A Ration Book Childhood

Jean Fullerton is the author of thirteen historical novels and two novellas. 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

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 1 08/02/2019 11:01

Also by Jean Fullerton

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

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 2 08/02/2019 11:01

A Ration Book Childhood

JEAN FULLERTON

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 3 08/02/2019 11:01

First published in paperback in Great Britain in 2019
by Corvus, an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

Copyright © Jean Fullerton, 2019

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: 978 178 649 6072
E-book ISBN: 978 178 649 6089

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

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 4 08/02/2019 11:01

To my seven grandchildren, Hannah, Nathan, Sarah, Imogen, Amelia, Annabelle and Tabitha, who I love to the moon and back.

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 5 08/02/2019 11:01

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 6 08/02/2019 11:01

A Ration Book Childhood

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 7 08/02/2019 11:01

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 8 08/02/2019 11:01

Chapter One

AS EVER, AT seven thirty on a working day, the signature tune of the BBC Home Service's *Up in the Morning Early* programme drifted out from the Bush radio on the dresser. Ida Brogan, already dressed in her workday skirt and jumper and with her bouncy chestnut-brown hair encased in a turban scarf, flipped a slice of yesterday's bread in the frying pan.

It was the second Monday in October and Ida was standing in the kitchen of number 25 Mafeking Terrace, the three-up three-down Victorian workman's cottage that had been her family's home for the past dozen years.

Mafeking Terrace was situated between Cable Street to the south and the Highway to the north, just a short walk from London Docks. The narrow street was lined on both sides by houses identical to Ida's. Every front door opened straight on to the pavement, without the benefit of a small garden or railing for privacy, while at the rear, each house had just a square paved yard with an outside toilet. A shared alleyway ran between each house and the one either to the left or to the right of it.

Before Chamberlain announced the country was at war with Germany a little over two years ago, families used the open space behind their homes to store their prams, tools and bicycles, but now the small yards were cluttered with stirrup pumps and sand-filled buckets ready to extinguish incendiary bombs, while barrels filled with soil were used for

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 1 08/02/2019 11:01

growing potatoes and iron drinking troughs for sprouting winter cabbage.

Life in the street had changed, too, since that fateful broadcast to the nation. Men had received their call-up papers and had gone off to the army, Ida's eldest son Charlie among them, while children and expectant mothers and those with babes in arms were evacuated to the country.

Last year, when the Luftwaffe blitzed East London nightly, the Brogans' terraced house had been packed to the gunnels as all the family took shelter there, but now that her two eldest daughters, Mattie and Cathy, were married with babes of their own, there was more room to spread out. Jo, her youngest daughter, had a bedroom to herself at the front of the house while Billy, the baby of the family, no longer had to share with his big brother.

Of course, as Queenie, Ida's argumentative and contrary mother-in-law, occupied the front parlour, it was still a bit of a squeeze, but they were better off than many of their neighbours, who might emerge from their shelters after a visit from the Luftwaffe to find their houses reduced to a pile of rubble and all their worldly goods gone.

The blackout would still be in force for another hour, so the curtains across the window overlooking their backyard were closed as was the one across the back door. Therefore, the room where the Brogan family ate their meals, drank tea and exchanged gossip was illuminated by a 40-watt bulb which hung from the ceiling above. What with the blackout coming into force at half five in the evening and lasting until most people were arriving at work in the morning, you barely had time to draw back the curtains before you had to shut them again. What with that and the low-wattage output from the power station to conserve coal for the factories, the

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 2 08/02/2019 11:01

inhabitants of East London – well, in fact the whole country – were living in a dull twilight land.

'Looks like the fog's lifting,' said Jerimiah, dabbing his freshly shaven face as he stood by the sink in his trousers and vest.

Ida raised her eyes from his breakfast sizzling in the lard and studied her husband of twenty-five years.

At forty-four Jerimiah Boniface Brogan was two years older than her and although he sported a few grey hairs at his temple and amongst the curls on his chest, he was as easy on the eye as he had been when they'd met all those years ago. A lifetime of heaving discarded household items on and off the back of his wagon meant his big-boned frame was still tightly packed with muscle and he towered above most of the men in the area by a good three inches.

'Pity,' said Ida. 'The German bombers are bound to be back tonight, then.'

'Pity too,' he winked, 'because I was hoping perhaps to have another night with you in the same bed.'

Suppressing a smile, Ida turned her attention back to the frying pan. 'Honestly, Jerry, fancy thinking of such things and at your time of life!'

'What can you be meaning, woman?' he replied, an expression of incredulity spreading across his square-boned face. 'I'm as frisky as a man half me age.'

'Are you now?' said Ida, making a play of moving the pan on the gas.

He flipped the towel over his shoulder and, striding across the space between them, grabbed her around the waist.

'Sure, don't you know the truth of it, me lovely girl?' he said, pressing himself against her. 'And a woman of your age shouldn't be complaining either.'

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 3 08/02/2019 11:01

'Get away with you,' she laughed, shoving him. 'I'm the mother of four grown-up children not some slip of a girl to be dazzled by your Irish charm.'

