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Opening Extract from...

Call Nurse Millie

Written by Jean Fullerton

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Call Nurse Millie

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Chapter One

Millie Sullivan pushed an escaped curl of auburn hair from her eyes with the back of her hand. She wished she'd put on her cotton petticoat under her navy blue uniform instead of the rayon one. Although the milk float was only just rolling along the street, it was already sweltering hot.

With a practised hand Millie wrapped the newborn infant in a warm towel. 'There we go, young lady, say hello to your ma.'

She handed the child to the woman propped up in the bed. Mo Driscoll, already mother to four lively boys, took the baby.

'Thank you, Sister,' she said, tucking her daughter into the crook of her arm and gazing down at the baby. 'Isn't she beautiful?'

'She's an angel,' Mo's mother, standing on the other side of the bed, replied. 'And a welcome change.' She looked at Millie. 'I'll clear up, Sister. You look done in.'

'I am, but thankfully it's my last night on call.' Millie handed a parcel of newspaper containing soiled gauze to the older woman. 'Could you pop these on the fire?'

'To be sure.' She took the packet and threw it in the zinc bucket alongside the dirty linen. 'That superintendent works you nurses too hard. You should try and put your feet up when you get back.'

Millie smiled. Chance would be a fine thing. She plopped her instruments into the small gallipot half-filled with Dettol, took off her gloves and glanced at her watch. Eight-thirty a.m.! Thank goodness.

She'd be back by the time Miss Summers gave out the day's work. Also, as Annie Fletcher, the trainee Queen's Nurse student assigned to Millie, was laid up with tonsillitis, Millie had given a couple of Annie's morning insulin injection visits to Gladys to do, and she wanted to make sure she'd done them.

'Do you know what you're going to call her?' Millie asked Mo, washing her hands in the bowl balanced on the rickety bedside table.

'Colleen, after me mum,' she replied.

Mother and daughter exchanged an affectionate look and Millie glanced at her watch again.

She ought to get on, as she'd promised her own mum that she'd pop home in time for Churchill's announcement at three p.m. Her parents, Doris and Arthur, only lived a short bus ride away in Bow but, as Millie had two newborns to check plus a handful of pregnant women to see before she swapped her midwifery bag for her district one for her afternoon visits, it would be a close-run thing.

Millie packed the four small enamel dressing-bowls inside each other, then stowed them in her case between her scissors and the bottle of Dettol. She snapped the clasp shut.

'I'll call back tomorrow, but if there's any problem just ring Munroe House to get the on-call nurse,' Millie said, squeezing down the side of the bed towards the door.

Like so many others in East London, the Driscolls' home was just the two downstairs rooms in an old terraced house that Hitler's bombs had somehow missed.

Colleen took the manila envelope tucked into the side of the dressing-table mirror and passed it to Millie. Millie opened it and took out two crumpled ten-shilling notes, popping them into the side pocket of her bag. I'll write it in when I get back to the clinic, she thought.

*

Leaving Mo in the care of her mother, Millie stepped out of the front door and looked up at the clear blue sky. Harris Street was filled with people milling around and chatting to each other. Women, their hair bound up in scarves knotted at the front and wearing sleeveless, wraparound aprons, sat outside their houses.

They were already sewing coloured bunting in anticipation of the Prime Minister's broadcast. Most of the doors had been thrown open and the strains of 'Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree' filled the street, with the voices of the women singing along. They had clearly been about their chores since early that morning, as the doorsteps were already scrubbed white. Bedroom

windows had been flung open and the curtains fluttering in the wind added to the festive mood. At the far end of the street a dozen or so boys were playing cricket with an upturned orange box as a wicket, while their sisters bobbed up and down the chalked squares of a hopscotch game.

Millie tilted her face to the sun. She closed her eyes for a moment to enjoy the dappled shadow on her eyelids and the warmth on her cheeks.

'Has Mo had her nipper, Sister?' asked a woman who was beating out her doormat on the side of a house.

