

CHAPTER 2

'Everybody out!'

'Here it comes!' cried one of the women.

At the first sound of rain, the machinists had to move quickly. If they didn't, the rain would come into the work area. Connie kept an umbrella near her sewing machine. She was putting this up over her work table when Albert appeared in front of her. He clearly had important news.

'There's a meeting tomorrow at the Ford head office in Warley,' he told her excitedly. Other women left their machines to listen too, so he spoke louder. 'The managers couldn't *believe* that you were talking about a strike!'

The women cheered. The company was listening to them now.

'There'll be three managers there.' Albert started to count. 'Who will we have? There's Monty Taylor from the union head office ... me ... Connie ... We need one more.'

'Why?' asked Eileen. She was one of the older machinists. In all her time at Ford, she had never seen anything like this.

'It's a little trick that I learned in the war*,' Albert smiled. 'Always arrive with more people than they have! So ... who's going to be our fourth man?'

Nobody answered. Several women shook their heads.

Albert tried again. 'Come on – it's a day off work!'

That changed things! Immediately most of the women put their hands up.

'Oh, so you all want to go now!' said Albert. 'Well ...' He stopped as his eyes met Rita's. Her arms were crossed and she was listening to everything carefully.

* When people in the UK say 'the war', they usually mean World War II (1939–45).

Albert just looked at her.

'What?' asked Rita.

The rest of the women understood and they knew that Rita was a good choice.

'You should do it,' a few women said to her. Connie nodded in agreement.

Rita didn't say anything for a few seconds. This wasn't the sort of thing that she usually did. But a day away from the factory sounded OK, and it was a chance to speak for the machinists for once ...

She smiled. 'Go on then.'



The next day Rita and Connie went with Albert and Monty Taylor to the meeting at the Ford head office. Monty was older than Albert. He was a big man with grey hair and a grey moustache. He worked for the union. Meetings with management were just part of his job.

On the way to the Ford head office, Monty said, 'We've got time for lunch before the meeting.'

Rita looked at the restaurant nervously. It looked expensive to her. She was wearing her best dress, but was it nice enough for a place like this?

'Monty always comes here,' whispered Connie.

During lunch Monty explained how he wanted the meeting to be. He had had a lot of meetings with the managers from Ford and he knew the best way of talking to them.

'Here's a little advice,' he told Rita. 'If they ask you a question, I'll answer it for you. If I nod, you nod. OK?'

'Right,' said Rita nervously.



At the meeting, the three managers – all of them men – sat on one side of the table. Monty, Albert, Rita and Connie sat on the other side. The two women followed Monty's instructions and stayed quiet.

'The women at the Dagenham factory are still waiting for a reply to their complaint,' Albert began. 'That's why we're sitting here now. They believe that their work is skilled.'

'I understand what the girls are saying ...' began one of the managers. This was Peter Hopkins and he seemed to be the boss.

Monty Taylor held up a hand. 'Please don't speak for the girls, Mr Hopkins,' he said with a smile. 'None of us knows what's in a woman's head!'

Rita sat in silence but she was becoming angrier and angrier. Monty didn't want Hopkins to speak for 'the girls', but he was happy to speak for them himself.

Hopkins continued. 'The machinists are not the only

workers here at Ford who have questions to discuss with management. They must wait their turn.'

Monty's smile became friendlier. 'Look, you know me,' he said. 'I haven't got any problems with Ford. Let's agree to meet again in two weeks' time. We'll come back and at that time you can listen to the girls' complaint. If we do that, you can tell your bosses that you stopped the strike because of today's meeting. And we can go back to the girls and tell them that you'll listen to their complaints in a few weeks' time.'

'That seems fair,' said Hopkins.

'I'm not sure that the girls will see it that way,' said Albert crossly.

'The girls will be fine,' Monty told him. 'They'll know that the union – not management – is making decisions for them. That's what matters to the girls.'

'Rubbish!'

It was Rita who said this. She had listened and listened, but she couldn't stay silent any longer. 'I'm sorry, but it is rubbish.' She looked straight at Monty. 'What do you know about what matters to the girls?'

Rita pulled some pieces of fabric out of her handbag. She threw them on the table. 'There! Put them together. Go on!'

'You stole those,' said one of the managers. 'They belong to the Ford Company.'

'Oh, stop it,' Rita told him. She pointed to the bits of fabric. 'We have to take all these different pieces and make a car seat cover. There aren't any instructions. That is *skilled* work.' She shook her head. 'You need to take an exam to do our work!'

Hopkins spoke over her. 'Please, Miss ...'

'It's Mrs O'Grady.'

'Mrs O'Grady, I understand why you are unhappy, but ...'

'No, you don't understand,' said Rita, 'but it's not difficult. Our work is skilled and we should get the pay for that.'

'Mrs O'Grady ...' Hopkins tried again, but Rita stopped him.

'I haven't finished ... You're saying that we have to wait our turn, but we made our complaint *months* ago! You've just done nothing about it. And we all know why – when the men at the factory go on strike, the management has to listen to them. But the women have never been on strike before, have we? You thought that we'd all just go away. Well, I'm sorry we're not going anywhere.' She looked right at Hopkins, no longer nervous. 'We're going to do what we said: no more overtime,' Rita thought for a moment, 'and an *immediate* twenty-four hour strike. After that, well, that's up to you.' She stood up. 'Excuse me – we have to go now.'

As Rita walked away, the men at the table didn't know what to say. Only Albert had a proud smile on his face.

Outside the building he was still smiling. But not Monty. He was really angry. 'Do you think I like looking stupid in front of Hopkins?' he shouted at Albert. Then he just walked off and left them.

Albert didn't care. 'I knew you were right for this job,' he told Rita. He waved the pieces of fabric. 'It was a brilliant idea to bring these.'

'Oh no, I didn't bring them for the meeting.' Rita shook her head. 'That manager was right – I was stealing them. Eddie mends the tent with them when we go on holiday.' She held out her hand. 'Can I have them back, please?'



It was late afternoon when Rita and Connie returned to the factory. The sewing area was busy, filled with the usual sound of sewing machines.

'What are we going to say?' Rita asked her friend.

'You tell them,' answered Connie. 'You're the one who made this happen.'

The noise of the sewing machines stopped when the machinists noticed the two women. Everybody wanted to hear what had happened.



Rita climbed onto a chair. She looked around at all the faces there. She worked every day with these women. They were her friends. She smiled nervously.

'Everybody out!' she said.

The women had talked about this moment, but it was still a surprise to hear the words. There was a nervous, excited feeling in the air. Several women kissed Rita and Connie on their way to the door. The women of Dagenham were going on strike!