'That you may be,' he replied, nuzzling her neck, 'but you're still a pleasing armful.' He gave her an exaggerated kiss. 'And as to my Irish charm: isn't it the very same reason we have a quiverful in the first place.'

Laughing, she pushed him away again and he released her.

With his dark eyes still twinkling, Jerimiah grabbed his canvas shirt that was draped over the back of the chair and shrugged it on.

The back-door handle rattled and the curtain covering it billowed out as Queenie and a chill of icy air came into the room.

''Tis cold enough out there to freeze the hooves off the devil,' she said, stomping into the room from her daily trek to the Jewish baker in Watney Street. She dumped her basket on one of the kitchen chairs and took out a tissue-wrapped tin loaf which she placed on the table. 'Is there a cuppa in the pot going spare?'

Small and wiry and with her head barely reaching her enormous son's shoulders, Jerimiah's mother was in her sixty-fourth year. She had moved in with the family a decade ago after her husband Fergus was found face down in the mud at low tide having drunk his own body weight in Guinness after a three-day drinking spree.

At first glance, with her wispy white hair, twig-thin legs and a face like an apple left out in the sun, you'd be forgiven for thinking Queenie Brogan was one of those soft and gentle sorts of grannies who tickled babies under the chin and fed stray cats, but that's where you'd be wrong.

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 4 08/02/2019 11:01

From the time the first air raid had sounded, Queenie had refused to go to the air raid shelters. Her only concession to having the Luftwaffe rain death down on her each night was to pop in her false teeth when the siren went off so that if she arrived at the Pearly Gates before dawn she wouldn't be embarrassed to greet St Peter.

Like Ida, Queenie was kitted out in her workday attire: a seaman's greatcoat, so large it skimmed the floor as she walked; a brown serge dress and lace-up men's boots, which looked way too heavy for her spindly legs to lift off the floor. To keep the cold at bay, she also wore the balaclava Mattie had knitted for Charlie, one of Jo's old school scarves around her neck and fingerless leather gloves like the market traders wore.

'The tea's just brewing,' Ida replied, as Queenie hung her outer garments on the nail behind the door. 'I'll pour you one after I've dished up Jerry's breakfast.'

'Well, before you do, you might want to throw one of these in for good measure.' Reaching into the basket again she pulled out a screwed-up sheet of paper with three eggs nestling in the middle.

'Where did you get those?' asked Ida, scooping the fried bread out of the pan and on to a plate.

Queenie's wrinkled face lifted in a toothless grin. 'I found them.'

'Where?'

'Probably better not to ask,' said Jerimiah, fastening the top button of his collarless shirt and winding his red neckerchief around his throat.

Ida regarded the precious eggs for a moment then picked up the large brown one. When all was said and done, Jerimiah was a working man with a hard day's graft in front of him,

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 5 08/02/2019 11:01

plus a patrol with the Wapping Home Guard in the cold later, so he needed to be fed.

Ignoring her conscience about where the egg might have been found, Ida broke it into the pan and while it was crackling in the fat she poured Jerimiah and her mother-in-law a mug of tea each.

'You'll have to have it without sugar as I'm saving the rations for Christmas,' she said, placing the steaming mugs in front of them. 'And no, don't see if you can "find" me some, Queenie, as I don't want the police knocking at the door asking about the black market.'

'Sure, don't you be worrying about the police now, Ida,' said Queenie, in the soft Irish brogue that forty-plus years in London hadn't yet softened. 'For aren't I on the best of terms with all those lovely lads at the station?'

'Only because they're forever arresting you for running bets for Fat Tony,' replied Ida. 'And I doubt that poor wet-behind-the-ears lad they sent down last time has recovered from the experience yet.'

A soft look stole across the old woman's face. 'Ah, he was a sweet lad, right enough, and very polite, too.'

'Well, if that's the case why did you scare him half to death by pretending to have a funny turn when he locked you in the cell?' said Ida, splashing fat over the top of the egg.

Queenie waved her words away. 'Because, Ida, a run-in with the law would be no fun at all if you didn't get one over on a rozzer from time to time.'

Ida rolled her eyes and turned back to her task. Satisfied the egg was cooked she scooped it out of the pan and deposited it on the fried bread just as the eight o'clock pips sounded out from the wireless.

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 6 08/02/2019 11:01

'I ought to be off,' she said, placing her husband's breakfast in front of him. 'I've put your sandwiches in the tin and topped up your flask.'

'You're a grand woman, so you are,' said Jerimiah, spearing a piece of eggy bread with his fork.

As he ate his breakfast Ida pulled down a plate and bowl in readiness for their son Billy's breakfast. Then she put the cover over the butter dish and wiped the crumbs from the breadboard.

'Are you back for tea or going straight to the Methodist Hall?' asked Ida, taking her coat from the back of the door.

Putting the last morsel of his breakfast in his mouth, Jerimiah stood up.

'Our squad's not on patrol until seven so I'll have a jar in the club then I should be back before the blackout starts. In fact,' he knocked back the last mouthful of tea, 'what with the government fixing the price of metal it's hardly worth putting Samson in harness these days.'

Ida bit her lip.

'Now, now, don't you start fretting,' Jerimiah said, taking his thick sheepskin jerkin from the back of the chair. He sidestepped out from behind the table, squeezed behind his mother and came over to Ida.