'About an hour ago,' Millie replied.

'What did she have?' asked the woman, setting out the newspapers on the rack outside the corner shop.

'You'd better ask Mr Driscoll.' Millie heaved her black leather Gladstone bag into the basket on the front of her bicycle. 'But I will say, you'll see some frilly baby clothes on the washing line from now on,' she added, unlocking the chain threaded around the lamp-post and through her front wheel.

Everyone laughed.

An old woman with iron curlers in her hair looked out of a front window. 'She'll need to keep her strength up, so I'll pop her over a drop of stew, Sister.'

'I'm sure she'll appreciate that,' Millie replied.

'Well, God bless the mite,' called a woman who was polishing her windows with newspaper. 'And, sure, isn't this the best of days to be born on?'

'It will be when old Churchill tells us it's all over,' shouted a man lounging under a lamp-post with two others. 'I mean, Hitler's been dead a week, so that must be an end to it. Hey, Sister! Do you think the Driscolls will call her Clementine after the old boy's missus?'

Millie laughed and grabbed the handlebars. 'I wouldn't count on it.'

She noticed the woman leaning on the windowsill at the far end of the street, a young boy playing with a model tank beside her. Millie wheeled her bike towards them.

'Jonnie looks a lot better, Mrs Brown,' she said, stopping in front of the pair. 'Has his cough gone?'

Mrs Brown nodded and looked down lovingly at her son. 'He's

almost back to his old self, thanks to you, Sister. If it hadn't been for you showing me how to sponge him to keep the fever down, I don't know that he'd still be with us.'

Millie ruffled the boy's hair. 'I'm sure it was having his mum sitting by his bedside day and night that got him through the measles.'

Jonnie looked up. 'Do you want to come to our party later, miss? There's going to be jelly and blancmange and pilchards and everything.'

Millie laughed. 'Not together, I hope! I'd love to, but I'm going to see my mum and dad.'

He turned back to his tank and vroomed it along the pavement.

Millie said goodbye to his mother, scooted her old boneshaker into motion and then climbed on to the seat. She pressed down on the pedals to build up speed and then, checking the traffic, swung left on to the Highway and headed for Munroe House Nurses' Home to have breakfast and restock her bag before starting her postnatal rounds.

The breeze caught a couple of stray wisps of hair from beneath Millie's broad-brimmed hat and fluttered them against her cheeks. It also carried the sour odour of the river, half a mile away. As if sensing the joy in the air, the sparrows hopped merrily over the charred beams of the bombed-out houses. It was the most wonderful of days. From today there would be no more sirens warning of enemy aircraft or the eerie silence after a Doodlebug's engine cut out and fell to earth. No, the dark days were over and baby Driscoll couldn't have picked a more perfect day to enter the world!

Millie pushed on, ringing her bell, waving at the beat officer seeing schoolchildren across the road and smiling at the people passing by on their way to work.

Finally, after twenty minutes of weaving between the lorries and a handful of old-fashioned horse-drawn wagons hauling goods from the docks, Millie pedalled through the back gates of the nurses' home.

Munroe House, where Millie and thirty other nurses employed by the St George's and St Dunstan's District Nursing Association lived and worked, was a large, four-storeyed Victorian house

situated at the Limehouse end of Commercial Road, just past St Martha's and St Mungo's Catholic Church.

It had once housed a family and an army of servants within its high-ceilinged rooms, and it had been bequeathed to the Association after the Great War. Standing on one pedal, Millie swung herself off the bike and guided it towards the bike stand by the old stable walls. She wedged the front wheel into a vacant slot, grabbed her bag and made her way to the back door.

