

A Ration Book Daughter

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*A Ration Book
Daughter*

JEAN FULLERTON



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*For all NHS and Care staff, who while I was at home writing
Cathy and Archie's story were on the front line
in a world-wide pandemic saving lives.*

Chapter One

STANDING AMONG THE rails of donated clothing, Cathy Wheeler, neé Brogan, ran her eyes over the various boys' coats. Spotting a green tweed one towards the end of the rail, she grasped it and pulled it out.

'I only unpacked it yesterday. It was in one of the new Canadian Red Cross parcels,' she said, turning it around and holding it up. 'But I think this might fit your little lad, Mrs . . . ?'

'Prentice. It looks a bit big,' said the young mother with tired eyes.

'Why don't you get him to try it on, Mrs Prentice?' Cathy said, giving it to her.

Cathy waited as the young woman fitted the donated coat on her son.

It was Friday afternoon and, as always when she did her stint at St Breda and St Brendan's ARP Rest Centre, she was dressed in her forest-green Women's Voluntary Service uniform. Three and a half years ago, before the war started, the room she now stood in had been used by the local community for wedding receptions, dances and the youth club. Now the main hall of the church's Catholic Club was the first port of call for those who, after a night in an air raid shelter, arrived home to discover a pile of rubble where their house had once stood.

The second-hand clothing section of the WVS's rest centre, which Cathy was responsible for, was located in the back corner of the main hall. Opposite her was the canteen area, from where a faint smell of hotpot drifted across. Behind the serving hatch, half a dozen of her fellow volunteers were preparing an evening meal for

families and ARP workers alike. The massive Bush wireless belted out tunes as the women worked. The rest of the hall was taken up by the dozen or so rows of camp beds with striped tick mattresses. On each bed was a neatly folded grey blanket with a pillow resting on top, ready for the next unfortunate occupant. However, fog had been blanketing the London Docks, just a stone's throw away, for the past week, which meant the Luftwaffe was unable to use the Thames's reflection to locate London, and so the emergency beds hadn't been needed.

It was the first week of November 1942 and Cathy had taken over the running of the second-hand clothes section at the end of the summer from her mother, Ida. They had joined the WVS together a couple of years before to help with the war effort. She'd been carrying Peter at the time and after he'd been born she hadn't been able to help out as much, but when he turned eighteen months last Christmas, Cathy decided to take advantage of the rest centre's nursery. So now, while Peter had fun with Auntie Muriel and Auntie Pat, Cathy did her bit to fight Hitler.

'I still think it's a bit on the large size,' said Mrs Prentice, studying her son all buttoned up in his new coat.

Cathy's gaze flickered over the youngster.

'It's got a bit of growing room, I grant you,' she said. 'But you only have to tuck up the sleeves an inch or two and you'll get a lot of wear out of it.'

The woman sighed. 'I suppose you're right. I'll have it then. And I've got a couple of gymslips my girl's grown out of.' She delved into the shopping basket at her feet. 'Can I swap them for a bigger size?'

She offered Cathy the navy garments.

'Thank you,' the woman said, as Cathy took the dresses from her.

Unfortunately, as always when there was something on offer for free, people took advantage. There had been a spate recently, especially when word got around that a new consignment from the US or Canadian Red Cross had arrived, of people turning up

at a rest centre pretending to have been bombed out. They'd take the pick of the new clothes, plus household items like crockery and linen, which then turned up a few days later for sale on market stalls. Thankfully, although Cathy had never met her before, Mrs Prentice was obviously a genuine case.

'How old is she?'

'Ten.'

Cathy, tucking a strand of light brown hair behind her ear, moved to the school uniform rail and sifted through the line of assorted skirts, blazers and trousers.

'Here we go,' she said, dragging out two pinafores.

'Gladys!'

A young girl reading a comic at one of the canteen tables looked up.

'Come and try these on,' called the young mother, beckoning her over.

Cathy caught sight of the clock over the door at the far end of the hall.

Almost four thirty already!

Leaving Mrs Prentice to deal with her daughter, Cathy tidied the hangers and straightened the piles of newly washed and pressed men's shirts set out on the trestle table, neatly ordered by collar size.

'How are we getting on?' she asked, turning back to her customer.

The mother looked her daughter up and down.

'They'll do until Easter, I expect,' said Mrs Prentice, bending to tug the hem of the navy gymslip straight. 'Go and change back into your clothes now, Gladys,' she instructed her daughter.

