

A decorative background featuring a large rose in the top left corner, several smaller roses and leaves scattered around, and three small airplane silhouettes flying in the upper right quadrant. The overall style is a light, monochromatic illustration.

# 1

‘Rose? What’s going on?’

Rose could see why her aunt was anxious. There were police officers everywhere. Some were on the move, slamming car doors and talking into their radios; others were standing around in clusters in their bright yellow jackets, drinking tea out of paper cups. Their cars were lined up along the side of the road, blue lights flashing, with two fire engines and an official-looking white van with a yellow stripe. A few passers-by were hanging about, looking as if they hoped something interesting was going to happen, and a little boy and his dad had stopped to admire the fire engines.

It was Mum who’d suggested they went out for a cup of tea. Tommy-dog could do with a walk, she’d said, and Aunt Cosy might like a breath of fresh air. Rose knew Mum just wanted them out of the way so she could prepare for the evening, but she didn’t mind. She’d rather be out of the house anyway.

‘What are all these policemen doing?’ said Aunt Cosy.

‘And why is there a soldier over there?’

She was right. A young soldier in British Army green was clambering out of the white van, adjusting his beret and joking with someone inside.

‘I don’t know, Aunt Cosy,’ said Rose. ‘I’ll find out.’

The nearest police officer was a big man with a shiny pink face who was fussing about with a roll of blue-and-white plastic tape that read POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS.

‘They’ve found a bomb,’ he said, without looking up.

Rose suddenly felt cold in spite of the May sunshine.

‘A bomb?’ she repeated.

The officer started wrapping his tape around the trunk of a huge tree that stood next to the old brick shelter at the corner of the common (which is what they called the area of open parkland near their house). Rose’s grandad had told her the shelter was built during the last war and had tunnels that stretched for hundreds of metres, deep beneath those of the tube station opposite.

‘Left over from World War Two,’ said the officer. ‘Unexploded. Builders found it buried under the grass while they were doing repairs on the bandstand.’

‘But that’s where we’re going, isn’t it, Rose?’ Aunt Cosy looked so tiny, standing there with Tommy, very upright in her bright red jacket. ‘The bandstand?’

‘Not really, Aunt Cosy. We were going to go to the cafe. It’s next to the bandstand. Remember?’

Rose felt bad as soon as she said it – the word ‘remember’. Aunt Cosy hadn’t been very good at remembering for a few years now, and it had got worse recently. Mum thought they should talk to a doctor, but Rose didn’t see the point. Aunt Cosy was ninety-two, for goodness’ sake. Ninety-two! Everyone gets a bit forgetful when they’re that old, don’t they?

The old lady had turned her smile on the police officer.

‘I’m meeting somebody at the bandstand,’ she told him. ‘Somebody rather special.’ They weren’t meeting anybody, but Rose didn’t say so. ‘So you see, officer, it is rather important we get there on time.’

‘I’m afraid that won’t be possible, madam,’ said the officer, straightening up and suddenly becoming more formal. ‘The entire park has been evacuated.’

‘Oh dear! Has it really? How long will we have to wait?’

‘Until the bomb squad gives us the all-clear.’ The officer trailed his tape across the path and wound it around another tree. ‘Nice dog,’ he added. Tommy wagged his tail. He didn’t understand everything people said, but ‘dog’ was a word he recognised. ‘What is he?’

‘We’re not sure,’ said Rose. ‘Part Jack Russell terrier, part springer spaniel, we think.’

The police officer made a big deal of looking at Tommy, who wagged his tail again, hoping he might produce some delicious treat from his pocket and give it to him as a reward for being a Good Dog.

‘Nah,’ he said. ‘He’s never got any springer in him. More like a bit of your Welsh collie. Rescue, was he?’

Rose nodded. ‘Sort of,’ she said. ‘He was a stray.’ She clipped the lead on to Tommy’s collar. ‘I suppose we’d best get back. Aunt Cosy?’

