LoveReading

YOU LOVED YOUR LAST BOOK...
BUT WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO READ NEXT?

Using our unique guidance tools, **LoveReading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

A RATION BOOK CHRISTMAS

Written by **Jean Fullerton**

Published By **Corvus an imprint of Atlantic Books**

All text is Copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is brought to you by **LoveReading**. Please print off and read at your leisure.

A Ration Book Christmas

Jean Fullerton is the author of eleven historical novels. She is a qualified District and Queen's nurse who has spent most of her working life in the East End of London, first as a Sister in charge of a team, and then as a District Nurse tutor. She is also a qualified teacher and spent twelve years lecturing on community nursing studies at a London university. She now writes full-time.

Find out more at www.jeanfullerton.com

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 1 01/06/2018 09:54

Also by Jean Fullerton

No Cure for Love
A Glimpse of Happiness
Perhaps Tomorrow
Hold on to Hope
Call Nurse Millie
Christmas with Nurse Millie
All Change for Nurse Millie
Easter with Nurse Millie
Fetch Nurse Connie
Wedding Bells for Nurse Connie
Pocketful of Dreams

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 2 01/06/2018 09:54

A Ration Book Christmas

JEAN FULLERTON

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 3 01/06/2018 09:54

Published in paperback in Great Britain in 2018 by Corvus,
an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

Copyright © Jean Fullerton, 2018

The moral right of Jean Fullerton to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.
This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities, is entirely coincidental.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

Paperback ISBN: 978 1 78 649140 4
E-book ISBN: 978 1 78 649141 1

Printed in Great Britain.

Corvus
An imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd
Ormond House
26–27 Boswell Street
London
WC1N 3JZ

www.corvus-books.co.uk

To my Hero@Home,
Kelvin, who has long since accepted that
although I might be next to him physically,
my mind is quite often in another century.

Chapter One

PUTTING HER FEET on the brake and clutch, Josephine Margaret Brogan, known to everyone as Jo, stuck her right hand out of the driver's side window of the five-year-old Morris 8 delivery van, then, seeing the road was clear, turned across Melton Winchet High Street into Garfield General Store's back yard.

Bringing it to a halt by the side wall, she pulled on the handbrake and switched off the engine. Jutting out her lower lip, she blew upwards to dislodge a brunette curl resting over her left eyebrow but the lock refused to budge. She wasn't surprised.

It was the first Friday in September and with the hot early-autumn sun blasting fully through the van's windows, the inside of the vehicle was like an oven and Jo was perspiring accordingly.

It might not have been so bad if she'd been able to deliver the shop's weekend orders in the sleeveless frock and cotton underslip she'd put on that morning, but no. Mrs Garfield was having none of it. Despite the BBC forecasting that the afternoon temperatures would nudge at 70 degrees Fahrenheit, the shopkeeper had insisted that Jo wear her regular dull green rayon overall so she looked 'tidy', which was a cheek as the blooming thing fitted her like a sack and had to be turned at the cuff so the sleeves didn't cover her hands.

Jo got out of the green van and swinging the keys back and forth around her fingers she walked between the stacked

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 1 01/06/2018 09:54

crates into the storeroom that was connected to the side of the shop.

Mrs Garfield, who was flitting a duster over a card of girls' pastel-coloured hairslides hung on the wall behind the counter, looked around from her task as Jo walked in.

The owner of Melton Winchet's general store was a woman on the wrong side of forty, with hips so extensive she had difficulty turning around in the space behind the counter. She stood a little over five foot and had frizzy grey hair and an expression that would lead you to believe she sucked lemons as a hobby. As her deep-set eyes alighted on Jo, her lips pulled into a tight bud.

'Where have you been?' she asked, scrutinising Jo through the lenses of her spectacles.

'I was held up at Rider's Bridge,' Jo replied, strolling behind the counter to hook the keys on the nail in the wall. 'And Mrs Veres asked me to tell you she's got some cooking apples from her orchard; they're two shillings a crate, if you're interested.'

'Two shilling!' snapped the shopkeeper. 'They were half that last season.'

Jo smiled sweetly. 'Well, there is a war on, you know.'

Mrs Garfield gave her a sour look. 'I don't suppose you've seen that brother of yours on your travels, have you?'

'Can't say I have,' Jo replied.

The shopkeeper tutted. 'Probably in detention again.'

'Or playing football in the meadow with the other lads,' Jo countered.

'Well, I've got a shop to run so if he's not here soon he'll have to go without lunch,' said the shopkeeper. 'And he'd better not come home with mud all over his trousers either, like he did last week. I wouldn't have volunteered to take in

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 2 01/06/2018 09:54

evacuees if I'd realised I'd have to skivvy for them. And tidy your hair,' she continued, waving a couple of fat bluebottles away from the loaves on the counter. 'I know you're not used to such things in East London but out here we're very particular about cleanliness.'

The shopkeeper's gaze flickered disapprovingly over Jo again and then she disappeared through the door behind her into the small parlour.

Although it wasn't the sort of thing a seventeen-year-old young woman who'd just gained a merit on her matriculation should do, Jo stuck out her tongue at the closed door.

Tucking the offending curl back behind her ear, she stepped behind the counter to mind the shop until Mrs Garfield reappeared.

Garfield General Store was a double-fronted affair with two large windows and a central door. It sat like a well-worn and overloaded portmanteau halfway up Melton Winchet's High Street and supplied the inhabitants of the small village ten miles east of Colchester with most of their day-to-day household needs. On the left as you entered the store was a serving counter, scrubbed smooth by Mrs Garfield and her mother before her, on which the baker deposited what remained of his morning stock when he closed at midday. Alongside the bread basket was a block of cheddar on a marble slab, protected by a glass dome, and a ham draped with a muslin on a china plinth, from which Mrs Garfield carved her customers' requirements. On the floor in front of the counter were artistically stacked tins of pilchards, pease pudding and Carnation milk, along with square boxes of fig rolls, garibaldi, arrowroot biscuit and a selection of all three in the broken biscuit box at the end. On the shelves behind the counter were packets of tea, tins of custard, Ovaltine

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 3 01/06/2018 09:54

and tins of National Milk, hermetically sealed to preserve it against gas attack. In a small section tucked in the corner were tins of condensed milk for babies, nappy pins and, in discreet grey striped packets, Dr White's sanitary pads.