'I have some navy school knickers, too,' added Cathy. 'They're new if you could use a couple of—'

'Thanks,' the young mother cut in, opening her purse and pulling out her pink clothing ration book.

‘They’ve been donated as second hand so you won’t need coupons, but if you want, you can drop a couple of coppers in our Spitfire jar instead.’ Cathy indicated the sweets jar on the refectory counter. It was half filled with coins and had a picture of the fighter aircraft mid-flight stuck on it. ‘We’d be grateful.’

‘I’ll see if I’ve got a bob or two,’ Mrs Prentice replied. ‘But what with these two eating me out of house and home and the prices in the shops going up every day, I’ve barely got two ha’pennies to rub together at the end of the week.’

‘I know what you mean,’ said Cathy, thinking of the handful of coppers in her own purse.

‘I thought it would get a bit better when the Yanks joined in last year but now you can’t get petrol, sweets for the kids are down to just a couple of ounces and they’ve even put biscuits on ration,’ Mrs Prentice went on. ‘I don’t know how the blooming government expects me to keep a roof over my head and feed two kids on a couple of quid a week from the army.’

Cathy gave her a sympathetic smile. ‘I know, but we all have to support our brave boys.’

‘I suppose.’ Mrs Prentice heaved a sigh. ‘Still, I’d better get on. Thanks again for the knickers.’

Gathering her children and their newly acquired garments, Mrs Prentice headed towards the door.

Taking the clothing ledger from the table, Cathy sat on the chair next to the rack of shoes and took her fountain pen from the top pocket of her jacket. After logging Mrs Prentice’s items in the ‘taken’ column and listing the two gymslips under ‘donated’, she closed the book and stood up.

Once she’d pushed the three rails full of assorted jackets, dresses and children’s wear back against the wall, she covered them with dust sheets ready for when she arrived the following morning.

‘Ain’t you got no home to go to?’

Cathy turned around to find Mary Usher, wearing the same WVS uniform as Cathy, standing behind her.

A petite brunette, Mary had spent the afternoon in the yard outside bundling up scrap paper and cardboard for recycling; now she had the red cheeks and windswept hair to show for her hard work.

She'd been a few classes above Cathy at Shadwell School and had lived over her parents' shoe repair shop in Salmon Lane, which was where she was living now with her two children, because her merchant seaman husband was somewhere in the frozen North Atlantic ferrying armaments to Murmansk for Britain's fickle ally Russia.

'Just finishing off,' Cathy replied, flapping the cover over the boxes beneath.

'Honestly, you're always the last one here,' continued Mary. 'It's a wonder you have time to get yourself fed and watered before you have to head off to the shelter.'

'I put a hotpot in the oven on a low light before I came out and that'll be ready to dish up when I get in,' Cathy replied. 'Unless the air raid sounds, the doors to Bethnal Green station shelter don't open until five thirty, so I've plenty of time, and my mum's always one of the first through the door so she'll make sure no one takes my spot.'

'It seems daft to go traipsing all the way up Cambridge Heath Road when the Tilbury shelter's only five minutes away,' said Mary.

'My brothers go to Parmiter's School, behind the museum,' Cathy replied, 'so it's not so far for them to get to school in the morning. You in tomorrow?'

'No, I've got to go and queue up for the Ration Department at the Town Hall and try to get Dad a replacement ration book for the one he lost a week ago,' said Mary. 'Mum's going spare as she's trying to feed all of us on quarter ra—'

The rest-centre doors crashed back against the walls as Wilf Ingles, the ARP warden for Sutton Street, burst in.

'Have you heard?' he shouted, waving an *Evening News*. 'Monty's bloomin' well done it!'

'Done what?' asked someone.

'Beat the bloody Hun,' Wilf replied, his lined face alight with excitement.

The room erupted into clapping and cheering. A couple of two-tone whistles cut through the air as people slapped each other on the back.

'Where?' someone shouted above the noise.

'Some place called El something or another,' Wilf replied. 'It's all here in the early edition. It calls it a "Great and Glorious Victory", and says our lads have captured thousands of Wop prisoners and hundreds of tanks. And now they're driving Rommel and his gang of Nazis into the sea.' He shook the newspaper again. 'You can read it for yourselves.'

People crowded around the elderly warden, looking over his shoulders and craning their necks to read the account.

'Isn't your Stan in North Africa, Cath?' Mary asked, turning to face Cathy.

'Yes,' Cathy replied flatly.

Mary laughed. 'Well, your old man must have been right in the thick of it. I bet you're doubly pleased to hear it's our boys that have won the day.'

