



CRASH

I was in the far corner of the woods, setting snares, when the siren started.

I stopped.

Crouched low with my arms out, my fingers laying the wire in the right position, I stopped *dead*.

I was quite far from the village — over the fields and deep in the trees — but that terrible noise reached right across to me. As if it were looking for me. Just me. It started as a single tone, a sound so frightening it almost made my heart freeze. Then it grew louder as it warmed up, the tone falling and rising. Falling and rising. A second siren joined it a few moments later, then a third, so all the village sirens were screaming at the sky.

This was the signal for us to run for our shelters.

To run for our lives.

I'd never been caught out in the open like this before. The warning had never sounded during the afternoon. The Germans liked to come on clear nights, filling the air with the buzz and groan of their planes, like angry monsters coming to turn everything to dust. And then it was a fast and scary rush to the

Anderson shelter, to sit in the half dark, waiting for a bomb to land on top of you and blow you into a million pieces.

All the way out here, though, I wasn't sure what to do. I didn't know if I could make it home across the fields to Hawthorn Lodge, to the tin shelter at the bottom of our garden. Or maybe I didn't need to. Maybe I was *already* in the safest place, right there in the trees.

But I didn't want to be on my own. I wanted to be with Mam. I wanted to know she was safe, and she'd want to know I was safe. I imagined her sick with worry, wondering where I was. She wouldn't know whether to run out and call for me or take cover in the shelter. Her heart would be thumping just like mine was. *Thump, thump, thump*. Her mouth would be dry. Her muscles tingling and shaking. She'd be standing in the garden as the planes came over: wave after wave of them, raining their bombs on her, all because she was out looking for me.

I shook my head once and squeezed my eyes shut, straining to get rid of the images. Then I stood and began to run.

Sprinting past the pheasant pens, I hardly noticed the stinging brush of the nettles that caught my bare knees. The twigs crunched and snapped under my feet. The tops of my wellies paddled against my bruised shins. I jumped fallen logs and scraped my legs against brambles. I splashed through the burn and weaved around the trees bordering the cold creek, throwing myself to the ground when I came to the barbed-wire fence and scrambling through the low gap that was made just for me. The skin tore on my knees as I crawled on the dry soil, but I ignored the pain.

I was moving as quickly as I could, clambering from all fours back onto my feet, rushing through the final line of the

woods before I burst out into the field. I ran out into the early evening just as another sound broke from behind the terrible cry of the sirens. It was as if this noise smashed through the solid wall, cutting through and drowning it out. And this sound was worse. Much worse.

It was the angry buzz of German bombers filling the sky.

Panic swelled in my chest. I had to get home. I had to find Mam.

I sprinted farther out into the field, wishing I could make one great big jump and be there. I wished my feet would move faster. I wished our house were closer. I wished there were no war. I wished . . . I wished so many things.

But for that moment, it felt like there was nothing else in the world except for me, my need to get home, and the planes. That noise. The sound of engines was so loud, as if the planes were following me, chasing me, whining and coughing like dirty giants. My head was filled with their growling, my whole body shook. I could feel their breath on my neck. Smell their darkness.

But then they stuttered.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

The engine caught and died, caught and died, and then cut out completely. No more droning, no more coughing, no more stuttering. All I could hear was the scream of the siren in the village and the rush of air behind me, as if an enormous bird of prey were arcing down to take me. In those seconds I knew how a rabbit must feel at that last moment by the hedgerow, when the hawk swoops down to carry it away.