The household items such as carbolic soap, washing soda, candles and horse embrocation, metal polish, starch and blacking for the fire grates were stacked on the other side of the shop along with brooms, shovels and zinc buckets.

The bell above the door tinkled as Mrs Toffs, wife of the village doctor, strode in. She was a well-groomed woman with a massive bosom and an opinion of herself to match. While most women wore a frock and modest headgear to run their daily errands, Mrs Toffs had decided a navy suit with a red velvet collar and cuffs plus a wide-brimmed feather-laden hat would be more appropriate attire for a visit to the village shop.

'Can I help you?' asked Jo.

'I hardly think so,' Mrs Toffs replied, running her critical gaze over her. 'Is Mrs Garfield in?'

Before Jo could reply, the door behind the counter opened again and Mrs Garfield bustled out.

'Mrs Toffs, what a pleasure,' said Mrs Garfield, her sharp features lifting into an ingratiating smile. 'What can I do for you?'

'We're having a few friends over next Saturday,' Mrs Toffs replied. 'Nothing grand, you understand, and Footman's delicatessen department has sent most of what's needed but' – slipping her hand into her pocket she withdrew a sheet of paper – 'there are a few things Cook still requires, so if you would be so kind.'

Mrs Garfield pushed her spectacles back up her nose and looked at the proffered list.

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 4 01/06/2018 09:54

'A dozen eggs!' A worried expression pulled the shopkeeper's heavy eyebrows together.

'I hope I can rely on you, Mrs Garfield,' Mrs Toffs cut in. 'After all, my husband does buy all the surgery's surgical and methylated spirits through you rather than the wholesalers in Colchester.'

Mrs Garfield paused for a second then folded the list and shoved it in her overall pocket. Her beady eyes shifted to Jo. 'Don't stand there eavesdropping. Get on with the rest of the deliveries.'

Biting back a retort, Jo went back into the storeroom and took the list pinned to the corkboard. She collected together the half a dozen bulging brown-paper bags, placed them in one of the spare fruit boxes stacked on the floor and carried it out to the van.

Balancing the load on one arm, she opened one of the van's back doors and slid the box onto the floor of the van. Holding the list in her right hand, she walked the fingers of her left over the twisted-topped brown-paper bags as she checked off Mrs Benboe in High Meadow Lane, Mrs Pedder, The Green, and Mrs Adams at Pucks Farm. Reaching the last name, Jo realised she'd left the Tillet sisters' order in the storeroom.

Shoving the scrap of paper in her overall pocket, Jo retraced her steps and re-entered the storeroom.

Spotting the overlooked brown-paper bag containing the spinster sisters' provisions still on the order shelf, Jo walked between the stacks of boxes and jars to get it. She'd just grasped the order when Mrs Garfield's voice drifted in from the shop.

'I tell you, Mrs Toffs,' said the shopkeeper, 'I don't care if Rev Farrow preaches on about giving succour to orphans

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 5 01/06/2018 09:54

and widows from now to doomsday, if I'd known the trouble they'd both be, I wouldn't have said yes to the placement officer.'

'My husband says it's a disgrace,' said the doctor's wife. 'All the evacuees he's had the misfortune to have in his surgery are running alive with nits.'

'Their mothers ought to be ashamed of themselves for sending their offspring in such a condition and raising children with such terrible manners,' the shopkeeper went on.

'*No* manners, don't you mean,' said Mrs Toffs.

'As you say,' agreed Mrs Garfield. 'You give them a roof over their heads and are they grateful?'

'Grateful!' echoed the doctor's wife. 'They don't know the meaning of the word. The scruffy lad Mrs Yates at Three Trees Farm got saddled with complained that he has to get up at five to help with the animals and does nothing but moan about being hungry.'

'She's fortunate she's only lumbered with one,' said Mrs Garfield. 'I've got that troublemaker Billy and his mouthy sister. And they're Catholics.'

'Still, at least the girl can earn her keep in the shop,' said Mrs Toffs.

'When she puts her mind to it,' said Mrs Garfield. 'But that's not the worst of it.'

'I suppose you have to keep an eye on the till,' said Mrs Toffs in a meaningful tone.

'And on my Norman,' said Mrs Garfield.

'No!'

'Not that my son's done anything wrong,' added the shopkeeper. 'But you know how impressionable young men can be around . . . around . . .'

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 6 01/06/2018 09:54

'Flighty girls?'

'Exactly,' said Mrs Garfield. 'No young lad is safe with girls like that around. You want to keep an eye on her in case she takes a fancy to your Eric.'

'I will,' said Mrs Toffs. 'So what happened?'

There was a pause before Mrs Garfield answered in a hushed voice. 'Well, the other day I—'

Jo strode into the shop.

'Only me, Mrs Garfield,' she said, smiling pleasantly at the shopkeeper. 'I can't seem to find the Tillet sisters' order.'

'It's on the order shelf,' the shopkeeper replied as a mauve blush spread over her multiple chins.

Turning back into the cupboard, Jo picked up the bag she'd just put down and went back into the shop.

'Found it,' she said in a sing-song tone and giving both women a dazzling smile. 'Sorry. Did I interrupt something?'

'Not at all,' said Mrs Garfield.

'We were just chatting,' added the doctor's wife, struggling to hold Jo's gaze.

Jo savoured their discomfort for a few seconds longer then smiled again.