'You and me have got through lean times before, have we not?' he said, shrugging on his top coat.

Ida forced a smile. 'We have, but what with the price of everything in the shops going through the roof and Christmas just two months away and—'

'And in all these years,' he cut in, giving her that sideward cheeky grin of his, 'when have I ever let you or the kids go short?'

Gazing up into his sea-grey eyes, Ida's shoulders relaxed and she smiled in reply.

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 7 08/02/2019 11:01

'That's better.' He gave her a quick peck on the cheek. 'Mind how you go and I'll see you at tea time.'

Taking his leather cap from his pocket Jerimiah flipped it on the back of his still abundant curls and left the kitchen, leaving a blast of cold air and an empty space behind him.

Queenie heaved herself to her feet.

'Well, I ought to make a start on the day, too, as that lot' – she indicated the enamel bucket piled high with the family's weekly smalls under the sink – 'won't wash themselves.'

Buttoning up her coat, Ida moved the blackout curtains aside a little and gazed through the kitchen window at the receding figure of her husband as he headed off to work.

She'd known from the first moment she set eyes on him walking into St Bridget's and St Brendan's that she was going to marry Jerimiah Brogan.

Although her family, like many in East London, had come from Ireland a hundred years earlier, they still counted themselves a cut above those newly arrived from the Old Country. And so they hadn't wanted Ida to marry Jerimiah, calling him a thieving gypo tinker with a crazy mother.

Her mother, God rest her soul, had told her he'd never amount to much, while her sister Pearl had predicted he would beat her when he was drunk and pinch her housekeeping when he was sober. Her brother Alfie had threatened to punch his lights out for setting his pikey sights on Ida, until he saw Jerimiah and thought better of it.

Her father had refused to give his consent so in the end she'd had to fall back on the age-old remedy for young couples with uncooperative parents: she'd got herself in the family way. They were married the day before Whit Sunday, six months later.

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 8 08/02/2019 11:01

Well, other than the comment about his crazy mother, everything her family had said about Jerimiah had proved to be completely wrong.

Unlike many men who left their wives hiding from the rent man and their children hungry to ensure they had their beer and tobacco money, Jerimiah had always provided for his family. More then provided, in fact. He, as much as she, had worried over their children when they were raging with fever and had sat by their bedsides through the night. In twenty-five years of marriage her husband had never raised his hand to her, and there weren't many women who could make that boast.

Tucking up her collar, Ida hoped she could sweet talk the butcher into giving her a pork chop with a bit of kidney. After six hours trudging around the streets on top of his wagon in the freezing cold, Jerimiah would surely deserve a bit of a treat.

The queue shuffled forward and Ida did too, thankful that after twenty minutes of waiting outside the shop she was now through the butcher's door.

'Will you look at the price of that liver,' said Winnie Munday, who was behind her in the queue.

It was now almost midday and some forty-five minutes since Ida had left Naylor, Corbet and Kleinman's, the three-storey, double-fronted law firm on Commercial Road where she cleaned each morning. Although there were still three women in front of her, the tray of pork chops in the window was still half full, meaning she had a good chance of getting Jerimiah one for his supper.

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 9 08/02/2019 11:01

The line of women outside Harris & Son, where the family's meat ration was registered, had already been halfway down Watney Street Market when Ida arrived, so she had popped into Sainsbury's first to see what was on offer there. She was glad she had because they'd just had a delivery of split peas and national flour, so she'd loaded them, along with a block of marge and a tin of salmon and another of golden syrup into her bag. Luckily, she'd remembered her greaseproof paper to wrap her purchases in as the store had already used its monthly allocation. The butcher's queue had shrunk by the time she'd emerged, so she'd decided to get her meat before visiting the greengrocer's stall.

'Shocking,' said Ida, glancing at the quivering mass of reddish-mauve offal sitting alongside a tray of pigs' trotter in the window.

'Criminal is what I'd call it,' Winnie replied, her close-set eyes looking at Ida through the thick lenses of her round-rimmed glasses. 'God only knows what a turkey for Christmas dinner will cost us.'

Winnie and her family of three boys and one girl lived in Alma Street, three streets down from Mafeking Terrace. Her husband worked for the gas company, a reserved occupation.

'That's assuming there are any,' said Ida. 'I had to make do with an ox heart last year.'

'Have you got much so far?' asked Winnie as they shuffled forward again.

'A few bits,' said Ida, 'plus enough dried fruit to make me Christmas cake, but I'll have to add some apple to bulk it up.'

'Better that than spuds,' said Winnie. 'I had another blooming Ministry of Food leaflet bunged through me letterbox yesterday with holly on it telling me 'ow to make shortbreads and marzipan with potatoes.'

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 10 08/02/2019 11:01

'Hopefully, when the government's new extra-points rations come in next month, I'll be able to splash out on a few luxuries to cheer us all up,' said Ida, as the woman in front of her stepped forward to be served.

Winnie rolled her eyes. 'I'm sure I don't understand what all that's about.'