But Aunt Cosy had found another police officer to chat to, a woman this time, so Rose wandered over to a bench with Tommy and sat down. It was a perfect spring afternoon, the kind of day when sunshine shimmered through the petrol fumes and office workers lazed away their lunch hours on pavements outside pubs. A single plane floated silently past, leaving a trail of white vapour like a chalk mark across the blue blackboard of the sky. Rose wished she was on it, going somewhere else. France.

Germany. America maybe. China! Anywhere but here . . .

It was three years now since Dad had died and Mum needed to move on with her life. That's what her friends said anyway, the ones who came round to sit at the kitchen table and drink wine late into the night. Rose would hear them, after she'd gone to bed, murmuring together and laughing. And Mum *had* moved on now. She'd met Sal. His full name was Salvatore and he was Italian, a photographer, with a big, loud laugh and hairy arms and a son called Leo who was in year eight at school and thought he was funny but wasn't.

And Sal and Mum were getting married tomorrow.

Rose was glad Mum had been able to move on, she really was. It was just that *she* couldn't. She couldn't close a door on that part of her life, the part with Dad in it, not yet. And ever since Mum had told her about the wedding and how Sal and Leo were going to move into Aunt Cosy's house with them, she'd felt sort of empty – hollow, like a Russian doll with nothing inside.

She hadn't wanted to tell anyone how she felt, so had just carried on as if nothing had changed. And it hadn't, not really. School was OK, even though there were exams coming up. It was just . . . she wasn't particularly interested in it any more, even the subjects she used to love, like English and Psychology.

And it wasn't just school. Whenever her friends Grace and Ella suggested doing something, she never seemed to feel like it. She'd rather sit in her room with Tommy and stare out of the window or chat online with her friend Fred (they'd met a couple of years ago and even though they'd not seen each other again, had been messaging ever since). He lived in Germany so he wasn't going to suggest they meet up and go for a coffee or anything. But recently, as the wedding day got closer, she'd even

stopped chatting to him. She didn't know why, but when Fred wrote *Hey Rose, how are you?* she couldn't bring herself to reply.

What she wanted to write was: *Awful, actually. I feel horrible because my mum's getting married to a man with hairy arms who isn't my dad and they're going to live happily ever after and might even have a baby together and there'll be no room for me and I'll be left out and lonely for ever and ever . . .*

But she couldn't put that in a message. So she didn't write anything.

'Rose?' Aunt Cosy's face was sparkling with amusement. 'This young lady tells me she's found a bomb!'

'Yes, Aunt Cosy, I know—'

'I think it was very clever of her, but it does mean we can't get our cup of tea.'

'Then we'd better go home. D'you think?'

'I do think!' said Aunt Cosy. 'I do!'

'Come on, then. Tom?' Rose tugged his lead.

Tommy didn't move. He was standing quite still, listening with every part of his body.

'What's up?'

Aunt Cosy put her hand on Rose's arm. 'She's listening, darling.' For some reason, Aunt Cosy thought Tommy was a female dog called Sophie. Rose had given up trying to tell her otherwise. 'Dogs always hear them first,' she added.

'Hear what, Aunt Cosy?'

'Shh!' Her aunt was nodding as if greeting an old friend. 'The air raid sirens,' she said. 'They start at the edge of the city. Then they come towards you, whooshing in like waves, closer, closer, closer. Listen. That's our one now.'

Rose could hear . . . birdsong . . . the crackle and chat-

ter of the police radios . . . traffic . . . the usual cheerful roar of London. Nothing else.

‘I can’t—’

‘Shh!’ Aunt Cosy held up one finger and looked at the sky. A single bird crossed the blue. ‘Where *are* you? Where *are* you? Where *are* you?’ She repeated the words like a chant.

Rose was scared. Her aunt could be a bit strange sometimes, but she’d never seen her like this. ‘What do you mean, Aunt Cosy?’

‘It’s the sound of the engines. I always think that’s what they’re saying: “Where are you?”’

‘Engines?’

‘The planes, darling. The German bombers.’ The old lady grabbed Rose’s arm. ‘We must get to the shelter! It’s starting, Rose! It’s all starting again!’