Noticing Cathy's tight expression, Mary placed her hand over hers. 'I know, luv, it's ruddy hard not having them around, isn't it?'

Cathy didn't reply.

'And it's not just the . . .' She gave Cathy a bashful look. 'You know . . . but the little things. Like how their eyes light up when you put their favourite dinner in front of 'em, nights in front of the fire listening to the wireless together when the kids are in bed.' She laughed. 'I even miss my Ted's blooming snoring.'

'There'll always be an England,' sang a male voice above the throng.

Others in the room took up the tune.

‘I’d better collect Peter and get home,’ said Cathy, raising her voice to be heard. ‘See you when I see you.’

‘Not if I see you first,’ Mary shouted back.

Cathy turned, and, weaving her way through the crowd of singing people, she left the main hall and headed for the door at the far end of the corridor.

Catching a faint whiff of carbolic, Cathy walked into what had been the caretaker’s storeroom and was now the organiser’s office. Wall charts and stirrup pumps had replaced the mops and buckets, but the smell lingered on.

The woman sitting behind an old schoolmaster’s desk at the far end of the room looked up and gave Cathy a weary smile.

‘You finished for the day then, Mrs Wheeler?’ she asked.

In her late fifties, with steel-grey hair and a sparse frame, Miss Edith Carpenter had lost her fiancé in the previous Great War and had never found another.

As the only child of the chief surgeon in St George’s Hospital, she was blessed with a private income, so instead of using all her energy and talents to run a home and family, Miss Carpenter poured herself into good works. It was natural, therefore, that when the WVS was founded a year before Hitler marched into Poland, she was one of the first to volunteer.

Although the WVS – or Women of Various Sizes, as their founder Lady Reading often called them – didn’t have an official management hierarchy, in truth, in every canteen or rest centre Cathy had ever visited, it was the wives of professionals and well-to-do businessmen in the area who took charge.

‘Pretty much,’ said Cathy, closing the door. ‘Have you heard the news?’

‘Yes, Peggy Wilson popped her head around the door a few moments ago to tell me,’ Miss Carpenter replied. ‘Marvellous. Your husband is serving in North Africa, isn’t he?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, no doubt you’ll have a letter from him soon telling you all about it,’ the older woman said. ‘And how he misses you, too, I’m sure.’

Cathy gave a tight smile but didn’t reply.

‘I hear your mother’s had her baby,’ said Miss Carpenter.

‘Yes, two nights ago, in the middle of an air raid,’ said Cathy. ‘A little girl; six pounds, thirteen ounces.’

Miss Carpenter’s fair eyebrows rose. ‘Goodness. Is she all right?’

‘She’s fine,’ Cathy replied. ‘Her waters went just before lights-out at ten and the midwife delivered the baby at three thirty.’

‘Have your parents chosen a name yet?’ asked Miss Carpenter.

‘Victoria,’ said Cathy.

The rest centre organiser’s pale eyebrows rose. ‘That’s unusual.’

‘That’s what everyone says,’ Cathy replied.

‘Well, it must have been a bit of a shock for her discovering she was pregnant again at her time of life,’ said Miss Carpenter.

‘It was,’ Cathy replied. ‘I think it was more of a shock for my dad, though.’

Truthfully, it had been a shock for the whole family, especially after the falling-out her parents had had the year before.

It was a long story, but when Ida’s old friend Ellen arrived with ten-year-old Michael and they found out he was Jeremiah’s son, it didn’t take much to imagine what Cathy’s mother’s reaction was. To be honest, she and her sisters Mattie and Jo had refused point-blank even to speak to their father when they found out, but as her mother had wholeheartedly forgiven him, Cathy had to as well.

‘Well, give her my regards when you see her,’ said Miss Carpenter. ‘And I’ll see you in the morning.’

Wishing the older woman goodnight, Cathy left her to her paperwork and headed towards the smaller hall at the back of the building.

Pushing open the half-glazed door of what had been the large committee room, Cathy walked into the nursery to a boisterous

chorus of 'Ee-I-Ay-Di-O', as the two dozen or more children holding hands sang at the tops of their voices.

Cathy's eyes scanned the laughing children for a moment before they rested on her son Peter, and love swelled in her heart.

Although he was only two and a half, Peter was already an inch or two taller than most of the boys his age. She had her side of the family to thank for that, but his thick, sandy-coloured hair and broad features were down to her husband Stan.

Peter was on the far side of the circle between two little girls but, seeing her, he broke free and hurried towards her, scattering wooden bricks and tin soldiers in his path.