'It's the food and stuff the Americans are sending us; you know, dried milk and powdered egg,' Ida explained. 'We're getting an extra ration book with points and depending on what arrives and what ends up at the bottom of the Atlantic each week, they will let us know how many of these extra points we'll need to buy it.'

'For Gawd's sake,' said Winnie. 'My brain's scrambled enough trying to add up coupon points for this without totting up another lot of numbers. I suppose you've got everyone at your place for Christmas again.'

'All except my Charlie,' Ida said, as an image of her strapping son flickered through her mind. 'He's out in North Africa, so God himself knows when he'll be back. I won't see his Stella or the baby either as she'll no doubt spend the day with her family. Although I said I'd take Patrick to Midnight Mass with the rest of the family.'

Winnie pulled a face. 'I'm surprised she didn't argue.'

'She tried,' said Ida, thinking of the look on her daughter-in-law's flat face when she announced it. 'Said it'd be better for him to sleep in his own pram and all that but as I pointed out to her, he's with me most nights down the shelter while she's working so I don't see how him being with me at St Bridget's and St Brendan's is any different. He's only six months so he won't know anything about it anyhow.'

Winnie gave her a sideways look. 'I saw her the other morning getting off the last night bus at the Troxy.'

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 11 08/02/2019 11:01

'I expect she was coming home from a night shift at the factory,' said Ida.

'What in high heels with her lipstick all rubbed off her mouth?' said Winnie.

Ida didn't reply and thankfully the woman in front of her collected her change and moved aside.

''Ello, Mrs B,' said Ray Harris, wiping his chubby hands on his blood-stained apron. 'How are you this fine morning?'

Ray was the son referred to in the Harris & Son sign painted above the shop. In fact, he resembled his red-headed father so closely sometimes you had to look twice before you were certain which one of them you were talking to . . .

Ray had always fancied himself as a bit of a ladies' man but until recently, with heavy features and crinkly ginger hair, he'd been unlucky in love. Now, however, with the meat ration recently cut again, he had dozens of women keen to walk out with him.

'Well enough,' said Ida. 'And all the better for seeing you've got some decent pork chops for once. I'll have five, and a bit of kidney on one of them would be welcome.'

'Right you are, Mrs B,' he said, licking his fingers and scooping up a sheet of paper from the pile next to the scales. 'Five pork chops coming up.'

Leaning into the window, he scooped up the cuts of meat and plonked them on to the paper.

'Just over the half and a bit of squiddly-diddly, too.' He looked at Ida.

She nodded. 'And I'll have three-quarters of braising steak, but make it lean.'

Wrapping the chops up with a deft twist of his hand, Ray put the parcel to one side of the till. He slid another sheet of paper from the pile then leaned back into the window.

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 12 08/02/2019 11:01

'Your Cathy was in earlier,' he said, dropping the paper and cubes of beef on the scales. 'I managed to find her a nice bit of shin and a spare sausage for that little lad of hers.'

'That was good of you,' said Ida.

'Well, it can't be easy for her all by herself, like, with her husband away,' the butcher continued.

'Plenty of women around here are in the same boat,' said Ida.

'You have the right of it there, Mrs B,' said Ray.

Of course, Cathy wasn't in the same boat because although there were thousands of young mothers like her up and down the country, most of them were raising toddlers alone because their husbands were in the army not, like Stan Wheeler, in prison.

Ray slid the weights on and off to bring the central needle on the scales upright then he wrapped the rest of Ida's order and placed it alongside the chops.

He looked at her expectantly. 'Anything else, Mrs B?'

'A quarter of suet,' she said. 'And that should do me until Wednesday.'

Ray grabbed a waxed tub from the small stack behind him and placed it with the rest of her order then took the stubby pencil from behind his ear.

'Two and a tanner,' he said, after scribbling the sum on a tatty pad next to the till.

Opening her bag Ida took out her purse and handed him her ration book. He marked off her meat allocation then, shoving the pencil back where it came from, returned her ration book. She handed over half a crown and got her purchases in exchange. Popping them in her bag, she squeezed her way along the queue and out through the door.

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 13 08/02/2019 11:01

Wondering if there would be more than just cabbages and carrots on the greengrocer's stall, Ida skirted around the men from Truman's who were unloading barrels outside the Lord Nelson and headed towards the cluster of barrows under the railway arches at the bottom of the market.

She'd just reached Feldman's stationers on the corner of Chapman Street when a woman walked out of the Post Office on the other side of the road.

Ida could hardly believe her eyes.

'Ellen,' she shouted. 'Ellen!'

The woman looked up. Ida waved and hurried across the street. 'Ellen,' she said breathlessly, stopping in front of the other woman. 'I can't believe it's you.'

'Ida,' she said, looking incredulously at her.

'Yes, it's me,' laughed Ida. 'And I'm glad you recognised me after all this time.'

Ellen's eyes flickered behind Ida and then back to her face.

'Of course I did,' she said, giving her a guarded smile. 'You haven't changed a bit.'

'You neither,' said Ida, looking her up and down.

Actually, that wasn't strictly true. Although she couldn't see any grey in Ellen's light brown hair, its bounce had disappeared. Her eyes, too, were dull, with dark shadows surrounding them. In addition, her cheekbones stood out in sharp relief. Unsurprising, really. After two years of food rationing and disturbed nights, everyone was sleep deprived and had shed a few pounds.