'I'll be on my way then, Mrs Garfield. Nice to see you, Mrs Toffs, and tell your Eric I'll see him at the harvest dance.'

Turning away from the two women, Jo's mouth pulled into a hard line as, clutching the missing order, she marched through the house to the back yard.

Yanking open the door of the van, Jo threw the bag of mixed vegetable into the box with the others then slammed the door.

Leaping into the driver's seat, Jo jammed the key in the ignition and turned the engine on. With a face like thunder

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 7 01/06/2018 09:54

she slammed the gearstick into reverse and backed out of the yard. Swinging the wheel, Jo forced the van into first and roared out of the yard.

St Audrey's Church clock was showing quarter past five by the time Jo drove back down the High Street having completed Garfield's afternoon deliveries. After leaving the shop earlier that day, she'd more or less calmed down by the time she'd turned up the lane to Pucks Farm, which was three miles out of town. A freshly made glass of lemonade from Mrs Adams the motherly farmer's wife had restored her equilibrium. Having decided she'd take her own good time to return to the store, she took the long way around along the river to High Meadow Lane then a leisurely trip to the elderly Tillet sisters who lived in an old cottage with no electricity near to the railway cutting.

One of their cats had just had a litter of kittens so after accepting another very welcome offer of refreshment – elderflower cordial this time – Jo enjoyed playing with the new arrivals before she got back into the boiling van and drove the half-mile back to Melton Winchet.

As she passed Tanners the butchers, Wilf, the proprietor's spotty eighteen-year-old son, walked out of the shop balancing a freshly butchered side of lamb on his shoulder.

Seeing her, he hooked the meat on a vacant spot in amongst the other carcasses hanging outside the shop and then waved her down.

Applying the brakes, Jo stopped the car and wound down the window.

'Afternoon, Wilf,' she said, as the engine ticked over.

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 8 01/06/2018 09:54

'Afternoon, my lovely.' Resting his arm across the roof of the car he leaned in. 'Just a word to the wise, before you go in the shop: Old Nutty's inside talking to Mrs Garfield.'

'Why? What's PC Beech doing there?' asked Jo.

'I don't know but he's just cycled down from the school,' Wilf replied. 'I thought I ought to warn you.'

'Thanks, Wilf,' said Jo, as her heart sank to the pit of her stomach.

'Perhaps I'll see you at the church dance next Friday?' he said softly.

Jo forced a smile. 'Perhaps.'

Shoving the car in gear again, Jo drove the remaining few yards before turning into the shop's back yard once more. Parking the van by the wall, she got out and, feeling as if her summer pumps were made of lead, she headed for the back door of the shop.

Jo walked into the kitchen behind the shop just as PC Beech was about to sink his unevenly spaced teeth into a generous slice of Mrs Garfield's fruitcake.

By the sag of his jowls and peppering of grey amongst his springy ginger hair, Jo guessed Cuthbert Lionel Beech must have been in his early to mid fifties. He'd served in the last war against Germany, as the faded ribbons on his chest testified, and as far as Jo could make out, he had been the village bobby for most of his twenty-year service.

He'd unbuttoned his uniform jacket, giving a brief respite to the buttons and their daily struggle to remain within their allotted buttonhole. With its antiquated houses and locals who considered the high life to be a trip to Colchester on market day, Melton Winchet wasn't exactly a hot spot for crime. Just as well, as the village's sole custodian of the law was a man who felt it vital to

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 9 01/06/2018 09:54

keep up his strength by consuming a 'bit of something' on an hourly basis.

He was sitting at Mrs Garfield's kitchen table with a steaming mug of tea and his Essex Constabulary helmet in front of him. The shopkeeper sat opposite him with her arms resting on the table, hands tightly grasped together and a look on her face as if she'd eaten a pound of lemons. Standing between them with his head bowed and cap scrunched in his hand was Jo's brother Billy. All of them turned to look at Jo as she walked in.

'I didn't do it,' said Billy. 'Honest, sis. I didn't.'

'Now, boy,' said the constable, brushing the crumbs from his overhanging moustache as he struggled to his feet. 'You just hold your tongue until I says as—'

'What happened to your face?' said Jo, striding across the room to her brother.

Taking her brother's freckled face in her hands, Jo tilted it up to inspect it and saw a red hand mark across his right cheek and temple.

Jo's mouth pulled into a hard line. 'Who did this?'

Billy didn't answer but his tear-filled eyes flickered on to PC Beech.

Jo spun around and glared at the police officer. 'Did you hit him?'

'He got a clip around the ear for contradicting an officer of the Crown and I hope it'll learn him not to do it again,' PC Beech replied, flicking a stray crumb from his shirt.

Jo put her arm protectively around her brother's shoulder.

'So what's this about?' she asked, holding him firmly to her.

'Ten shillings' been taken from the tuck shop's money box,' PC Beech replied.

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 10 01/06/2018 09:54

'I never took it,' sobbed Billy.

'Lying won't help you out of this one, my lad,' said Mrs Garfield, giving Billy a sour look.

'Cross my heart, Jo,' said Billy, gazing up at her with wide-eyed innocence. 'It wasn't me.'

Jo studied her brother's upturned face for a moment and chewed her lip.

Mrs Garfield tutted loudly. 'Such lies! See what I have to put up with, Cuthbert.'

'Don't worry, Mabel,' said PC Beech. 'I'm trained to get the truth out of miscreants.' He turned his attention back to Jo and Billy. 'Now, son,' he said, giving them what Jo supposed was his coaxing smile, 'we all know you took the ten shillings out of the tuck box so why not be a man and admit it?'

Billy stuck out his lower lip. 'Because I didn't.'

Mrs Garfield and PC Beech exchanged an exasperated look.

'Who said Billy took it, anyway?' asked Jo.

A chair scraped across the floor as Mrs Garfield jumped to her feet. 'Miss Dixon,' she snapped. 'And you can't think the schoolmistress would lie about such a thing.'