Pushing open the door, she headed for the refectory. The room where the nurses ate their meals was once the family parlour. Its lofty, ornate ceiling was cream in colour and had been painted so often that what had once been delicate crafted grapes now looked like clumps of potatoes. The room had been redecorated with apricot-coloured flowers and green foliage on a mushroom-hued background just before the outbreak of war, but it had now faded into gloomy shades of brown. There were two long, scrubbed tables that could accommodate at least a dozen nurses around each. Luckily, as all thirty nurses were never in the house at any one time, there was always a place free.

Half-a-dozen nurses at the far end of one of the tables looked up and acknowledged Millie, then returned to their breakfast.

Connie Byrne, sitting at the table by the kitchen, raised her head and smiled. In contrast to Millie's dark looks, Connie was a strawberry blonde with high cheekbones and golden-green eyes. She was just an inch or two taller than Millie's five foot four, but as she and Millie had the same slender figure, the two girls extended their meagre wartime wardrobes by swapping clothes.

Each of the nurses employed by the St George's and St Dunstan's District Nursing Association and who had completed the Queen's Nurse training were allocated to a set geographical area. They were the nursing Sisters who planned the care of the local patients, but they often had a nursing assistant to help them in day-to-day patient care. Connie had the patch next to Millie's. She covered the close-packed houses east along the Highway to Ratcliffe Cross, while Millie took the west section, including the Chapman Estate, and the dingy end of Cable Street.

'I hope you haven't polished off all the grub,' Millie said, walking over to the breakfast table and pouring a cup of tea

from the oversized enamel teapot. 'Some of us have been up for hours and already done a day's work.'

Cradling the cup in her capable fingers, Connie grinned. 'I thought I heard the phone ring. What time was it?'

'Just after six.' Millie sat next to her and put her bag on the floor beneath the chair. She took a slice of slice of toast from the rack.

Connie passed her the butter dish. 'It's axle grease, I'm afraid.'

'What, already? Miss Summers could have only given Cook this week's ration book two days ago.' Millie eyed the solid block of marge. 'I'll make do.'

'Who was it?' Connie asked, as Millie reached for the pot of damson jam.

'Mrs Driscoll,' Millie replied, digging her knife into the ruby jelly. 'A girl.'

Millie glanced at the large wall clock.

'Don't worry,' Connie said. 'You've got time to finish your breakfast before allocation.'

'It's just that, you know … being six nurses down.' Millie forced a smile.

'You take too much on yourself,' Connie said, taking a sip of tea.

'Someone has to. Anything from your Charlie?'

Connie shook her head. 'I can't believe it's almost a year since I got his last letter, but the Army post is simply shocking, and his mother's heard nothing either. I expect he's too busy rounding up the last of Mussolini's thugs to write, but I'm sure I'll hear something soon.'

Millie put her hand over her pal's, and squeezed. 'Don't worry. The top brass will be kicking him home soon enough.'

Beattie Topping, their friend who covered the Stepney area, came over.

'Morning, girls,' she said, pinning the last few strands of light brown hair away from her face as she sat down opposite them. 'Some of us are going to ask for permission to go up West later for the celebrations. Why don't you come?'

Millie poured a cup of tea for Beattie. 'Who's us?'

'Me, Eva, Joyce and some of the other girls. We're going up to

the Palace to see if the King and Queen come out on the balcony. It's going to be a party and no mistake.'

'Do you think the Old Girl will give us all a pass?' Connie asked.

'I don't see how she can say no, as long as there's someone here to answer the phone. It's not every day we win a war.' She looked sheepishly at Millie. 'We thought perhaps you wouldn't mind asking her.'

'I will, but you'll have to go without me,' Millie replied. 'I promised Mum and Dad I'd join them to listen to the Prime Minister's broadcast.'

Connie elbowed her. 'You can be back here for eight and we can all catch the tube together. Come on. Let's put our glad rags on and dance until dawn with the rest of London. After dodging bombs for six years, don't we deserve a bit of fun?'

'I should say.' Beattie winked. 'There'll be hundreds of our brave boys looking for a girl to swing on their arm. It's nothing less than your patriotic duty not to disappoint them.'

