not let dad fight, dad had still done his best to help and had sent his pocket money to the Blue Cross for the sick and injured animals and local military hospitals. I'd loved hearing Grandma Aarons' stories about dad. I could almost feel the heat from the fire against my back as I'd sat there listening to her.

Life had been hard for everyone during those long dark years of death, destruction, and little money. Granddad Aarons had died in 1915, not long after the Great War had started, leaving Grandma Aarons to bring dad up on her own. A year later, she had lost three of her boys. I always thought it strange how Grandma Aarons had never remarried like a lot of the other widows. Maybe she'd loved Granddad Aarons too much, a bit like Rosie's Granny Elliot, or maybe the Great War had just taken too much from her. Grandma Aarons had been the only girl born in a house of five brothers. By the time the Great War had ended in 1918, Grandma Aarons was the only one left alive. From her loss, I understood how devastating war could be. I'd never gotten the chance to know my uncles or great uncles, to be able to miss them like some did so many years later. Still, there were times when I was much younger when I would fantasise about how different things might have been if my uncles had lived. Maybe there would have been more support for mum when dad had died.

Not every soldier died by a stray bullet. You'd think it, given Rosie's attitude towards the war and fighting. Dad had died of a heart attack at home. Sometimes death came no matter where you were, or what you did. If only I could make Rosie understand. I just wish I could get her to lift her head out of the sand long enough to see this.

Over twenty-one years had passed since the Great War had ended, yet, as this new one began, I could almost feel its darkness creeping in. Whitby was changing. Old Widow Gilbert was redeveloping her 19th century Georgian house, The Turnstone, into a convalescent home for wounded soldiers. Jimmy's mum, Mary Chappell, was set to take up the role as Sister there. Makeshift blackout curtains were going up over all the windows in Whitby, along with anti-blast strips of paper, which we'd stuck to the panes of glass. The Government had issued specifications on the minimum lighting on cars. The orders were very strict, and instructions had been provided. I'd seen Jimmy using metal cutters on a Lyles Golden Syrup tin to put over the headlights of his granddad's car.

It hadn't been long after war was declared when Archie Fisher and Terry Dorson, who were in charge of patrolling the area between Whitby Station and Sandsend Tunnel, had captured two Germans. No military assistance had been offered and it had been left to us locals to patrol the area. Sandsend Tunnel had opened in 1883 by the Whitby, Redcar and Middlesbrough Union Railway, and we couldn't afford for our rail links to be compromised. I smiled as I thought about Archie and Terry. '*Captured*' was probably a strong word to use in their case. The German soldiers had walked up to them and turned themselves in. They'd apparently been suffering from exposure after spending several days in a rubber dinghy, after being shot down over the Firth of Forth, which is the estuary of several Scottish rivers that meets the North Sea on the north coast and Lothian on the south.

Gas masks had been issued, and some schools had been evacuated to Whitby from Hull. Hull was a port and would be prime bombing ground for the Germans. We'd also received warnings that air raids were imminent. Up to now, we had only received a false alarm. Still,

we needed to be prepared. Poland had been overrun and destroyed and fears were mounting. In the air was the occasional sound of gunfire or depth charges exploding.

In 1937, there were said to be some 200,000 soldiers in the British army.

I'd thought about this figure a lot. While it seemed a huge number, I just couldn't see how there could be enough of us to stop Hitler. A lot of people were going to lose their lives. I wasn't a fool, nor was I stupid enough to think that I was invincible. Losing four great uncles, three uncles, and Grandad Aarons to the Great War told me that there was a good chance I might not be coming home, which brought me back to Rosie. If only she would stop living too far into the future. We needed to live for this moment. Hang the future!

The Government didn't think there were enough soldiers either, which was probably why they had introduced the Military Training Act. The terms of this act meant men between the ages of twenty and twenty-one had to register within six months for military training. Jimmy and I were both twenty-three, a fact that Rosie had reminded me of constantly. The reason why I hadn't signed up sooner, despite how I felt about it all.

I took out a pack of crumpled cigarettes and shook one out. Cupping my hand around the flame of the lit match, I pressed it to the cigarette and inhaled. I watched the smoke as I blew it out of my nose. For the first time in my life, I thought Thomas Armitage was the luckiest guy in Whitby.