Cathy put on her brightest face and, crouching down, held out her arms.

'Hello, young man,' she said, as she enveloped him in her embrace.

'Mummy,' he replied, hugging her tightly.

Cathy closed her eyes and hugged him back.

Feeling the heaviness that was always hovering just over her shoulder and threatening to descend, Cathy gave him a last squeeze and then let him go.

Forcing a smile on to her face, she straightened up and took his hand. 'Let's get your coat and then we can go home.'

Within a few moments of leaving the rest centre, Cathy reached Commercial Road.

Before the war, the main highway between Gardiner's corner and Limehouse had been barely passable because of the cars whizzing past in both directions. However, since the abolition of civilian petrol rations a few months before, only lorries and buses and the occasional horse and cart now trundled along the wide road.

'Look, Mummy,' said Peter, pointing a chubby finger at a Charrington's dray rolling along on the other side of the road.

‘Yes, Peter, it’s a black horse,’ she said, manoeuvring his pushchair across the road.

Turning east, she walked past Arbour Square and then left into Head Street and left again. Pausing by the gates of Senrab Street School, Cathy’s eyes rested on the neat rows of three-storeyed houses running along either side of the street.

The last few people were shutting their doors for the night as Winnie Master, the street’s part-time ARP warden, finished her early-evening round, ensuring Cathy’s neighbours were complying with the blackout regulations.

Tightening her grip on the pushchair handle, Cathy headed down the street and turned into the side alley beside the red door halfway down. Reaching the end, she unlatched the side gate and walked through.

Unlike her parents’ home half a mile away in Mafeking Terrace, the houses here had reasonably large back gardens. At the outbreak of war, most of Cathy’s neighbours had dug up their lawns and planted an Anderson Shelter instead of spring bulbs in their flowerbeds.

Her corrugated refuge was buried under a great mound of earth, which looked as if the lawn was about to give birth. Unlike some, it had proper drainage and two good-size bunks. Her husband Stan had dug it for her and his mother to shelter in, but Cathy never used it.

The weight surrounding her threatened to press down on her shoulders again, but Cathy lifted her chin, opened the back door and rolled the pushchair into the kitchen.

The kitchen straddled the width of the house with a window next to the door. On one side of the room was a porcelain sink with an integrated draining board set into a white enamelled stand. At the far end of the room was a built-in dresser with long cupboards on either side of a central section with a pull-down worktop, which sat over a set of drawers. The room also housed two other items

that, as far as she knew, no one else in the street or even the area had: a washing tub, with internal paddle and mangle, and, tucked in the corner on its squat little legs, a refrigerator.

Stan had refitted the kitchen before he'd brought her home as his bride, and, in truth, most women would give their eye-teeth for a kitchen such as the one she was standing in. But for Cathy, there was a coldness about it that had nothing to do with the temperature outside.

The smell of her shin of lamb hotpot wafted over to her, making her stomach rumble.

Kicking on the pushchair's brakes, Cathy took off her coat. Then, setting Peter on the floor, she unwrapped him from his winter layers.

'Is that you?'

Cathy took a deep breath. 'Yes.'

She pulled a smiley face at Peter.

The little boy laughed but then his attention shifted to something behind his mother and his happy expression disappeared.

Cathy turned to see her mother-in-law standing in the doorway.

Wearing the long-ago fashions and muted colours of the Edwardian age, Violet Wheeler looked a decade older than her fifty years.

'Now that the clocks have gone back and it gets dark so early, you might have come home sooner,' said Violet, her pale lips drawing into a sullen line.

Tying her son's Noddy and Big Ears bib around his neck, Cathy didn't reply.

'Still,' continued Violet, putting on her hard-done-by-little-old-lady expression, 'after all this time, I should have known you don't care about my poor nerves.'

Cathy crossed to the dresser and pulled out the cutlery drawer. 'I've been busy all afternoon, so I was late getting away.'

'Busy!' scoffed her mother-in-law. 'Is that what you call gossiping with those do-gooding friends of yours at that centre?'

‘Busy helping families who’ve lost everything in the bombing,’ Cathy replied.

Violet’s thin face pulled into a sorrowful expression.

‘And what about my poor little Stanley?’ She ran her bony hand over her grandson’s fair hair and the boy looked up. ‘Were you left all alone, my poor darling, while your selfish mummy was enjoying herself?’

‘His name’s Peter,’ said Cathy, collecting the knives and forks from the dresser. ‘And you know full well *Peter* was in the nursery playing with the other children.’