Millie laughed. 'Well, if it's for king and country, how could I refuse? Let me know how many of you want a pass and I'll ask Miss Summers after allocations.'

The door swung open and Gladys Potter strolled in. She went to the mirror over the fireplace, took her hat off and patted the rolls on either side of her head back into place.

'Have you given Mrs Rogers her insulin?' Millie asked.

'You asked me to, didn't you?' Gladys replied, fingering through the flattened curls of her fringe without glancing around.

'What about Mr Gordon?'

'I'll do him on my way to Turner Street when I go out,' she replied.

'But he can't have his breakfast until you've been.'

Gladys swung around. 'Look, I've already done three of my own patients plus yours, so he'll have to wait!' She turned to the mirror, pressing her lips together to redistribute the red lipstick she wasn't supposed to wear on duty.

'What is it with her?' asked Beattie in a low voice.

'Don't take no notice. Me and Millie were in the same nursing set as her at the London and she was a cow even then,' said Connie quietly.

‘One night Old Iron Knickers, the matron, found an American airman that Gladys was knocking around with in the linen room at the nurses’ home,’ Millie explained in a whisper. ‘If it wasn’t for the war Gladys would have been kicked out on the spot. She wasn’t, but she had to do three months of nights on the men’s orthopaedic ward as punishment, and then had to report to matron every night at six o’clock, eight o’clock and ten for another three.’

‘What’s that got to do with you?’ asked Sally.

‘Gladys thinks it was me who told matron,’ Millie replied. ‘I didn’t, but …’ she shrugged.

The grandfather clock in the hall started to chime.

Connie swallowed the last of her tea. ‘We’d better go through.’

Millie stood up and the three women left the refectory to make their way to the treatment room at the far end of the corridor.

There was no sign of Miss Summers, so Millie slid around to her place in the chair near the top of the central table. Connie and Beattie followed.

The room at the hub of Munroe House had been the morning room once used by the lady of the house, and it was large enough to accommodate an examination couch, a sizable table and a dozen straight-backed chairs. Pinned on the pale cream wall surrounding the nurses were posters advising people to use a handkerchief when they sneezed, and not to spit, and reminding children that Dr Carrot was their best friend. A floor-to-ceiling cupboard stood against the opposite wall, while the blackboard that listed the names of the nurses allocated to the clinic each day was hooked behind the door. The equipment ready to be loaned out to patients, such as china bedpans and bed cradles that kept blankets off patients’ legs, was stored between the empty wine racks in the cellar below. As always, the acidic smell of iodine mingled with Dettol and hung heavy in the air.

Other nurses filed in, Gladys being the last, perching on a chair with her legs crossed and a blasé expression on her face.

As the second hand of the large clock fixed above the door ticked by, the nurses waited. After a few moments the chattering started.

‘Perhaps someone should go and see what’s keeping her,’

Gladys said, looking across at Millie as the noise in the room grew louder.

Millie stood up and went towards the door but as she got there it opened and Miss Summers walked in. Millie's heart sank. Not only had the superintendent misbuttoned the front of her uniform, but she was wearing one black shoe and one brown.

Miss Summer's watery eyes ran over Millie as she tried to focus. 'What are you doing, Sullivan?'

'Coming to find you, Miss Summers,' Millie replied, catching a faint whiff of gin.

'But I'm here,' replied Miss Summers as she tottered past Millie. 'Now, for today's allocations,' she said, planting her generous rear on the chair. She opened the enormous bound book and the nurses sat with their notebooks and pencils poised.

The superintendent stared at the ledger with a baffled expression on her face.

'Excuse me, Miss Summers.' Millie reached across and turned the book the right way up.

There was a titter from the far end of the table.

Miss Summers took her old spectacles from her top pocket, wedged them on the tip of her nose and peered at the page in front of her.

'Dr Murray asks that someone call in to talk about a patient in Sydney Street, so that would be you, Nurse Barrett,' she said looking over the rim of her spectacles.