'Did Miss Dixon actually see Billy take the money?' asked Jo.

'Not as such,' replied PC Beech. 'But she found him and a couple of others loitering outside the tuck-shop window the day before.'

'I believe thieves call it casing the joint,' said Mrs Garfield, with relish.

'Just so,' agreed PC Beech. 'The criminal underworld are known to use such colloquialisms to disguise their felonious intents.'

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 11 01/06/2018 09:54

Resisting the urge to roll her eyes, Jo turned to her brother. 'Who else was in the playground, Billy?'

'Jim Potton, Peter Danson and Mark Smith,' Billy replied, wiping his nose on his sleeve. 'We were playing marbles.'

Jo looked back at PC Beech. 'Have you questioned them about the money?'

'No I haven't,' he replied. 'Because I can tell you straight, it weren't any of them.'

'Why not?' asked Jo.

'Because they all come from families in the village that's why,' said Mrs Garfield.

Billy started to cry.

Jo squeezed her brother's shoulders. 'It's all right, Billy.'

'A taste of the birch is what he needs,' continued Mrs Garfield, glaring across at them. Her gaze shifted onto PC Beech. 'Aren't you going to run him down to the station?'

The officer chewed his moustache but didn't reply.

Mrs Garfield looked puzzled. 'Cuthbert?'

'He can't,' said Jo, 'because he's got no evidence.'

PC Beech's jowls quivered. 'Not this time I haven't but—'

'Billy,' Jo said, turning her back on the officer and ruffling her brother's mop of red-gold hair. 'Why don't you trot upstairs and do your homework until supper?'

Rubbing his red-rimmed eyes with the heel of his hand, Billy nodded.

Twisting his cap in his hand and his head bowed in abject misery, Billy slunk from the room.

Jo regarded the two people opposite her coolly. PC Beech held her unwavering gaze for a few seconds then grasped the front of his uniform jacket.

'We'll say no more about it this time,' he said, working his way up the silver buttons. 'But let me tell you, I'll be keeping

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 12 01/06/2018 09:54

a very close eye on your brother, miss, so you make sure he keeps his nose clean in future.'

Snatching his helmet from the table, he flipped it on his head and, after another quick glance at Mrs Garfield, marched out through the shop.

The shopkeeper's mouth pulled in an ugly line and she rounded on Jo. 'I don't care what you say, I know your brother stole the money.'

'Do you now?' Jo replied. 'Well, in that case, where is it? Where's the ten shilling you're so certain Billy took.'

Mrs Garfield was taken aback. 'Well, he's spent it, of course.'

'What, ten shillings in an hour?' said Jo. 'And on what? The baker's shut so he couldn't have spent it on pies and cake. You sell sweets and comics so if he'd come in flourishing a ten-bob note you would have mentioned it before now, so where is it? I'll tell you where,' she continued before the older woman could reply. 'In the pocket of the person who took it, that's where.'

'Everyone knows crime is a way of life to you East Enders,' said Mrs Garfield. 'So who else could it have been?'

Jo shrugged. 'I don't know. Maybe the caretaker had a hot tip for the three-thirty at Kempton Park or perhaps Miss Dixon herself took it to fund a wild night of gin and dominos in the Thatcher's Arms. If PC Plod bothered to do his job properly rather than bullying a ten-year-old boy he might even find out.'

Mrs Garfield glared at her. 'I'm going to have a word with the placement officer about you both. Do you hear?'

'You do that,' shouted Jo over her shoulder as she stormed across the room towards the hallway.

Leaving Mrs Garfield fuming in the shop's back room,

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 13 01/06/2018 09:54

Jo made her way upstairs past the snug family bedrooms on the first floor and towards the narrow door at the far end of the corridor behind which the roughly made stairway led to the old servants' quarters.

Knocking lightly on Billy's room she opened the door. Still in his school uniform, he was lying on the bed propped up against the headboard reading a copy of *Champion*, which he set aside as she walked in.

'You should be doing your homework.'

'It's boring,' he replied.

'Well, you'll never be able to join the RAF if you don't pass your school exams,' Jo replied.

Billy pulled a face. 'You sound like Mattie. She's always going on about me getting my matriculation.'

'Well, she's right,' Jo replied.

'I'll join the army instead then,' Billy replied. 'As long as I can kill some Germans.'

Shaping his two fingers into a pistol he aimed at the bare light bulb over his bed and let off an imaginary round.

Jo smiled and reaching out, tousled her brother's ginger hair.

Billy pulled a face and jerked his head away.

'Joooo?' he moaned.

'What?'

'Why can't we go home?' he asked.

'You know why,' said Jo. 'Because the Germans will be bombing us soon and it's safer for children to be out of London.'

'I hate it here,' said Billy. 'The local kids are always picking on us and saying we've got fleas.'

'I've told you to ignore them,' Jo replied.

'It's all right for you,' Billy said sullenly. 'You don't have to go to school.'

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 14 01/06/2018 09:54

'No, I have the life of Riley working like a slave in the Garfields' poxy shop instead of being at secretarial college like I was supposed to be,' Jo replied.

'At least you get money of your own at the end of the week,' Billy replied.

The corner of Jo's lips lifted in a satisfied smile as she remembered the way Mrs Garfield's piggy eyes had bulged when Jo had refused point blank to be an unpaid shop assistant.

Billy's face suddenly lit up. 'Perhaps if Old Face-ache downstairs does speak to the placement officer like she's always saying she will, we'll get sent home.'

'I wouldn't get your hopes up,' Jo replied. 'For all her threats, Old Garfield's not going to complain because she doesn't want to lose the fifteen bob a week the government are paying her to keep us.'

The miserable expression returned to her brother's face.

'Even if it is safer here,' said Billy, 'I don't understand. When Mrs Reilly from across the street asked Mum at Christmas if she was going to evacuate us Mum told her "over my dead body". Why did she change her mind?'