Her mother-in-law’s eyes narrowed. ‘And if that’s not bad enough, you dump him on your mother every Wednesday to go gadding around,’ Violet added.

‘I’m taking typing and shorthand classes at Cephas Street, not dancing the night away in the Lyceum,’ Cathy snapped back.

‘Evening classes,’ sneered her mother-in-law. ‘What do you need evening classes for?’

‘To better myself,’ Cathy replied. ‘Perhaps I’ll get a little job when Peter gets older.’

‘You’ve got a job as a wife and mother and looking after me as you should. And if you think you’re going to get yourself a swanking job in an office somewhere then you’d better think again. My Stan won’t have you showing ’im up by letting people think he can’t provide for his family.’

Turning her back on her mother-in-law, Cathy started to wash her hands.

‘I’ll be writing to him tomorrow, to tell him just how you treat me,’ continued Violet, speaking to the back of Cathy’s head. ‘Mark my words. He’ll sort you out good and proper when he gets back.’

Graphic memories of her brutal and fearful life with Stan flashed through Cathy’s mind and panic fluttered in her chest.

‘And it’ll be no more than you deserve,’ added Violet.

Reminding herself that her husband was two thousand miles

away in North Africa, Cathy pushed the unsettling thoughts aside.

‘I suppose you’ll be off to the shelter with your mother in an hour,’ Violet said.

‘I will,’ said Cathy.

‘I don’t know why you don’t just go straight there,’ said Violet.

Cathy said nothing. Stretching up, she went to take two dinner plates from the rack.

‘Don’t bother,’ said Violet. ‘I got fed up waiting for you, so I’ve had mine.’

Placing her and her son’s plates on the table, Cathy picked up the tea towel from the hook by the cooker. Winding it around her hands, she crouched down.

A blast of hot air hit her face as she opened the oven door and lifted out the enamel casserole dish. Placing supper on the table, she lifted the lid.

Cathy stared at what was supposed to be her and Peter’s supper for a moment then raised her head.

‘What?’ asked Violet, with barely concealed malice glinting in her pale grey eyes.

‘What do you mean, what?’ snapped Cathy, pointing into the bowl. ‘You’ve had the lot.’

‘No I haven’t,’ her mother-in-law replied, giving her an airy look. She glanced into the dish. ‘See.’

She pointed at the couple of potatoes, the handful of carrot slices and the bits of gristly meat at the bottom of the dish. ‘That’s more than enough for Stanley.’

‘And what about me?’ Cathy asked. ‘That was part of my weekly meat rations, too.’

Violet shrugged. ‘Well, had you been here you could have said something, but as you weren’t, hard lu—’

The door knocker echoed down the hall.

‘Who’s that?’ said Violet.

Again, not answering, Cathy wiped her hands on the tea towel and went through to the hallway.

'It'd better not be any of your bog-trotting family,' shouted Violet, as Cathy reached the front door. 'I won't have them under my roof, do you hear?'

Patting her hair into place and straightening the front of her blouse, Cathy opened the door.

Standing on the step was a post office messenger dressed in a navy uniform with red piping and a pillbox cap. He was about thirteen or fourteen, with the shadow of his first moustache on his top lip and acne sprinkled across his forehead. His bicycle was propped up on the kerb.

Gathered on the pavement on the other side of the road were Cathy's neighbours, all with pitying expressions on their faces.

Cathy's heart leapt into her throat.

'Mrs Stanley Wheeler?' the boy asked, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down as he spoke.

'Yes.'

Diving into the bag slung across him, he pulled out a telegram and handed it to her.

'I'm sorry.'

Touching the stiff peak of his cap, the lad climbed back on his bicycle and cycled away.

Cathy stared at the envelope in her hand for a moment then went back inside, closing the door behind her.

'Who is it?' bellowed Violet.

Cathy walked back into the kitchen and the blood drained from her mother-in-law's face when she saw the telegram.

Cathy broke the seal and unfolded the page.

'Is it my Stanley?' asked Violet as Cathy's eyes tried to focus on the lines of tickertape that were dancing about on the page.

'Is he injured?'

Cathy didn't reply.

‘Tell me,’ screeched Violet. ‘Tell me if my son’s all right. Tell me!’

Violet snatched the paper from Cathy’s hand. Her hard eyes darted across the page for a moment then she looked up at Cathy.

‘Missing in action,’ she shouted. ‘How can he be missing in action? I only got a letter yesterday.’

‘That’s what it says,’ Cathy replied.