'Excuse me, Superintendent, but Nurse Scott is the Whitechapel East nurse,' Millie said, nodding at Sally Scott sitting on the other side of the table.

Miss Summers shot her an irritated look. 'That's what I said. Nurse Scott will visit.' She looked down at the neat columns of copperplate writing and mumbled her way through the remaining telephoned requests. 'And if all that were not enough, those pen-pushers at the Public Health Department are on to us again about visiting the schools. Don't they know there's a war on?' Miss Summers scowled at the sheet as if it were responsible for the lack of nurses.

'Not any more there ain't,' Gladys muttered to her two friends sitting either side of her.

Millie leaned forward. 'Would you like me to organise the school visits, Miss Summers?'

The superintendent raised her head. A Kirby grip broke loose and a strand of grey hair flopped over her right eye. 'Please don't interrupt me, Sullivan.'

'Sorry, Miss Summers,' Millie said.

Miss Summers glanced at the book again. 'Sullivan, I want you to arrange the school visits.'

Sally and Beattie gave Millie a sympathetic look. The phone sitting on the table outside in the hall rang.

'Mrs Jupp?' asked Beattie.

Connie shook her head. 'Mrs Williams. She was due two weeks ago.'

Millie stood up. 'I'll get it.'

She squeezed her way behind the nurses alongside her and went into the hall. The metallic ring of the black telephone echoed around the tiled hall and up the stairwell.

Millie picked up the receiver. 'Good morning. Munroe House. How can I help you?'

'This is Doctor Hurst from St Andrew's Hospital. I'd like to speak to one of your nurses, a Miss Sullivan, if I may,' a male voice said.

'Speaking.' There was a pause. 'Miss Sullivan speaking,' she repeated.

'I'm sorry. I didn't think I would get through to you directly. I'm afraid your father has been admitted to Bromley Ward in St Andrew's. Your mother is at his bedside but I think she will need you with her soon.'

*

Heels tapped across the polished floor and wheels squeaked as the nurses pushed the black trolley to the far end of Bromley Ward. The large ward clock set above the nurses' station by the door ticked out the minutes. The clatter of a bucket and a faint smell of disinfectant told Millie the ward orderly was mopping up a spillage somewhere. Millie couldn't see any of this because screens had been drawn around her father's bed.

Arthur Sullivan lay still with his eyes closed and, as a bed bath was a nurse's first duty when a patient was admitted, newly washed and with his hair combed. Millie ran her eyes over the

blue counterpane and wondered how many of them she must have thrown over, smoothed flat and tucked in during her seven years of nursing.

His barrel chest still rose and fell with unhurried regularity, but already Millie could hear the rattle in the back of his throat. Despite his droopy right eye and slack mouth, Arthur looked younger than his fifty-two years and now much more like the father she remembered hoisting her on his shoulders at Southend so she could see the Punch and Judy show at the end of the pier. Millie squeezed her father's nicotine-stained fingers as images of him holding nails between his lips as he made a cradle for her best doll filled her mind. She hooked her fingers around her father's wrist to feel his pulse. It was thready, with an occasionally missed beat.

Millie looked across at her mother Doris keeping vigil on the other side of the bed.

Whereas her father's years had mysteriously slipped away, Doris looked every day of her forty-seven years. Somewhere between discovering her husband collapsed and climbing into the back of the ambulance, she'd remembered to shrug on a summer coat, but she was still wearing her tartan slippers. Her drained, colourless complexion matched perfectly the faded candy-striped curtains behind her.

'He only went out to pull a couple of carrots,' Doris muttered, without taking her eyes from her husband. 'I didn't think anything of it when he didn't come in. I just thought he was chatting to Peggy next door; you know, her with the bad knee and the Jack Russell, but when I noticed his bacon and eggs getting cold on the table I went out to see,' the tears welled up in her pale eyes, 'and that's when I found him just lying there, like that, among the beans and cabbages, staring up at the sky.' Doris pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket. 'If only I'd gone out straight away I could have called the ambulance sooner and …' she blew her nose.