'How are you?' asked Ellen.

'Well,' said Ida. 'Very well.'

Ellen's eyes flickered down the road again. 'And the children?' she said, giving Ida a tight smile.

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 14 08/02/2019 11:01

'All grown,' said Ida. 'Charlie, Mattie and Cathy are married with babes of their own and Jo's engaged. Billy's eleven now and a bit of a handful, but there's no harm in him. Of course, we have Jerimiah's mother Queenie living with us, cantankerous old so-and-so, but—'

'How is Jerimiah?' asked Ellen.

'Fit as a fiddle,' Ida replied. 'But never mind about us. How are you? I thought you were in Sevenoaks?'

'For a couple of years then we moved to Hastings.' Ellen glanced down the road again. 'Paul was promoted to deputy station master there but unfortunately even with the sea air to help, his condition got worse soon after he took the job and he died.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry,' said Ida.

'It was a few years ago now . . .' Ellen gave her a brittle smile.

'So where are you living?' asked Ida.

'I've got a couple of rooms in Juniper Street,' Ellen replied.

'You should have written and told me about Paul,' said Ida, her heart aching for her old friend's loss.

'I didn't want to trouble you, not when you had your own family to worry about,' said Ellen.

'Perhaps not, but we were so close once, me and you,' said Ida.

'Yes, we were,' said Ellen softly, a sad smile lifting her thin lips.

Ida's gaze ran over her old friend's face as long-buried images and unbearable emotions surged up. Her hazel eyes captured Ellen's grey ones and the years since they'd last met disappeared for a heartbeat or two. Then her friend glanced up the street once more.

'Look, Ida,' she said nervously, 'I need to tell you something. Something important. The reason—'

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 15 08/02/2019 11:01

'Mum!'

Ida turned to see a young lad of about Billy's age, dressed in a green school uniform, scooting down the road towards them.

Darting between the shoppers and stall holders, he skidded to a halt beside Ellen.

'I got the last one, Mum,' the lad said, waving a copy of *Boy's Own* with a Spitfire shooting down a German bomber on the front cover. 'Look!'

Fear flashed across Ellen's face but then she turned to the boy.

'Well done,' she said, smiling at the lad. She took his hand. 'Michael, this is my oldest friend Ida.'

Michael turned his snub-nosed, freckled face to Ida.

'Hello, Auntie Ida,' he said, smiling innocently up at her.

Ida opened her mouth to reply but the words stuck in her throat. Staring down at the lad's square jaw, broad forehead, black curly hair and soft grey eyes, the blood drained into her boots.

'Be a luv, Michael,' said Ellen, cutting across Ida's chaotic thoughts. 'Pop over and buy me a couple of apples from the stall across the way.'

'Right you are, Mum,' he replied, giving her a smile that ripped through Ida's heart.

Taking the couple of coppers from his mother, the lad dashed across to the greengrocer's barrow. Ellen watched him for a second or two then she looked back at Ida.

'I'm sorry you had to find out like this, Ida,' she said, in a tone that belied her words.

Ida stared incredulously at her. 'Is he—'

'Yes, Ida,' Ellen interrupted. 'Michael is Jerimiah's son.'

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 16 08/02/2019 11:01

Chapter Two

JERIMIAH BROGAN PATTED Samson's piebald rear as the sixteen-hand gelding buried his muzzle in his supper.

'There you go, me fine lad,' he said to the horse as he filled the overhead manger with sufficient hay for the night. 'We'll be having a better day tomorrow, so we will.'

The draught horse flicked his ears in response but continued to munch away. Jerimiah patted the horse's rump again, checked the water in the drinking trough and left the stall.

Securing the bolt across the door, Jerimiah hung the bridle and tack on the wall hook next to the horse's cart collar and harness. The railway arch where he stabled Samson and stored his wagon was situated within sight of Shadwell Station in Chapman Street, under the Blackwell-to-Minories railway. Samson's stall was at the far end of the arch, constructed to keep him dry and out of the wind that cut like a knife up the Thames some nights.

Next to Samson's stall was an office that Jerimiah had built out of a couple of old door panels and windows. Furnished with a school desk that could have come from the ark, a clerk's chair with no arms and a kitchen dresser without any doors in which he stored his accounts book, it was nonetheless comfortable, especially after a long day scouring the streets for scrap metal or any other odds and ends that Jerimiah could sell on.

To be truthful, it had been a better day than many he'd known in recent times.

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 17 08/02/2019 11:01

As the fog meant the Luftwaffe hadn't come calling last night, for once he hadn't had to coax Samson through the emergency crews as they cleaned up after a night's bombing. What's more, he'd been able to search unhindered for fragments of shell cases and twisted metal amongst the debris. He'd discovered a tail fin and a long section of brass casing amongst the rubble along with melted house railings and warped coal-hole covers. Under the Ministry of Defence directives, he would get nothing for the railings as all unclaimed metal was deemed to be government property and vital to the war effort, but he would be paid for collecting the remains of the German armoury although, sadly, he wouldn't receive what the brass and copper were actually worth.