Jo shrugged.

'Do you think Aunt Pearl told her to when she turned up last time?' he persisted.

'I supposed she might have,' said Jo, knowing full well it was.

Billy gave her a puzzled look. 'But what about you? Why did mum send you away too?'

'What does it matter, Billy?' said Jo, sidestepping his question. 'We're here now so we'll just have to make the best of it.' She brushed his upper arm with a pretend punch. 'Come on! Chin up.'

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 15 01/06/2018 09:54

Billy forced a cheery smile.

'All right, sis, I'll try.' He delved into his trouser pockets and pulled out two crumpled letters. 'I picked up the late post.' He thrust them at her. 'There's one for both of us from Mum and another addressed to you.'

At last!

Jo put the letter from their mother into her pocket then, with her heart thumping uncomfortably in her chest, turned the other envelope over hoping to see Tommy Sweete's bold handwriting on the envelope but instead she recognised her sister Mattie's neat round lettering.

With her heart somewhere in her boots, Jo shoved aside the feeling of despondency in her chest and tousled her brother's hair.

'Finish your comic, Billy,' she said. 'I'll see you downstairs for supper.'

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 16 01/06/2018 09:54

Chapter Two

WITH THE RED light of the September sunset cutting through the window, Tommy Sweete mashed the last mouthfuls of potato into what remained of the liquor then scooped it up on his fork. Popping it in his mouth he skimmed down the front page of the *Evening News* which was propped against the condiment set. A year ago he'd have turned straight to the racing results on the back page, but now he was interested in the account of yesterday's fight between the RAF and the Luftwaffe over Beachy Head and the aftermath of the bomb that had been dropped in Hackney the week before.

It was just after five on the first Friday evening of the month and he was sitting in his usual booth in The Centurion Pie & Mash shop opposite the LCC Fire Station in Roman Road. As ever, it was crowded with workmen in rough clothing like him, stopping off for something to eat on their way home from work, and mothers with children having a meal before going to Friday-evening Mass at the Catholic Church five minutes away in Victoria Park Square.

With its white and black Victorian tiles decorating the walls, wooden benches either side of the scrubbed-pine tables and the steaming vats of stewed eels behind the counter, The Centurion had been feeding East Enders since the turn of the century. Like the décor, the menu hadn't changed much since then and remained either stewed eels or a steak pie served with mashed potatoes – with the traditional lumps

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 17 01/06/2018 09:54

– smothered in opaque liquor. This pale gravy was in fact parsley sauce made with the water used to boil the eels, which gave it a unique flavour and a green tinge.

Tommy's grandmother had brought him and his brother here each Friday and, using a few coppers from her hard-earned wages, had treated them to a bowl of stewed eels followed by an aniseed twist which they'd both slurped all the way home on the tram. Although he no longer had an aniseed twist after his plate of double pie and mash, a visit to The Centurion was still something Tommy treated himself to each Friday evening at the end of a tiring working week.

Although labouring, by definition, was always heavy physical graft, the last week had been particularly long and hard. Long because, with half the men in London called up he'd had a full week's work and hard because hammering girders into place needed muscle. Thankfully, after years of training and fighting in Arbour Amateur Boxing Club he had plenty of that and, at a shade over six foot tall and with a forty-two-inch chest, he had the height and bulk to manhandle the ten-foot-long, six-by-six timber props needed to prevent buildings from further collapse. Now, though, he was aching all over.

Skimming through the account of how the Ministry of Food was issuing new ration coupons with watermarks to frustrate black-market racketeers from forging them, Tommy picked up his mug of tea and washed down the last morsel of his supper.

'That all right for you, was it, Tommy?' called Dolly, from behind the marble counter.

Somewhere in her late fifties, Dolly was dressed as usual in a floral wrap-around apron and had her bright orange hair tied up under a mauve chiffon scarf. With an apple-

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 18 01/06/2018 09:54

round face and arms like a wrestler, Dolly Walker gutted and chopped live eels and peeled mountains of potatoes each day as her mother had before her and her mother before that.

'Nectar from heaven, Doll,' Tommy replied.

''ark at you, and your old blarney,' she replied, dimpling up like a schoolgirl. 'I suppose you'll be wanting roly-poly and custard.'

Tommy grinned. 'Do you need to ask?'

Grasping a ladle sticking out of the blackened saucepan at the back of the range, Dolly set to work and within a minute she was standing beside him holding a steaming bowl in her hand.

'There you are,' she said, as she set a dish of sponge floating in a pond of yellow custard before him. 'I've given you a bit extra to fill those long hollow legs of yours.'

Tommy smiled at her. 'What would I do without you to feed and fuss over me?'

'I wouldn't need to if you pulled your finger out and found yourself a wife,' she replied, picking up his empty plate. 'Now eat your pudding before it gets cold.'

She returned to serve the queue of customers at the counter.

It was true she always made a fuss of him but then Dolly made a fuss of everyone, and gave so many of her customers a 'bit extra' it was a wonder she earned a living.

Tommy picked up his spoon and made short work of his pudding, finishing the last mouthful with a satisfied sigh. Folding the newspaper, he stood up and shoved it in his pocket before taking his old donkey jacket from the back of his chair. He shrugged it on then, grasping the handle of his tool bag which he'd placed on the chair beside him, he went to the counter to pay for his meal.

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 19 01/06/2018 09:54

'You seeing Ruby later?' Dolly asked.

Pocketing his change, Tommy nodded.

'Well then, you can heat this up for her,' she said, sliding a battered Oxo tin full of pie and mash across the counter then wiping her hands on her faded apron.

'Thanks, Dolly,' he said, placing it in his bag amongst his hammer and chisels. 'You're a true diamond gal.'

Dolly's already red cheeks glowed a bit brighter but she shrugged. 'Even with everything it wouldn't be Christian to let her go hungry.'