'I don't think it would have made any difference,' Millie said gently.

The screen behind her mother moved and a young man dressed in a white coat stepped through. With his brown hair, round-rimmed glasses and smooth cheeks he looked no more than

twelve, but the stethoscope hanging around his neck marked him out as the junior houseman.

'I'm Mr Sullivan's daughter,' Millie said, standing up and walking around to stand beside her mother.

'Good day. I'm Dr Hurst. I telephoned you earlier,' he said.

'Do you know what's wrong with my Arthur?' Doris asked.

The doctor picked up the clipboard hanging on the end of the bed and glanced at it. 'We've done some tests and I can tell you that Mr Sullivan has suffered a stroke.'

The colour drained from her mother's face. 'But how? Arthur's as strong as an ox and he's never had a day on the sick in his life.'

The doctor glanced over the chart again. 'Your husband has suffered a cerebral haemorrhage in the motor part of his brain and, more seriously, his medulla oblongata.'

Her mother looked blankly at Millie.

'Dad's had a bleed into the part of his brain that takes care of his breathing and heartbeat,' Millie said woodenly.

'But he will get better, won't he?' Doris asked anxiously. 'I mean, George Duffy at number four had a stroke last November and now he's as fit as a fiddle.'

'Vascular accidents are by their very nature unpredictable, Mrs Sullivan,' the young doctor said in a ponderous tone. 'But I feel confident in my assessment that, due to the extent of the vascular involvement, your husband will not recover from this episode.'

'You mean he won't be able to walk or talk or something?'

Millie took her mother's hand. 'The doctor means there's nothing they can do, Mum, and it's just a matter of time.'

Doris stared blankly at her for a moment, and then covered her mouth with her hands.

The doctor returned the chart to the end of the bed. 'I'll let you have a few moments alone,' he said, before leaving through the screens.

Millie returned to her seat on the other side of the bed and she and her mother sat in silence for a moment, and then Doris straightened the collar of her husband's pyjamas.

'You're a daft old bugger, so you are, Arthur,' she said, softly. 'My mother always said you were a man born the wrong way around. Only you could have stroke on the day it's all over.'

She took her husband's hand again. 'How am I going to cope without you?'

'You've still got me, Mum,' Millie replied, as pain tightened in her chest.

Doris nodded. 'I know. I know. But me and your dad have known each other almost thirty years.'

'Quick, turn it on so everyone can hear,' a woman called from the other side of the screens. There were some crackling sounds as someone turned the tuning dial, and then a blast of music from a military band.

The music stopped and the plummy voice of the announcer spoke. 'This is the BBC. We are now going over live to the Cabinet Room at Ten Downing Street where the Prime Minister will address the nation.'

A buzz of excitement went around the ward just as a small trickle of spit slipped out from the corner of Arthur Sullivan's slack lips. Millie wiped it away with a gauze square.

'Yesterday morning at two forty-one a.m.,' the unmistakeable voice of Winston Churchill said, 'at General Eisenhower's headquarters …'

Arthur gurgled and stopped breathing. His skin blanched and the birthmark over his left eye mottled as his circulation ceased.

'Arthur!' Doris whispered, clutching his lifeless hand.

As Churchill announced unconditional surrender of the German state, Millie rose and placed her hands over her mother's.

'He's gone, Mum,' she said quietly after a while.

Her mother lifted her husband's hand to her cheek and kissed it. With a lingering look at her father, Millie moved the screen aside and stepped out.

'We may allow ourselves a brief period of rejoicing …' Millie heard the Prime Minister say, and a cheer went up. The matron in her frilly starched cap, nurses in green candy-striped uniforms and patients in dressing gowns and slippers shook hands and hugged each other.