Peter toddled over and grabbed Cathy’s legs, so she lifted him up and slid him into his highchair.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Violet.

‘Giving Peter his dinner before we go off to the shelter,’ said Cathy.

Her mother-in-law looked at her in disbelief. ‘But your husband’s missing! Doesn’t that mean anything to you?’

‘Of course it does,’ said Cathy, placing Peter’s plate in front of him. ‘If he doesn’t turn up or appear on a POW list in the next six months, I’ll be a widow.’

Chapter Two

ALTHOUGH THE DAMP from the London clay he was lying on was seeping through his khaki battle jacket, Sergeant Archie McIntosh barely noticed the discomfort. It was now mid afternoon on the first Friday in November and he had more important things to worry about. The main one being the 1,500-kilo German bomb, known ominously as a Satan, that he was lying alongside at the bottom of a ten-foot trench.

On the other side of the bomb, hunkered down on his haunches, was Lieutenant Monkman, the officer in charge of North East London Bomb Disposal Unit's D Squad. He was chewing the side of his thumb and, despite the chilly air at the bottom of the wood-clad shaft, Archie could see perspiration gathering on his senior officer's forehead.

'Can you see the number on the fuse yet, McIntosh?' Lieutenant Monkman asked, the steam of his breath visible as he spoke.

'No, sir, there's too much muck,' Archie replied.

With thin Brylcreemed brown hair and elongated features, Nicholas Ernest Monkman was a bit younger than Archie's thirty years. Although Monkman's officer's uniform was tailor-made rather than standard issue, the jacket still hung loosely from his shoulders and had plenty of room across the chest. According to Tubbs Croker, the mess sergeant who dealt with the officers' lounge and bar, Monkman was the younger son of some earl. Growing up in Maryhill, Archie hadn't had too much to do with the aristocracy or their offspring, but two years of serving under Monkman had given him a practical understanding of the words 'entitled' and 'condescending', and had confirmed to Archie why

he was a card-carrying member of the Labour Party.

Taking the cloth tucked inside his jacket, he wound it around his finger and, reaching across, gently wiped the mud from the circular disc in the fat belly of the explosive.

The cavity made by the ten-foot-long bomb as it had ploughed its way underground after impact had been discovered by the local ARP warden earlier that morning while he was inspecting the damage of the previous night's air raid. As the unexploded armament had come to rest between the three storage tanks of the St Pancras Gasworks and the mainline station itself, the control room at Islington Town had immediately phoned through to Wanstead School, where the bomb disposal unit was based. Archie's team were on first call that morning and they had been sent out immediately. That was just after nine, and the men had been digging down for the past five hours to uncover the bomb.

With his heart thumping against the inside of his chest, Archie gently cleared away the last few smears of mud. Taking his torch from his breast pocket, he flicked it on.

'It's a seventeen,' Archie said, as the beam illuminated the number in the centre of the disc. Inching forward, he placed his right ear on to the dirty metal. 'And the wee bugger's ticking.'

Fear flickered in Lieutenant Monkman's close-set eyes and he scrambled to his feet. He glanced at the ladder leading up to the surface and, for one brief moment, Archie thought his senior officer was going to make a bolt for it, but then Monkman's eyes returned to him.

Holding the other man's gaze, Archie stood up.

'Chalky!' he yelled up the shaft without taking his eyes from the man opposite.

'Sarge?' Corporal White shouted back.

'It's a Satan with a number seventeen fuse, so the lieutenant will be needing the clock stopper and the stethoscope,' Archie bellowed up.

'Right you are,' White yelled back.

'And have the drill and steamer ready to go once we've stopped it ticking,' Archie called.

The lieutenant took his handkerchief from his pocket.

'What in the devil's name is taking them so long?' he asked, mopping his brow and casting anxious glances at the bomb at their feet.

'Dinna fret, they'll be here presently,' Archie said.

'I'm not fretting,' snapped the lieutenant. Taking a packet of cigarettes from his trouser pocket, he sneered, 'I just don't want them *aping* around, that's all, Sergeant.'

Archie held Monkman's mocking gaze.

The officer took out his lighter, a silver one with his initials stamped on the side.

'Good God, man,' he said, flicking it, 'it's not too much to ask that they get a shift on, is it?'

'No, sir,' Archie replied.

'I bet they wouldn't be *monkeying* around if they were standing next to a sodding ticking bomb,' said Monkman, frantically flicking the lighter cap to get a flame.

Irritation flared in Archie's chest.