He'd made light of it to Ida that morning, but in truth, with furniture and household goods being either unobtainable or extortionately expensive, no one was throwing out household items any more so some days he barely scraped together enough to feed Samson let alone give Ida her weekly housekeeping. The small allowance he received for being a member of the Home Guard helped a bit, but the fact of the matter was he'd have to put his thinking cap on to figure out a way of increasing his income. Easier said than done for an Irish rag-and-bone man who left school at twelve.

Casting his worries aside, he kicked the wedges under the wagon's back wheels. He opened the door cut into the left-hand double gate, ducked his head and stepped out into the street outside.

Although it was only just after four, the blackout was already in force so taking his muted torch from his sheepskin pocket he pointed it at the floor and headed along the street towards his end-of-day watering hole.

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 18 08/02/2019 11:01

In truth, his boots could probably find the way by themselves as the Catholic Club that backed on to St Bridget's and St Brendan's was the Brogan family's second home. Not so much for the bar on the first floor but for things like Irish Dancing classes, young mothers' groups, wedding receptions, birthday parties and funeral wakes, which all took place in the main hall below.

With the beam of light just in front of his toecaps, Jerimiah joined port workers in donkey jackets and heavy boots as they trudged home after a twelve-hour shift unloading vital food supplies in the docks. Mingling amongst them were dozens of women pushing prams loaded with toddlers, sandwiches and flasks of hot drinks: although the air raid warning had yet to sound, they were on their way to a bomb shelter or an underground station to bed down for the night.

Turning the corner into Dean Street, Jerimiah strolled on towards his well-earned end-of-the-day Guinness and within a few moments he reached his destination. Situated around the corner from the church, the Catholic Club had been built fifty years ago and was a square, functional building typical of the Edwardian period. Of course, the windows now had the extra protection of gummed tape criss-crossing them to stop shards of broken glass littering the room in the event of an explosion.

The main hall on the ground floor, where the Brownies and Scouts met and the club's Shamrock League held their ceilidh dances, was now one of the local rest centres. It was manned by the WVS and gave shelter to those who had been bombed out.

As there hadn't been any bombing the night before the rows of camp beds at the far end of the hall were currently empty, with a brown, government-issue blanket neatly folded

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 19 08/02/2019 11:01

on each one. There were a handful of people sitting at tables drinking tea while mothers with babies balanced on their hips or hanging on their skirts were sifting through the rails of second-hand clothes looking for bargains.

Jerimiah pushed open the brass-plated door that led into the entrance hall. Passing the noticeboard with a poster showing a German soldier surrendering with the caption 'We Beat 'em Before; We'll Do It Again', he headed along the concrete-floored passageway to the stairs at the far end.

Taking them two at a time he soon found himself in the club bar on the first floor, which already had a good number of his fellow members supping pints within. With its scrubbed wooden floor and private booths, this bar was like many others in the area. There was a dartboard in a wooden frame with a chalk scoreboard on one side and an advert for Jameson whiskey painted on the other. There was a worn rubber oche on the floor showing the required throwing distances, and a couple of sets of darts jammed into the bottom on the surround.

Greeting old friends as he passed by, Jerimiah strolled between the tables to the bar and slid on to a vacant stool.

'The usual, Jerry?' called Pete Riley, the club manager, who was drying glasses at the other end of the bar.

'When you're ready,' Jerimiah replied.

He and Pete's families had lived a few doors apart in Pennington Street. They had been snotty-nosed, barefooted kids running the streets during the last few years of the Old Queen's reign. Mostly, trying to keep out of sight of PC McDuff, the keen-eyed heavy-handed beat bobby.

Like Jerimiah, Pete was the father and grandfather of an ever-expanding family but whereas a lifetime of heaving household items on and off a cart had helped Jerimiah avoid

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 20 08/02/2019 11:01

middle-age spread, Pete's buckle was strained to its last notch.

Miraculously, both had survived the trenches, leaving Pete with a lump of shrapnel embedded in his right thigh and Jerimiah with the unswerving conviction that the officer class, their self-styled betters, were nothing more than a collection of inbred, fecking idiots.

Hooking the last couple of glasses on the brackets above the bar, Pete flipped the tea towel over his shoulder and took down a pint glass.

'Good day?' he asked, putting the glass under the brass spout and grasping the pump on the top of the counter.

'So so.' Jerimiah pulled a couple of coins from his trouser pocket and put them on the counter. Taking his drink, he raised it to his lips and took a long swallow, enjoying the rich bitterness as it slid down his throat.

Smacking his lips, he placed the glass on the polished mahogany counter and looked at his old friend.

'How's the family?'

They exchanged anecdotes about their respective offspring for a couple of minutes until the door of the bar opened and a chap Jerimiah vaguely recognised entered. He spotted Jerimiah and strolled across.

'Jerry Brogan,' he said, stopping next to him.

'The very same.'

'Brian O'Connor,' he said, offering his hand. 'We met when the St Patrick team played St Bridget's and St Brendan's a few months back.'

'Yes, we did,' said Jerimiah, shaking his hand. 'I remember it well. Four–three to us, if my memory serves.'

Brian smiled. 'Indeed, although a blind man could see your last goal was offside.'