'Thanks, all the same,' said Tommy. 'And see you next week.'

Outside, the streets were full of the early-evening bustle of people making their way home. Crossing the road, Tommy started up Globe Road towards Stepney Station and spotted the postman cycling away from the letter box with a full sack in his basket.

Damn! He'd missed the evening post. Still, after four weeks what difference would it make if his letter arrived on Monday instead of tomorrow?

In truth, if he'd had the sense he'd been born with, he'd have written it sooner instead of trying to pretend he didn't care that Jo had stopped writing.

They'd exchanged letters weekly for the first couple of months but since the beginning of August she'd not written back. At first, he wasn't too perturbed and, not wanting to press her, he'd forced himself to be patient, but now after almost four weeks he was worried. Worried that, despite her telling him over and over how much she loved him, in the three months since she'd been sent away, she'd found someone else. Some well-heeled country type with a car and a brace of hounds trotting behind or some white-collar

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 20 01/06/2018 09:54

professional – a doctor or a solicitor – who could offer her a better life than someone with a dodgy reputation and very little prospects. After all, she was gorgeous enough to attract any man's attention and he was certain she had.

Dolly was right on the nail when she said he needed a wife. But not just a wife. He needed Jo.

Perhaps rather than beating about the bush he should have come straight out and asked her to marry him. It was for that reason he had spent all his lunchtime in Bishopsgate library around the corner to where he was working writing a letter telling her exactly how he felt about her and that he would be catching the early train next Saturday to see her. Because Dolly was right: he needed a wife and even if he had to wait another four years until she was twenty-one, he would shift heaven and earth to make Miss Josephine Margaret Brogan Mrs Thomas Sweete.

Three-quarters of an hour later and after a brisk walk via Stepney Green Station, St Dunstan's Church and Limehouse Basin, Tommy stepped over the slurry of rotting vegetables and horse dung congealing around the blocked drain and crossed Gravel Lane.

By rights, at seven o'clock on a warm late-summer's evening, the pubs dotted along the ancient riverside thoroughfare should have been noisy and full and the warehouses quiet and empty. However, since the country had declared war on Germany last September the reverse was now true. Instead of the dock hooter sounding the end of the day at five, the dockers and stevedores in all the London docks were now working double shifts.

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 21 01/06/2018 09:54

In the long, summer days of 1940 the cranes fixed to the quays and jetties swung back and forth from dawn to dusk unloading vital supplies from ships that had escaped the German U-boats lurking in the Thames Estuary. Dodging between the hand carts piled high with crates and sacks, and imagining Jo running into his arms as he stepped off the early-morning train from Liverpool Street Station, Tommy turned the corner into Brewhouse Lane.

Passing the dilapidated row of once elegant terraced houses with their peeling paintwork and cracked and missing window panes, he came to the ten-foot-high double gates with 'Sweete & Co Builders' painted in an arch across it. Pushing open the door set within the left-hand gate he strolled into the yard. The area, which was perhaps fifty-foot-long by twenty wide, ran behind the row of houses and backed onto the solid brickwork of the Tilbury to Minories railway line. Parked in front of the small office with its one dirty window was Reggie's three-ton Bedford lorry.

Due to the coal and domestic fuel rations, Maguire & Sons, the coal merchants in Poplar, had been forced to sell off some of their fleet and Reggie had jumped at the chance to buy one of their trucks. He'd paid them a fiver over the asking price, thereby nabbing himself one of their new vehicles. Stacked around Reggie's new acquisition were various piles of building materials, while the pallets of bricks and the rows of picks and shovels lined up along the back wall all gave the impression of a thriving business. Anyone looking more closely, however, would soon see that the sand had become solid, and that there were weeds sprouting amongst the paving slabs, and rust on the tools. Although he took on the odd bit of navvying just to show willing, everyone knew

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 22 01/06/2018 09:54

Reggie Sweete's main line of work had nothing to do with bricks and mortar.

As Tommy stepped through into the yard, Fred Willis and Jimmy Rudd walked out of the office.

Fred, who'd been his brother's shadow for as long as Tommy could remember, was a wiry chap with a jagged scar along his chin. In contrast, Jimmy was a low-browed, heavily built individual who even Tommy had to look up to.

As they spotted Tommy they both looked relieved.

'Fank Christ, you've arrived, Tommy boy,' said Fred, lolloping across. 'Your Reggie's in one of his tempers.'

'Yeah,' added Jimmy. 'Been biting our bleedin' heads off all bleedin' day, he has.'

'What's happened?' asked Tommy.

'God knows,' Fred replied. 'But me and Jimmy are skedaddling before he starts going off on one again.'

'See you,' said Jimmy, giving Tommy a light-handed cuff on the arm as he and Fred headed for the gate.

The two men left, closing the door behind them.

Tommy found his brother Reggie sitting behind a desk strewn with papers that had been anchored down with a bag of nails and an open bottle of Scotch. Behind him was a dusty three-shelved bookcase stacked haphazardly with files and ledgers. Nailed on the wall opposite the window was a cork board with last year's calendar pinned on it showing Miss December, in high-heels and a scant negligee, making a snowman.

Seven years his senior, Reggie was four inches shorter than Tommy and instead of his tight, athletic frame he had the physique of a prize bull.

Dressed in a wide-collared shirt, a chocolate-brown three-piece suit with a flowery tie and fob chain dangling

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 23 01/06/2018 09:54

across his middle, his brother looked as if he were going out on the town rather than working in a builder's yard.

He looked up as Tommy walked in.

'I was beginning to fink you'd got lost,' he said, the half-smoked cigarette dangling from his lips moving as he spoke.

Dropping his tool bag on the desk, Tommy dragged a paint-splattered chair over and sat astride it.

'Who's been yanking your chain, then?'

'Poxy council that's who,' said Reggie. 'Sent me this bloody summons.'