That thought alone told me how conflicted I was about this war. Tom's dad, Albert, had killed himself when Tom had been twelve. Tom had found him hanging in the barn with the farm machinery. I'd never really stopped to consider what kind of effect this would have had on Tom. To open the barn door and find your dad's dead body swinging from the rafters. God, it must have been awful.

Not surprisingly, Tom had changed that day. He started cutting himself off from everyone in Whitby, and I couldn't really blame him. It wasn't only due to the fact that his dad had killed himself, or the fact that he had been the one to find him... the gossips had wanted to know the reason why. A reason that, despite constant probing, Tom had refused to discuss. Of course, it could be that Tom didn't know, though I always felt that he did.

Until Albert's death, Tom, Jimmy, Rosie, and I had all hung out together, passing the time, larking around, and having fun. Albert hadn't only taken his life, he'd taken his son's with him. We no longer hung around together. Tom had become a shadow. Always in the side-lines, never part of the fun.

Tom was in a better position right now than I was, and for the first time, I envied him. Not that I wanted to trade places with him. *Bloody hell*, I couldn't think of anything worse than to be Tom Armitage. However, farmers were on the 'reserved occupations' list, which meant that due to his job or status as a farm owner/worker, he was exempt from conscription. It would certainly alleviate some of the guilt I was now feeling about not signing up earlier, and the fact that I was now about to sign up. I shook my head. As much as I loved Rosie, there was a part of me that just couldn't sit around and not fight. Chamberlain was right. Hitler had to be stopped.

I took another drag on the cigarette as I thought back to the four weeks after Chamberlain's declaration of war on Germany. People had started calling it the 'phoney war' because of the lack of military action. But I'd never believed it. Everywhere I went, I could feel change coming. The build up to something big. It was now mid-November and the Government had widened the age of conscription to all men aged between eighteen and forty-one. This meant

that apart from those working in ‘reserved occupations,’ I could now be called to the armed service. I couldn’t ignore my duty any longer.

“*Bloody hell.*” I swore under my breath.

Rosie walked around the corner. Her hair was pinned up and rolled at the back. I’m sure that there was some fancy name for the hairstyle, but I couldn’t think of it. Dark black strands fell at the sides of her face, softening her features. She hadn’t noticed me yet. For a split-second, I thought about dashing back into the house before she did. I stayed where I was, preparing to lie as I watched her approach.

Her black shoes, with their thick chubby heels and T-bar, drummed out a beat, which my heart seemed to pick up. Hooked over her right arm was a black alligator handbag with its fancy gold fastening shining in the low sun. The brown, checked, single-breasted coat she wore was buttoned up to the wide V-collar, which swept across to a point at the shoulders. The coat was elegant, nipping at her small waist, while falling loosely across her full hips. A cream-patterned silk scarf was wrapped around her neck. I’d given her the scarf last Christmas. Like a fool, it sent a small buzz of happiness directly into my heart to see her wearing it. My eyes fell upon her red painted lips. I longed to press mine hard upon them. She kept me wanting, was a constant surprise, quick to laugh, and even quicker to temper. That was my Rosie Girl.

I took a last drag on the cigarette as she came closer, throwing the butt to the floor and crushing it beneath my shoe. I waited silently for her to look in my direction. I knew that she’d seen me by now, but in true Rosie style, she was going to ignore me until she was ready to acknowledge me.

The wind blew at her hair, and more strands came loose from the confines of the pins. I watched her eyes, as they looked me up and down. Nervous, I swallowed as I saw suspicion shine in her brown eyes. I watched as her eyes swept back over me, taking in the loose trousers of the brown lounge suit I’d chosen to wear for today, along with my best coat and hat.

“Why William Aarons, what are you doing leaning against your mother’s house like it’s going to fall down?”

I couldn’t stop the laugh that bubbled from my lips. Without thought, I grabbed and kissed her. Whatever I had expected her to say, it hadn’t been that.

“You stop that, you hear? People are going to talk.”

I placed my forehead against hers. I had to stoop a little to do so, but I didn’t care. “Hang what the gossips say. Besides, I didn’t hear you complaining when we were on the beach.”