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 21 08/02/2019 11:01

They laughed.

'Can I buy you a pint?' asked Jerimiah.

'No, I'm grand, thanks,' said Brian. 'But am I right in thinking you helped move the Ibbertsons from Diggon Street to Fairfield Road?'

'You are, just last week,' said Jerimiah, slurping the froth off his drink.

'Well, I wonder if you could do the same for my sister,' said Brian. 'She was bombed out and is staying with us but you know what it's like having two women in a kitchen . . .'

'I most certainly do.' Jerimiah laughed, thinking of the daily ding-dongs between Ida and his mother.

'Well, thankfully,' continued Brian, 'Mary's found another house for her and the kids in Chigwell.'

Jerimiah pursed his lips. 'That's a bit of a trek from here, isn't it? I mean, it would take me a day there and back.'

'How much?'

'Well, now.' Jerimiah took another mouthful of his drink. 'What do you say to three quid if there's someone to load with me or four if not. And I could take her on Wednesday?'

Brian chewed his lips for a moment. 'Done, it'll be worth it just to have me tea in peace and I'll send my lad to help out. We're in Thurza Street, number twelve.'

Jerimiah offered his hand. 'I'll be there at eight on Wednesday.'

Brian took it and then strolled back to the door.

'Not bad for a day's work,' said Pete after he'd gone.

Jerimiah took another mouthful of beer. 'I'm not complaining.'

'That's four you've moved in as many weeks, isn't it?' said Pete.

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 22 08/02/2019 11:01

'It is,' said Jerimiah. 'But sure, I'm only doing it so old Samson can have a day out in the country.'

'And three nicker,' laughed Pete. 'You carry on like this and you'll be able to retire to the country yourself.'

Jerimiah smiled, and Pete went off to serve another customer.

Lifting his pint to his lips Jerimiah took another large mouthful. He didn't know so much about retiring to the country but perhaps having the horse and cart might provide a way of keeping the wolf from his door for the duration.

As he'd promised Ida that morning, Jerimiah pushed open the back door and entered the kitchen just as the last five o'clock pips fell silent.

The aroma of simmering cabbage and roasting meat were all but swamped by the starchy smell of the washing that hung from the dryer hoisted above the kitchen range and the family's smalls draped over the clothes horse in front.

This was only to be expected, given it was a Monday, but what was a surprise was that Ida wasn't in the kitchen to greet him with a cup of tea. In fact, he couldn't remember the last time he'd walked into the house after a long day's work and not found her getting supper ready.

Frowning, he took off his coat and hung it over several others on the back door.

'I'm home,' he shouted.

'I thought I heard you,' said Queenie, as she came through from the parlour. 'Good day?'

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 23 08/02/2019 11:01

'Not bad,' he replied. 'Where's Ida?'

'She came home a couple of hours ago with a face like thunder saying she had a headache and she was going upstairs to lie down,' Queenie replied. 'Supper won't be ready for an hour yet so why don't you put your feet up in the other room and I'll bring you a cuppa. Jo's in there.'

'Thanks, Ma,' said Jerimiah.

They exchanged a fond look. Jerimiah loosened his neckerchief and went into the back parlour.

One of the advantages of the work he did was that he was able to furnish the family home with quality items which he acquired on his travels. The massive dresser in the kitchen was one such item, as was the button-back leather porter's chair that he relaxed in each evening. It had a wobbly arm, true enough, but you can't have everything.

He'd found a carved wooden chair with a padded seat for Queenie but he'd had to saw two inches off each leg so her feet could touch the floor, but his best find was the tapestry armchair with padded arms that he'd got for Ida. It had cost him double what he'd usually have paid but it was worth it so that after a long day scrubbing other people's floors and caring for the family she could sit in comfort by the fireside each night.

With Ida in mind and knowing she had a soft spot for them, he'd also gathered a collection of figurines for her to display on the mantelshelf. To his way of thinking they would have been more suitable as substitutes for coconuts in a coconut shy for the church's summer fair, but Ida thought they looked nice and that's what mattered.

And he could understand his wife's attachment to her mantelshelf trinkets because he felt the same about his greatest find: a 1913 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 24 08/02/2019 11:01

This sat proudly in the tall mahogany bookcase, dominating the whole room.

Sadly, volume twenty-five was missing but even so he'd spent many a happy hour when the children were young reading to them from the various volumes.

As he walked in to the comfortable family room, Jo, his youngest daughter, looked up.

'Hello, Dad,' she said, giving him a weary smile. She was sitting in her mother's chair with her feet up on the battered leather pouffe. A few months short of her nineteenth birthday she was a member of the Auxiliary Ambulance Service and had worked her way up from driver's assistant to a fully fledged ambulance driver. She had been on the day shift, which didn't start until nine, so she'd still been in bed when he'd left this morning. Although she had loosened her tie she was still in her navy uniform and could have only been in a little while as she was holding a steaming cup of tea.

Like her oldest sister Mattie, Jo took after his side of the family, and in more ways than just her dark colouring and turned-up nose. Jo had the look of an angel from above, but she could send you spinning with a flash of her sharp green eyes. Truth be told, like her two sisters, Jo could twist him around her little finger but that was one of the joys of being a father of girls.

