

A Ration Book Wedding

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A Ration Book Wedding

JEAN FULLERTON



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*To my Fullerton family who are no
longer with me but whose anecdotes and
experiences of WW2 are sprinkled all
through the Ration Book series.*

Chapter one

FRANCESCA FABRINO, FRAN to her friends, grasped the lever just above her and pulled it down, watching through the Perspex lens of her goggles as the drill bit bore a hole into the solid cylinder of metal. Feeling the tip of the bit reach its goal, she quickly released her hold and allowed the spring to raise the mechanism. She pressed the pedal by her right foot and the component – designed to allow the propellers of a Lancaster bomber to turn – popped out and joined the others in a wooden crate to her left. Pushing away the tendril of ebony hair dangling in her vision, Fran shifted her foot across to the other pedal, stamped on it and released another plug of aluminium into the drill bed, then repeated the process.

She, with at least two hundred other women and girls, was deep beneath the ground working in the newly opened Plessey factory. The factory, which had previously been used to assemble field radios and wirelasses, ran along the tunnel of the Central line between Leytonstone in the west and Newberry Park in the east.

Francesca was working in the aircraft engine component section under Wanstead station. She and the other women operating the machinery sat facing the platform wall with the dome of the tunnel arching over them. Behind her ran the narrow-gauge railway used to ship the finished components to the collection shafts from where they were taken to the surface. Although she was in one of the deepest sections of the tunnel, at five hundred feet below street level, the vibration of the German bombs above could be felt. She'd been allocated to work at the factory when she'd signed up a couple of months ago when the new war conscription act meant all women between the ages of eighteen and fifty, without dependants, were

required to register for war work. As she was twenty-four and single, she had volunteered for factory work to ensure she didn't get drafted into the ATS.

It wasn't that she would have minded being in the ATS. Not at all. In fact, if the truth were told, she'd have preferred to be up top driving a petrol wagon or ferrying supplies to army bases rather than deep beneath the earth, but her father had been through enough and she didn't want him to worry any more than he already did, so she'd opted for the safer option of factory work.

Feeling the sweat trickling down between her shoulder blades, Francesca yanked down on the lever again. A fine spray of lubricant drenched the fresh metal plug and curls of aluminium escaped as the drill bit deep again. As she released the lever the hooter, signalling the end of the shift, blasted out. Giving a silent prayer of thanks, Francesca stamped on the pedal and ejected the metal component. She flicked the red switch off and the whirling drill ground to a halt. Yawning, she stepped away from the now-idle machine then turned towards the double doors of the exit.

The cream-tiled changing room, which was situated between the two platforms at the bottom of the stairs, was already abuzz with women changing into or out of work clothes. Francesca yawned again. Moving her goggles up to her forehead, she removed her ear plugs. She squeezed her way through the half-dressed women to her metal locker on the far side of the room. Looping her mother's crucifix out from beneath her clothing, Francesca took the key dangling alongside the cross and slid it into the lock.

'Cor, I thought that night would never blooming end,' said a woman's voice as Francesca opened her locker.

She turned to see Joan Dunn, a jolly blonde who worked on the machine three along from her on the assembly line.

'At least in the old factory you knew when the sun came up you'd soon be done for the night,' Joan added, as she opened the metal door of her locker.

'I know,' Francesca stowed her goggles and ear protectors on the top shelf. 'But it was worst for them up top. Still,' she continued, unbuttoning her overalls, 'at least we've got a day off tomorrow.'

In the dim light from a forty-watt bulb above, Joan's blue eyes rolled Heavenwards. 'Praise the lord.'

'For what?' asked Daisy Willis as she joined them from the factory floor.

'For strong, handsome men and gin,' Joan said. 'Although I've not had much of either lately.'

Francesca smiled. 'And for a day off.'

'Oh yes,' said Daisy with feeling as she removed her goggles. 'Got anything planned?'

'Just a date with my bed for about ten hours,' Joan replied. 'Then off down the market to join a queue.'

'Are you after anything special?' asked Daisy, sliding the straps of her tan-brown dungarees off her shoulders.

'No. Whatever's on offer,' Joan replied, untangling herself from her work clothing. 'What about you?'