“Well, that was before I was mad at you. And now I mind.” She pushed herself out of my arms with one of her black gloved hands.

“Come on, Rosie, don’t be like that.”

“I’ll be like I want to be. Thank you very much.”

She made to leave, and I snaked my right arm around her waist, pressing her to my side. “If you’re going to be like that, maybe I should pick you up and take you to the beach to remind you how much you love me.” I whispered into her ear.

“You’ll do no such thing. You hear me, William Aarons?” I caught the smile that she failed to hide.

“See? You love me, really.” She turned those big brown eyes on me and I felt lost.

“I never said I didn’t love you, Will. But it’s hard to love someone that you know is going to leave you and break your heart. Maybe you didn’t think about that in all your excitement over this stupid war.”

I groaned inwardly at her words. It was as if she already knew what I was up to.

To add to my sinking heart, Jimmy took that moment to chug around the corner in his grandad’s Austin 7, which some referred to as the Baby Austin. Rosie turned and looked at the red Baby Austin with its black hood, her eyes narrowing. Jimmy’s grandad was one of the few people to own a car in Whitby. The car was now over ten years old, but it was still a beauty. Production of the Baby Austin had ceased, replaced by the Austin 8, also known as the Austin Big 7. It wasn’t a patch on Jimmy’s grandad’s car. Jimmy’s grandad’s car was real, not just something I saw in the adverts in the newspaper. My eyebrows rose upward in surprise as I saw Tom Armitage sitting in the back, arms spread out across the seat, in his loose-fitting blue dungarees and washed out green shirt. Unlike me, Tom hadn’t bothered to dress for the trip. Not that putting on your best suit was a requirement in signing up. I bet the armed forces didn’t care what you wore, so long as you were capable of holding a gun, aiming and firing.

Jimmy pulled to a stop beside us. I watched Rosie as she looked from Jimmy to Tom, to me. Jimmy opened the car door and climbed out, grabbing hold of his hat as a gust of wind tried to whip it off his head. He came to a stop in front of us.

“Morning, Rosie. I thought you were going out with Betty today. Not that it’s not lovely to see you.”

I watched Rosie send him a cold stare and the smile on Jimmy’s face faded. I put a hand to my throat in a slicing action. Jimmy’s mouth hung open as if to ask what he’d said wrong.

Tom leaned forward but stayed where he was, the wind pulling some loose strands free of his ponytail. His long, dark brown hair fell to his shoulders when unbound. He constantly had a stubble lining his jaw, neither clean shaven, nor a beard. Tom was a bit of an enigma, a non-conformist to society, fashion, and pretty much everything else. It made people feel uneasy.

It said a lot that Rosie ignored both me and Jimmy and looked at Tom. “Where you going, Thomas Armitage?”

While Rosie turned her attention on Tom, Jimmy mouthed “*caught?*” at me.

“*Run while you can,*” I mouthed back at him. We both stayed where we were, waiting for the fallout to begin.

“Rose.” Was Tom’s only comment. I watched his eyes travel down the length of her. I tightened my grip on her waist.

“As chatty as ever, I see.” When she turned to me, her eyes sparkled with anger. The problem with Rosie is that you never quite knew how she was going to react, or what she was going to say. Sweat began to sink into my hat from my forehead, as she turned to Jimmy.

“*Ouch!*” I mouthed at Jimmy.

Jimmy managed to look worried and smile at me at the same time.

“Well then, James Chappell.”

“*Me!* What’d I do?” Jimmy looked like he wanted to slink back into the Baby Austin, place it in reverse, and get the hell out of here. *Me too!*

“Yes, *you*.” Rosie pointed a gloved finger into his chest. “Might you be telling me where you boys think you’re going, dressed up and all?” She waved her gloved hand up and down the length of him – at his lounge suit, peeking out from the opening of his dark, brown tweed coat.

Jimmy opened his mouth.

“And don’t you think of lying to me, James Chappell. I can always tell when you’re lying.”

His mouth snapped shut.

Jimmy sent me a pleading look. I nodded at him and relief fell over his face. It was only fair that I tell Rosie, not Jimmy.

“We’re off to sign up.” My voice was little more than a whisper as she whipped around to face me. My arm still rested on her waist.