'Hello, me darling,' said Jerimiah, sinking into the chair opposite her. 'Have you had a good day?'

'Busy,' Jo replied. 'But thankfully routine stuff like fetching people back and forth to hospital for appointments. I did get called to a woman in labour but the midwife was already there when I arrived, so I left her to it.'

'You going out later?' asked Jerimiah.

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 25 08/02/2019 11:01

'Only to phone Tommy.' She twisted her engagement ring with her thumb. 'Mum told you I'm going to visit him the weekend after next, didn't she?'

'She mentioned something about it,' Jerimiah gave her a severe look, 'and promised me you'd be in separate rooms.'

'Of course, Dad,' Jo replied, giving her father a wide-eyed, innocent smile.

'That's all right, then,' he said, hoping he sounded as if he believed her.

Jo took a mouthful of tea.

'I was wondering, Jo . . .' said Jerimiah. 'If I knocked up a couple of sign boards in the next day or so, could you paint notices on them in your best handwriting?'

She laughed. 'I don't know about best handwriting. My English teacher Miss Wood used to say my script was like a drunk spider who'd fallen in an inkwell, but I'll have a go. What's it for?'

'Oh, just an idea that's come to me,' he replied.

Queenie came in from the kitchen and handed him a cup.

Jerimiah glanced at the door leading out to the hall. 'Has Ida been up there all afternoon?'

'She has,' said his mother. 'Although I thought she might have roused herself when she heard you come in.'

Jerimiah put his drink on the floor and stood up. 'I think I'll just go and see if she's perhaps sickening for—'

The door burst open and Ida walked in. She'd changed from her work clothes and was now wearing a pair of trousers and a thick jumper and carrying the briefcase that contained all the family documents, ready for another night in the shelter.

'Hello, me darling,' Jerimiah said, giving her a warm smile. 'Ma said you had a headache.'

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 26 08/02/2019 11:01

Ida gave him a look that could have cut tempered steel then barged past him and into the kitchen.

He looked at Jo, who shrugged. Searching his brain and finding nothing that he knew of that might have upset his wife, Jerimiah followed her through. By the time he got into the kitchen Ida had put the old picnic basket she took to the shelter with her on the table and was packing the sandwiches for her and Billy's night underground.

'Isn't it a bit early to go to the shelter?' he asked, as she slammed the Thermos flask in beside the tins of sandwiches.

'Might as well beat the rush,' she replied, without glancing at him.

'Good idea,' he replied, watching his wife's sharp movements and tightly drawn face.

She looked up and he noticed her eyes were red-rimmed.

'I saw Ellen today in the market,' she continued, as her stare bore into him like two hot needles.

'Ellen?'

'Yes, Ellen Gilbert,' she said. 'Surely you remember her?'

'Yes, of course I do,' said Jerimiah, unease creeping up his spine. 'She was a good friend to you, to both of us.'

'Yes, she was, wasn't she?' Ida gave him a brittle smile. 'She had Michael with her.'

Jerimiah frowned. 'Michael? Michael who?'

His wife's hazel eyes, flint-like with pain, fixed on his face. 'Michael. Your son.'

The breath caught in Jerimiah's lungs and the blood stilled in his veins.

'My . . .'

'Son,' Ida repeated. 'Michael. That's what she called him. He's about ten and so like our Charlie at that age he could have been his twin.'

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 27 08/02/2019 11:01

Jerimiah's jaw dropped. 'Ida, I—'

'Aren't you going to say there's some mistake,' Ida cut in.

Jerimiah opened his mouth, but no words came as jumbled images, long buried and forgotten, resurfaced in his mind.

'Or perhaps, "He couldn't possibly be mine, Ida, because I've never been with Ellen,"' she continued, tears springing into her eyes again. With pain and anger reddening her face she glared at him, daring him to say something. Several heartbeats passed before Jerimiah found his voice.

'Let me explain, Ida,' he said. Crossing the space between them, he tried to capture her in his arms.

She stepped back. 'Don't you touch me.'

Jerimiah let his arms fall to his sides and he stood there, helpless, as she dragged her coat from the nail at the back of the door and put it on. She snapped the hamper shut and heaved it off the table.

She opened the door to the parlour. 'Tell Billy to meet me at the shelter, Jo,' she shouted through to her daughter.

'Righto, Mum,' Jo called back from the living room.

Ida closed the door then giving him another murderous look she crossed the kitchen and went out into the backyard. She marched across to the gate, but Jerimiah got there first.

'Ida, please,' he said, trying to take her arm but she knocked his hand away.

She spun around to face him, tears glistering on her cheeks. 'By my reckoning you and she must have had your bit of fun about eleven years ago. Eleven years ago, when James died. I hate you, do you hear? I hate you, so don't you dare touch me, Jerimiah Brogan. Not now, not ever again!'

Tearing the gate open she stormed out.

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 28 08/02/2019 11:01

With a yawning chasm opening in his chest, Jerimiah stared helplessly into the dark side alleyway as the woman he'd loved from the first moment he'd laid eyes on her marched away, taking her love with her.

ARBCHI pages v5s01.indd 29 08/02/2019 11:01