Chalky and the lads had finished their shift the previous night at ten, after cleaning and reordering the equipment and loading it back in the truck, a full three hours after Lieutenant Monkman and a couple of his fellow officers had disappeared up West for an evening out. Today, the lads had already shovelled out several tons of mud and set the shaft props in place before Lieutenant Monkman arrived, pulling up at the scene in his sports car just after lunch.

Stiffing his resentment on his men's behalf, Archie took a deep breath to steady his pulse.

At last a flame flickered, illuminating Monkman's thin face in an orange glow. However, as he held the tip of his cigarette to the flame, he lost his grip on the lighter and it clanged on to the bomb casing.

Fear flashed across Monkman's narrow face and he froze.

Archie's eyes locked with his and both men held their breath.

The dripping water from the oozing mud counted down the seconds for what seemed like an eternity then Archie bent down and picked up the lighter.

'Allow me, sir,' he said.

Stepping forward, Archie offered his senior officer a light.

Monkman's hands shook as he held the tip of his cigarette into the flame.

Archie gave back the lighter and the officer forced a laugh.

'Damn cold. Freeze the balls off a brass monkey, wouldn't you say?' he asked, his thin moustache lifted in a smirk.

Archie's eyebrows raised a fraction but he didn't reply.

They stood in silence for a moment then a two-tone whistle echoed down the shaft.

'Mind your heads,' Chalky called.

Archie looked up to see the cradle with the equipment in it being lowered down the shaft. Stepping carefully around the bomb, he reached up and guided the mesh box down.

'About bloody time, too,' muttered Lieutenant Monkman as he joined Archie.

The clock stopper was a two-foot-wide, four-inch-thick device that stopped the fuse's internal mechanisms by means of a magnetic current. The earlier versions resembled a horse collar; however, the one D Squad now used was square with handles. Monkman tried to lift it out of the cradle but hit the metal sides instead, sending a loud clang back up the shaft.

'Perhaps it might be best if you let me position the clock stopper, sir, while you listen in with the electronic stethoscope,' Archie suggested, taking the solid ten-pound piece of equipment from his senior officer's hands and moving it clear of the bomb.

Ten minutes later, with Lieutenant Monkman crouched opposite him with his earphones on, listening to the fuse mechanism and

puffing on the last half-inch of his cigarette, Archie tightened the last bolt on the clock stopper's metal strap.

He looked at Monkman, who nodded.

Turning on the balls of his feet, Archie switched on the hand-held generator and block battery attached to the clock stopper by two leads.

A low hum signalled the cumbersome equipment's response to the electrical charge passing through it.

Holding his breath, Archie looked across at his senior officer again.

Monkman gave him the thumbs-up, indicating the ticking had stopped, and Archie's shoulders relaxed.

Rising to his feet, he pressed his hands into the small of his back to relieve the tightness, then cupped his hands around his mouth.

'Chalky!'

Corporal White's apple-round face appeared over the edge of the parapet. 'Sarge?'

'You, Mogg and Ron get yourselves and the drill down here pronto, and tell Arthur to fire up the steamer,' Archie called.

'Yes, Sarge,' his corporal shouted back. 'And, Sarge! Guess what?'

'The Andrew Sisters are dropping into HQ to entertain us all over a spot of tea?' Archie yelled.

'No,' his second-in-command bellowed. 'One of the coppers up here just got a copy of the *Evening Standard*, and splashed across the front page is the news that old Monty's gone and kicked Rommel's fat German arse in some place called El-Armin or summink.'

'Well now, while I'm right pleased for General Montgomery, Chalky, you'll forgive me if I dinna go too wild with joy just at the moment, due to the fact I'm standing alongside 1,500 kilos of high explosives. So if you don't mind . . . ?'

'Sorry, Sarge,' said Chalky.

‘And fetch us down a slug of water, will ya?’ Archie shouted back. ‘Ma mouth’s as dry as the bottom of a budgie’s cage.’

Chalky hurried off to do his sergeant’s bidding.

Flicking his cigarette butt into the corner of the damp pit, Monkman stood up.

‘Well, McIntosh, I’ll get out of your way while you and the chaps get the drill and steamer going.’

‘You’ll nae be hanging around to oversee the operation?’ asked Archie.

He shook his head.

‘Too many cooks and all that.’ He grinned and slapped Archie’s upper arm. ‘Good work, Sergeant.’

Turning, he practically bounced up the ladder and was gone.

There was a scuffling above and Archie looked up to see Chalky and the three squaddies he’d asked for climbing down the ladder with the drill and rubber hosepipe from the steamer.