If I whispered the words, maybe the wind would carry them away before Rosie could hear them. Her back stiffened. Maybe not. It had been a nice thought while I’d had it.

I’d wanted to lie to her, but I found I couldn’t. Besides, she would have found out anyway. Then she would be even madder at me for lying to her. It was a no-win situation.

“I see.” Funny how two words can carry so much weight.

“Come on, Rosie.”

“Don’t you come on, Rosie, me, William Aarons.” She pulled out of my arms. “You just go and sign up and do what you need to do. Don’t you go thinking about me or your family in any of this.”

I groaned. “Rosie, please. It’s not like I wouldn’t be drafted anyway.”

“*Drafted anyway!* You think you can hide behind that? Maybe you would be drafted, and that would be out of your control. But at least I’d be thinking to myself that you’d stayed here as long as you possibly could, so that we could spend as much time together before you had to go. But no, you’re just too eager to die to bother trying to show me that I mean something to you, that what we feel for each other is bigger than this war.”

I opened my mouth to speak.

“Don’t you dare interrupt me when I’m on a rant, Will. You know full well how I feel about all this.”

My heart sank as she turned and began walking away. She’d only taken a couple of steps when she turned around, looking at the car. “I’d have thought you’d have more sense than them, Thomas Armitage.”

Tom shrugged. “Looks like I don’t.”

“So cocky, huh? Well, you tell me, *Mr. Cocky*, what about your sister Becky or your mum? How do you think they’d feel if they knew what you were up to? How will they cope with the farm and all that needs to be done there, or are you thinking that it’ll all become someone else’s problem? Who is this someone else? Huh, Tom? Can’t think of anyone? What a surprise!”

I saw Tom blanch at Rosie’s words.

“Yep, another selfish idiot on his way to die with no thought for anyone else. Just what I thought.”

“Is that what they’re calling fighting for your country nowadays, Rosie? Guess I should have read the paper before I left this morning.”

Rosie took a step closer to Tom. “You boys think you’re so smart. Well, you’re not. It’s those left behind picking up the pieces and keeping everything going while you’re away that you need to be thinking about. This war is going to touch us all, I know that, but you seem to want to make it harder for us.”

Rosie turned away. Stopped and faced Tom again. “I’m curious, Tom, when you sign up, what are you going to put down as your occupation? Because people like you are needed here. Isn’t it bad enough that I’m already surrounded by brainless men that you have to go on and join them?”

“Well, let me tell you, Thomas Armitage, there ain’t no glory to be found sitting in a dirty trench waiting to die.” Rosie spun around and beat out a ferocious tune with each heel that hit the pavement.

I heard her sniff and knew she was crying. She came on all strong and hard, but I knew she was only being this way because she cared. I wasn’t about to tell anyone how happy that made me. Rose Elliot, the prettiest girl in Whitby, and she loved me.

“Didn’t know she felt like that.” Tom grumbled.

Jimmy and I sent each other a knowing look. “Yeah, sorry about you getting caught up in it.” I mumbled to Tom.

Tom leant back against the car seat. “We’d better get off, before she comes back.”

Jimmy smiled at me, ignoring Tom. “You know, I thought it went really well, with Rosie.”

I shot Jimmy a doubtful look. “And how did you work that one out?”

“You’ve still got your head, for starters.”

I laughed at him. “Oh, you’re just full of silver linings, aren’t you?”

Jimmy nodded at me, smiling. “It would seem that one of us has to be. You look like a puppy that’s been left out at night, all alone.” Jimmy placed his fingers near his lips, turning them down.

I shook my head at him. “I’d stop with the compliments. You’re not very good at them.”

“Now then, Mr. Negative. Positive thinking, that’s what it’s all about, Will.”

“In that case, you’d better get your positive bum in the car if we’re ever to fight in this war. At this rate, we’ll be bypassing World War Two and going straight on to World War Three.”

“There you go being negative again, Will.”

I gave Jimmy a playful push towards the car as I shook out another cigarette, offering one to Jimmy and Tom. Tom shook his head. Jimmy and I lit our cigarettes and we silently climbed into the car, our excitement diminishing slightly as we watched Rosie slip from view.

Whatever was I going to do about Rosie. About us?