One of the nurses spotted Millie and came over. 'Isn't it marvellous?' she asked, her round face shining with joy. 'I can hardly believe that it's all finally over.'

'My father's just gone,' Millie said flatly.

The young nurse became serious instantly. 'I'll tell the doctor.'

She hurried to Dr Hurst, who was sharing a drink with the ward orderly. She spoke to him and they came over. Millie followed them back behind the screens. Her mother was as she'd left her, clutching her husband's hand and gazing aimlessly at the clouds passing by outside the window.

Millie put her arm around her shoulders. 'Shall we let the doctor have a bit of room?'

'Yes, of course,' Doris said, standing up and stepping aside.

The doctor placed his stethoscope on Arthur's chest for a couple of seconds and then slung it around his neck.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

Doris nodded. 'Thank you, doctor. I'm very grateful for all you've done and I'm sure my Arthur would say the same if …' She wiped her nose with her handkerchief, and then sat down next to the bed again.

'If you could let us have a few moments,' Millie said, as her mother started to sob noiselessly.

The doctor left. On the other side of the screen people chatted and laughed while the BBC orchestra played dance music.

'I should have come yesterday instead of covering Mavis's evening round,' Millie said quietly, staring down at her father.

Doris looked up. 'Don't be silly, dear. You've got an important job and people rely on you.'

'That's true, but even so.'

The screens parted and the nurse slipped through the gap. 'I'm very sorry for your loss, Mrs Sullivan. Is there anything you'd like? A cup of tea perhaps?'

'Thank you, and I understand you've a lot to do, so we'd better get on.' Doris stood up.

The nurse looked dismayed. 'No, no, Mrs Sullivan. There's no rush. Stay as long as you like.'

Doris smiled. 'You're a good girl for saying it, but my daughter's a nurse so I know what it's like.' She hooked her handbag over her arm. 'She's a Queen's Nurse and works on the district now. Top of her class at the London she was, too. '

The nurse smiled politely.

'You've been very kind,' Millie said. 'Can I collect my father's property and death certificate tomorrow?'

'I'm not sure,' replied the nurse. 'Now the Prime Minister's

announced a two-day holiday, I don't know if the almoner will be in. Perhaps if you telephone.'

'I will.' Millie looked at her mother.

Doris leaned over her husband and gave him a peck on the cheek. 'Goodbye,' she whispered, then pushed the screens aside and hurried out.

Millie went after her into the long corridor just as her mother disappeared down the stairs. Submerging every nursing instinct, Millie ran down the stone stairs to the ground floor and caught up with her mother outside the main door.

'Perhaps you should go and sit with him for a while, Mum. The nurses won't mind.'

Doris shook her head. 'After twenty-seven years as man and wife there's not much me and your dad haven't said, and he knows.'

Millie slipped her arm through her mother's. 'Well then, let's find a taxi and get you home.'

'Don't be silly, dear. It's only four stops on the bus and your dad would think I'd had a win on the horses spending money like that.' Tears welled up in her mother's eyes.

Millie forced a smile. 'I think Dad would understand,' Millie led her mother towards the main road, 'and especially if he could see what you've got on your feet.'

*

'Don't worry, Millie,' Connie's voice said down the telephone. 'I'll sort out your round and divide it between me, Eva and Beattie. You just look after your mum.'

'I owe you,' Millie replied.

'Don't be daft. It's the least we could do and, Millie, all the girls are really sorry about your dad.'

The lump in Millie's throat grew. 'Thanks. I'll see you Thursday.' She put the receiver down and looked through the glass of the telephone box. On the other side of the street there was a crowd outside the pub waving Union Jacks and singing. The saloon door swung open and an upright piano was dragged into the street.

Millie watched them from the silence of the telephone box as they manoeuvred the piano on to the pavement, and then she took a couple of pennies from her purse. She put them on the

shelf above the tatty telephone directories and picked up the receiver again. She dialled her Aunt Ruby's telephone number.

It rang a few times before being picked up.