'I'm having me hair done,' said Daisy. 'Then going up West to the Trocadero with a few of the girls from seven section to see if we can catch ourselves a couple of rich GIs.'

'Well, you watch out that you don't end up being the one "caught".' Joan winked. 'They don't call 'em over-sexed for nothing, you know.'

Daisy laughed and looked at Francesca. 'Why don't you come with us, Fran?'

'Oh, I don't know,' she replied, lowering her gaze as she stepped out of her boiler suit.

'Come on, it'll be fun,' urged Daisy.

Standing in her knickers and brassiere, Francesca laughed. 'I'm sure, but I promised to give Dad a bit of a hand in the café.'

'I'm sure he can manage without you, especially –' Daisy's eyes twinkled – 'if it meant you hooking up with some rich American with an Italian grandmother.'

‘It would make his day,’ Francesca replied. ‘But I’ll give it a miss this time if you don’t mind, Daisy, as I don’t want to play gooseberry.’

Her friend laughed. ‘Well, if you change your mind, we’re all meeting at Bow Road station.’

The radio’s pips, heralding the morning news bulletin, cut through the changing-room hubbub.

‘Cor, is that the time?’ Daisy said, shoving her arms in her coat. ‘I’d better dash or I’ll miss my tram.’ She slammed her locker door shut. ‘Have fun and I’ll see ya.’

‘Not if we see you first!’ Francesca and Joan called back in unison.

Daisy waved cheerfully over her shoulder. ‘And don’t forget, Fran,’ she said, gathering up her handbag and heading to the door, ‘seven o’clock at the station.’

Francesca smiled, but didn’t reply.

She turned back and unhooked her light-blue dress from the peg inside. Slipping her gown over her head, she whipped off her head scarf and shook out her long ebony tresses.

‘You know I used to have hair as long as that,’ said Joan wistfully, as Francesca brushed out the tangles ten hours bound inside a scarf had caused.

Joan’s pale eyes softened. ‘You really should think about meeting up with Daisy and her mates and having a bit of fun up West.’

‘Maybe another time,’ said Francesca, deftly winding one coil over the other as she plaited it.

‘It’s not as if you’ve got a sweetheart,’ Joan persisted as she took her coat from her locker.

‘I know,’ said Francesca, taking her rucksack from her locker and shoving her dirty overalls in it. ‘But I’m just waiting for the right man to come.’

‘I don’t say it ain’t important you find the right one,’ agreed Joan. ‘Cos if you don’t, you’re blooming well stuck with ’em until one of you’s pushing up daisies, but—’

‘Which is why I’m not going out looking for him,’ cut in Francesca. ‘And with my brother Giovanni in the army, Dad needs me around so I’m happy to wait.’

‘Well, I hope he don’t take too long for your sake,’ Joan said. ‘Because, believe me, there’s nothing quite like having a strong, handsome man to keep you warm at night.’

‘So I’ve heard.’ Taking her three-quarter-length red coat out of the narrow metal closet, Francesca put it on, then closed the door and locked it. She picked up her haversack and turned to Joan. ‘Now, I’d better get my skates on or I’ll miss my bus. See you Saturday.’

Emerging from the brick-built entrance of the underground factory some five minutes later, Francesca drew in a long, slow breath of early-morning air. It was the last Friday in February and after ten hours or so breathing in the hot, subterranean atmosphere of the factory, the chill of the frosty morning revitalised her.

She was standing in Cambridge Park Road. Wanstead’s common, with its ancient gnarled oak, was in front of her and Wanstead Flats, which were now dotted with ack-ack guns instead of grazing cattle, beyond that. Above her head, in the bare branches of a tree, a few birds warbled away, welcoming the lightening eastern sky behind the houses.

If you ignored the ARP control post with sand bags surrounding it, the sticky-tape criss-crosses on every windows, the silver barrage balloons squeaking against their anchorages and the signs directing you to bomb shelters, you could *almost* forget there was a war on.