He searched out a crumpled manila envelope from amongst the paperwork and shoved it at Tommy.

As Tommy scanned the letter, Reggie took the last drag on his cigarette and flicked it on the floorboards then taking one of the stained enamel mugs from behind him, he threw the dregs on the floorboards.

Grabbing the whisky, he waved it at Tommy who shook his head. His brother poured himself a large measure.

'Bloody cheek of it,' he continued after swallowing a mouthful. 'Who said they could sign me and my chaps up as part of their Civil Defence tosh?'

'The Air Raid Precautions Act,' Tommy replied, handing the compulsion order back.

'And if that ain't enough piggin' cheek,' Reggie continued, screwing up the council letter in his fist. 'They've sewest . . . sekest . . . me lorry too.'

'Sequestered,' said Tommy.

'Bloody fancy word for a bloody liberty, however they want to dress it up,' said Reggie.

'There is a war on and you want to count your blessing, Reg,' said Tommy. 'You've been allocated to the Shadwell. Some builders have been ordered to report to command

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 24 01/06/2018 09:54

centres on the other side of London not to mention you'll get paid £2 17s 6d a week.'

'I'm earning three times that now,' scoffed Reggie. 'And they'll bleedin' tax me too.'

'Probably,' said Tommy. 'But if you don't want to end up in front of the beak having to explain yourself then—'

'All right, smart arse, you've made your point,' said Reggie, knocking back the last of his Scotch and pouring another. 'But I'm listing you as one of the crew. Unless of course you want to freeze your bollocks off doing fire watch on top of the India and Imperial warehouse all winter.'

'All right, count me in,' said Tommy. 'As long as it's all above board and legit.'

Holding his little finger down with his thumb Reggie raised his right hand. 'Boy Scouts' honour.'

Tommy gave him a wry smile. 'Anything else in the post?'

Reggie grinned. 'I suppose you mean from your bit of fluff in the country.'

Tommy's mouth pulled into a hard line. 'Her name's Jo.'

'Sorry, no,' said Reggie. 'There was nothing from Jo.'

Tommy's shoulders sagged.

'Come on, cheer up.' Reggie shoved the bottle across the table at him. 'Have a drink and forget about her. Plenty more fish in the sea and haven't I always told you to follow your big brother's example and love 'em and leave 'em.'

Tommy didn't reply.

Reggie held his gaze for a second then his eyes flickered onto the tool bag on the desk. 'I did think when they released you from Borstal we'd go back to our old games, you know.' He gave Tommy an ingratiating smile. 'The Sweete brothers, quick and crafty, living by our wits.'

'By breaking in and nicking stuff, you mean?' said Tommy.

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 25 01/06/2018 09:54

'Yeah, but didn't I teach you everything you needed to know?' said Reggie.

'True,' Tommy conceded. 'If it weren't for you I'd never have learned how to shin up a drainpipe, pick a lock or open a three-tumbler safe using a drinking glass.'

'I know it's that bi . . . that Jo who's been stuffing your bonce with all that going straight nonsense,' said Reggie. 'And it's understandable, you being swayed by her. You're young and your sap's rising, making you frisky, but you shouldn't let that get between us.'

Tommy forced a smile. 'It won't. Now, I should be off.'

There was a long pause then Reggie picked up the crumpled pack of Senior Service lying amongst the paper debris on his desk. 'I suppose you're going to see her.'

'Of course.' Tommy stood up.

'I don't know why you bother,' his brother said.

'Because I have to,' Tommy replied.

The two brothers stared at each other for a moment then Reggie looked away.

'I'll see you later at the Admiral?' he said out of the side of his mouth as he held the flame to the tip of his cigarette.

'Not tonight,' Tommy replied, picking up his tools. 'I'm freezing me bollocks off fire-watching on the India and Imperial.'

Tommy turned and headed for the door.

'Don't bother to give her my love,' Reggie called after him.

'Don't worry,' Tommy replied, without breaking his stride, 'I never do.'

•

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 26 01/06/2018 09:54

Twenty minutes after leaving his brother's yard, Tommy turned down Limehouse Causeway carrying a full shopping bag in one hand and his tool bag in the other. He continued on until he reached the bend in the road at Milligan Street. Staring past the line of warehouses, his gaze fixed on Potter Dwellings. Despite being just a stone's throw from Limehouse Basin, the solid yellow brick tenement had survived the night's bombing, and Tommy gave a sigh of relief.

As the plaque on the wall informed those who might be curious, the three-storey council block had been opened less than forty years before in 1904 by Alderman Henry Potter who gave the building its name. Walking under the wrought-iron archway and into the central courtyard, Tommy headed for the furthest staircase then took the steps two at a time to the top floor. He strode along the balcony until he reached the door at the far end.

With two bedrooms, a kitchen with running water and one toilet for every three families, the flats were much sought after and all tenants maintained them to a high standard, as the freshly painted doors, window boxes and scrubbed stairways testified.

All, that is, except the one Tommy was standing in front of now.

He looked at the faded front door for a second or two and then, knowing it was never locked, pushed it open. Stepping over the discoloured door mat and ensuring he didn't kick the three-day-old milk bottle beside it, Tommy walked inside.

'Mum,' he shouted, as the foetid air clogged his nose. 'It's Tommy?'

Nothing.

Shutting the door behind him, Tommy walked down the narrow passage and into the main living room. With

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 27 01/06/2018 09:54

the exception of perhaps a few additional stains on the sofa and more dust on the mantelshelf, the ten-by-twelve room looked much as it had looked when he'd visited last week. The pile of newspapers remained stacked haphazardly in the corner and each surface had an item of used crockery on it. There were a couple of lazy flies buzzing around a half-eaten piece of fish and a handful of last week's dried chips nesting in a screwed-up piece of newspaper on the floor. Although he paid the rent on it each week, the thought of living there made his stomach churn. He and Reggie lived in Tarling Street instead.