'Ilford 5174,' a woman's voice at the other end said, almost drowned out by the music and laughter in the background.

The pips went and Millie pressed the coin into the slot. 'Hello, Aunt Ruby, it's me, Millie.'

'Millie! What do you want?' her aunt replied sharply. 'I hope you're not ringing to tell me you won't be coming to clean tomorrow.'

'No, you've got the wrong Millie. I'm not your charlady – I'm your niece,' Millie shouted, putting her finger in her other ear to cut out a chorus of 'Roll Out the Barrel' from the street.

'Yes, I know we're at peace, but that's no reason to let standards slip,' Ruby replied.

'Aunt Ruby! It's me, Millie.'

'Oh, Amelia. Just a moment,' the sound became muffled. 'Antony darling, be a sweetie and close the door.' The noise stopped and Ruby took her hand from the mouthpiece. 'I thought you would have rung immediately after Mr Churchill's rousing speech, not three hours later. Still, I expect you're out enjoying yourself. We're just having an impromptu, red, white and blue party. You know, just a few friends for cocktails. More in keeping with the occasion than a street party, don't you think?'

Millie took a deep breath. 'Aunt Ruby, I have some bad news.' Millie fed the telephone a few more coins and recounted the events of the afternoon in a quivery voice.

There was a silence for a few seconds and then Ruby spoke. 'Oh, Amelia. '

'I'm sorry to tell you like this, but the station sergeant at Ilford police station didn't think there would be an officer free to send around to you until tomorrow. I'd have jumped on the bus myself but I can't leave Mum.'

'I should think not. How is she?'

'It's been such a shock that I don't think it's sunk in yet.'

'And I'm sorry. Your father was a good man. You haven't contacted Bill, Martha or Edie, have you?'

'No. I thought I'd tell you first.'

'Good. Bill doesn't open the door after five, and if the police

turned up at Martha's door she'd have one of her wobbly heads for a week. You'd better let me break the news to my brother and sister. And don't expect that Edie will be able to come down for the funeral, not with her legs.'

'I haven't even thought so far ahead,' Millie replied. 'The superintendent has given me compassionate leave for a couple of days but I'll have to go back on Thursday, and so I wondered if you would come and help us make the arrangements.'

'Of course I will. After all, your mother will be too upset to make sure the funeral is organised properly. I'm at the hairdressers at ten but I'll come down after.'

'Thank you, Aunt Ruby. I'll see you tomorrow.'

'Amelia dear, just one thing. You said your father collapsed in the vegetable patch. Was he gardening?'

'No. He just popped out to pull a few carrots before going off to work.'

Ruby sighed. 'Thank goodness for that. At least the neighbours saw him stretchered out properly dressed in a shirt and collar. I'll be down for lunch but don't go to any fuss. Perhaps a bit of fish, if you have it, but nothing special – just a little plate of something, there's a dear. Goodbye.'

She hung up.

Millie replaced the receiver and pressed button B, collected her unused coins and slipped them in her pocket. She pushed open the door of the telephone box and stepped outside.

The street party was in full swing now, with people laughing and dancing. Someone had strung bunting across from house to house and around the lamp-posts; it fluttered above tables laden with sandwiches and cakes from precious ration stores. There were a couple of uniformed servicemen sporting a giggly young woman on each arm, and from time to time an old timer in a cloth cap would slap the soldiers on the shoulder and toast their health.

Millie skirted around the revelries and headed for her mother's house at the end of the cul-de-sac. Pulling the string attached to the front door to lift the latch, she walked into the silent house. Her mother was sitting in her chair beside the fireplace, staring at the picture on the table beside her. It was the one of Millie's mother and father sitting in deckchairs on the beach at Jaywick

the previous year. They each had an ice cream in their hands and a happy smile on their faces. The lump returned to Millie's throat.

Doris looked around when her daughter walked in.

'What did Ruby say?'

'She'll be here by dinnertime.'