Chalky, a solid individual with sandy-coloured hair and a ready smile, stepped off the bottom rung of the ladder and sidled over.

‘I see our commanding officer has done his usual,’ he said, handing Archie a water bottle. ‘Well, at least wiv him gone, we’ve got a decent chance of getting out of the stinking pit in one piece.’

Uncorking the canteen, Archie’s mouth lifted slightly by way of reply. He took a swig of water and then hunkered down.

‘All right, me bonny lads,’ said Archie, picking up the discarded headphones and putting them over his ears. ‘You know what to do, so let’s get on with it.’

Hooking his towel on the peg, Archie stepped under the stream of water pulsing out of the chrome shower head a few inches above him.

Resting his hands on the white tiled wall in front, he hung his head and let the warm water trickle down his aching body.

It was already dark by the time he and his men had arrived back at the depot half an hour ago. Thankfully, drilling through the outer casing of the bomb had been pretty straightforward, as had the removal of the explosives. It hadn't taken long to emulsify them using the steamer. Although, even without the fuse, the explosives could still blow you to kingdom come, Archie had decided that it would be better to get the whole thing up top so he could disarm the fuse in the daylight. Unfortunately, as the bomb was smack bang in the middle of two buildings vital to the war effort, they'd had to transport its carcass, with the clock stopper still attached, to the safer location of the bomb graveyard on Hackney Marshes.

They'd arrived there just as the blackout started at six, so in a tarpaulin blackout tent under the glare of two spotlights, Archie had finally detached the fuse with his spanner and made it safe before heading back to base.

The army's bomb disposal squad was housed in what had been Wanstead High School for Boys. With most of its pupils evacuated elsewhere, the school had been converted into the North East Regional Headquarters, housing ten sections, comprising of half a dozen men apiece. Each squad was headed up by a sergeant and, in theory, were under the command of any of the dozen or so lieutenants. In reality, with a few notable exceptions, the lieutenants did little work, leaving it to experienced sergeants like himself to manage the day-to-day business.

Archie's D Squad was located on the second floor of the old school building, along with E and F Squads. The classrooms had been converted into barracks, but, although it was cheaper to live on site, Archie, like a couple of the other non-commissioned officers, had found himself a billet close by, just east of Bow Bridge. The officers made their own arrangements and rented houses if they had families or took lodgings if they were single.

Of course, by the time he and his team had returned, soaked to the skin and ravenously hungry, the officers were already

celebrating the news from Egypt, knocking back large Scotches in the mess as if they'd been the ones who'd routed Rommel.

Archie was now standing in what had been the boys' changing room, and around him were the six men that made up D Squad, all vigorously scrubbing the day's filth off them with slivers of carbolic soap.

'Oi, Archie!'

He looked around at Fred Wood, the driver and tea maker, lathering himself under the shower opposite.

'Me and some of the boys are going to the Regal later to raise a glass or two in Monty's honour, fancy joining us?' asked the private, who'd been a bin man in Doncaster before he was called up.

'Yeah,' said eighteen-year-old Private Tim Conner, rubbing his hands across his hairless chest. 'There'll be plenty of totty.'

'The boy's right, Archie,' said Mogg Evans – the Swansea Mangler, as he was known in amateur wrestler circles. 'Wild they are since those Yanks arrived. Coming down to London from all over looking for a bit of fun.'

'Yes, I tell you, I just flashed the old bomb squad badge last week at the Ilford Palais and I was swamped with girls who wanted to show a hero of the Blitz their gratitude.'

Archie smiled. 'I wouldnae want to cramp your style, lads.'

'Ark at 'im,' laughed Ron Marchant, who'd been a stevedore in the Royal Docks. 'The UXB's very own Casanova.'

They all laughed, and Archie joined in.

'Come on, Archie,' urged Arthur Goodman, who at thirty-eight was the oldest in the squad. 'You need to get out a bit.'

'Yeah, come on.' Chalky glanced down at Archie's bare crotch. 'Give your todger something to do for once.'

Archie smiled. 'Thanks for the offer, pal, but I've already got a date. And don't enjoy yourselves too much: we're back on duty at six.'

This brought forth the usual groans, expletives and rude gestures.

Archie's smile widened, and, throwing his towel over his shoulder, he headed off for the changing room.

In the steamy atmosphere, each one of his squad's naked bodies looked much the same as the other. Only he looked different. And not just because at six foot two he towered over the other men. He looked different because, despite his Glaswegian accent and Highland name, while they were pale pink all over, he was the colour of milky coffee.