There was a shuffling sound behind him and Tommy turned to see his mother leaning against the doorframe.

Ruby Sweete was just forty-five but looked at least ten years older. She was wearing the dressing gown he'd bought her in Boardman's a few Christmases ago but lack of regular washing meant the bright pink garment was now grey. The lace around the collar was mostly missing while the matching decoration on the cuffs hung in twisted threads around her bony wrists. In the photos of her as a young chorus girl at the Hackney Empire, Ruby's blonde hair was a riot of curls but now it looked like an abandoned bird's nest. The remnants of last night's make-up were still smudged around her eyes and what remained of her lipstick had sunk into the etched lines around her mouth.

She had never been what you'd describe as full figured, but in the last couple of years her slender figure had become gaunt and even the rouge on her cheeks couldn't disguise the grey tinge to her skin.

She stared uncomprehendingly at him a moment then a light flickered on in her eyes. 'Tommy.'

'Hello, Mum,' he replied. 'How you been keeping?'

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 28 01/06/2018 09:54

'Oh, you know,' she replied. 'You?'

'I'm in the pink,' he replied. 'I thought I'd just pop down to see if you're all right. Where did you go last night?'

'Down to the Angel,' she replied. 'You get a nice crowd in there.'

'No, I meant when the air raid siren went off.'

She looked puzzled. 'Air raid—'

'Which shelter did you go to?' Tommy persisted.

'I stayed in the pub, of course,' she replied. 'I reckon if your number's up, your number's up. You got a fag?'

Reaching into the bag, Tommy took out a packet of Senior Service and handed them to her. Fumbling, she unwrapped it and took one out. Placing it between her lips she took a box of Swan Vesta from behind the motionless clock on the mantelshelf.

After a couple of attempts to strike a light, Tommy put the bag on the sideboard and walked over to his mother. Taking the matches from her, he lit one.

Her hand shook as her nicotine-stained fingers closed over his and she drew on the cigarette.

'Thanks, luv,' she said, looking up at him through bloodshot eyes. 'It's this weather. Plays havoc with me circulation.'

Moving away before the smell of her unwashed body made him gag, Tommy returned to the sideboard.

'Dolly sent you some pie and mash,' he said.

Shoving aside a half-empty bottle of Gordon's, Tommy started to unpack the shopping. 'There's a couple of tins of pilchards, some of that rice pudding you like, a tin loaf. It's off the first tray of the evening batch.'

He laid the tissue-wrapped bread that he'd bought after leaving Reggie's yard next to the collection of tins. The smell

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 29 01/06/2018 09:54

of freshly baked yeast and flour drifted up and almost masked the stale odour of the room.

His mother studied the collection unenthusiastically and blew a stream of smoke towards the discoloured ceiling.

'I know,' he said, pulling out the tin Dolly had given him from the bottom of the bag, 'why don't I find a plate for your supper?'

'Ta, luv, but,' she patted her stomach, 'I'm a bit jippy. I'll have it later. But you can make yourself a cuppa if you want. There's milk on the doorstep.'

'No, it's all right, Mum,' he said.

'Have you seen Reggie?' she asked.

He nodded. 'I dropped in at the yard earlier. He says hello.'

'That's good of him,' she replied sourly.

'He's busy, Mum,' said Tommy.

'Too busy for his mother,' she said, the cigarette dangling from her lips sprinkling ash as she spoke. 'It ain't right. Do you hear me, boy? It ain't right.'

Tommy said nothing.

'I suffered agonies for two nights bringing him into this world and this is how he treats me,' she continued, with tears of self-pity shining in her bloodshot eyes. 'My own flesh and blood. And after all I've done for him.'

Memories of him and Reggie, hunger gnawing at their innards, huddled under a dirty blanket for warmth, shot through Tommy's mind.

'He's busy, Mum,' he reiterated.

His mother mulled this over for a moment and then a maudlin expression spread across her face.

'Not like you, Tommy,' she said. 'You don't forget your old mum, do you?'

'No, Mum,' he replied in the same flat tone.

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 30 01/06/2018 09:54

'You always were my favourite.' She smiled, showing her irregular, nicotine-stained teeth. 'You know that, don't you?'

There was a long pause punctuated only by the echo of the dripping tap in the kitchen.

'I've got to go,' said Tommy.

Walking across the sticky rug he headed for the door.

'Tommy.'

He stopped and looked back at her from the doorway.

'Can you spare me a couple of bob?' she asked.

'What happened to the half a crown I sent round on Tuesday?' he asked.

Her pale lips lifted in a self-pitying smile. 'You don't begrudge me a bit of comfort, do you, Tommy?'

Tommy studied his mother for a couple of seconds then shoved his hand in his pocket. He pulled out his change and selected a couple of florin.

Retracing his steps, he dropped them in his mother's outstretched hand.

'Thanks,' she said, her chipped, painted nails scraped the back of his hand as her fingers snapped around the coins. 'You're a good boy.'

Tommy turned, marched back across the room and left the flat.

The sun had crept around the end of the block, illuminating the grimy and smeared window behind him. Resting his hands on the rough brickwork of the balcony, Tommy took a deep breath to clear the cloying stench from his nose and mouth.

He'd been born in this flat and somehow survived there, until Reggie had offered him a bed with him and the woman he was knocking about with at the time. Family life for him and Reggie had been dirty clothes, hungry bellies

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 31 01/06/2018 09:54

and random aggression. For a while he'd gone along with Reggie's philosophy towards women and had begun to drink more than was good for him to numb the hollowness of his hand-to-mouth existence, but then he'd met Jo and everything had changed. Seeing the possibility of a different life with her had formed a steely resolve in Tommy, and he'd sworn by all that was holy that no child of his would ever have to endure the nightmares he had.

ARBCH pages v5s03.indd 32 01/06/2018 09:54