To her right along the High Street, people were already out and about, either going to work or making a start on their morning tasks. A milk float being pulled by a horse, its food bag fastened to its halter, steam puffing from his sweating haunches, plodded along the street while the milkman darted back and forth replacing empty

bottles on the doorstep with full ones. The draymen on top of the Charrington's wagon were rolling barrels down a plank and into the floor trap of the vast Victorian gin place on the corner opposite. The greengrocer was out in front of his shop trying to make an artistic display of his limited supply of vegetables while the butcher next door placed trays of off-rations offal in the window.

Francesca's weary gaze flickered across to the clock hanging above the jeweller's shop opposite The George.

Twenty past. Blast!

On cue, the 17 tram came into view. Gliding silently on its tracks it disappeared around the corner and onward to Leytonstone. Adjusting her haversack on her shoulder, Francesca sighed. Oh well. It was only a mile to walk to her connecting stop at the Green Man and at least it wasn't raining.

Francesca jolted awake as the 25 came to a halt outside the main postal sorting office on Whitechapel Road.

'Whitechapel station and London hospital,' called out the conductor from his position on the back platform.

Forcing her eyes open, Francesca grasped the upright metal pole on the back of the seat in front and hauled herself to her feet. Trudging between the seats on the lower deck, she made her way to the platform at the back of the bus and stepped down, narrowly avoiding colliding with the three boys dressed in Sir John Cass uniforms who jumped on.

The section of Mile End Road between Cambridge Heath Road to the east and Vallance Road to the west was known as The Waste and was home to one of the oldest markets in East London. It was a Friday, so the stalls and shops were already bustling with women, sporting scarf turbans on their heads and wraparound aprons beneath their coats, searching for bargains.

Before the outbreak of hostilities, the stalls offered all manner of goods for sale: clothing from the local factories, home-made pickled herrings, fresh bagels and rabbits in their fur caught on Barking Flats or Hackney Mashers. Now, sadly, after three years of rationing and the German navy torpedoing merchant ships in the North Atlantic, there was much less for the cash-strapped housewife to choose from.

Amongst the early-morning bargain-hunters were ARP wardens, who were handing out government leaflets. Alongside them two matrons in the green uniforms of the WVS doled out tea and toast to a grimy-looking Heavy Rescue team who had just finished their shift of digging people out of the ruins. That said, as far as Francesca could see, all the shops that flanked Whitechapel station were still standing, as was the brewery and the Blind Beggar Pub on the corner.

However, although she was glad to see that the old shopping area had survived the night, as always after being away from home all night the building she was most happy to find in the exact same condition as when she set off to work the night before was her father's cafe.

The cafe, called Alf's, sat on the corner of Brady Street and would have been open since the crack of dawn, ready to feed the army of night workers who had just finished their shift. As soon as the blackout ended each morning, her father rolled up the window blinds. Even at this distance Francesca could see people sitting inside enjoying their breakfast.

Francesca stepped off the kerb and crossed the road to join the throng on the other side of the road. The door to the cafe opened as she reached it, so Francesca stood back to let two postmen come out, then stepped into the warm fug.

Her father Enrico had taken over the former pie and mash shop just a year ago, after he and her brother Giovanni were released from an alien internment camp. Although they couldn't run to the

expense of changing the black and white tiles that lined the walls, her father was able to add a bit of Italian flavour to the eating house by suspending a selection of battered copper pans from the ceiling behind the counter. However, pride of place was given to a painting of Ponte Vecchio in Florence, where the Fabrino family came from. It had been painted by Giovanni and now hung on the wall at the far end of the cafe, surrounded by ornamental plates.

This morning, as always, Francesca's father was behind the marble counter. Through the hatch behind him she could see Olive, stirring pots and loading plates with buttered toast and scrambled egg.

Olive Picaro and her husband Victor lived in the Peabody buildings behind Balmy Park at the top of Cambridge Heath Road, a five-minute walk away from the cafe. They'd been bombed out of their coffee shop in Bethnal Green Road almost the same day as Francesca's father signed the lease on the cafe. Enrico had offered them both a job and they were now firmly part of the fabric of the cafe.

As the warmth of the room spread through her – the smell of coffee, fried bread and braised kidneys filling her nose – Francesca turned her attention back to her father at the till. Although only halfway through his fourth decade, Enrico looked at least ten years older and whereas her Mediterranean colouring was a warm olive, his was sallow. He'd never been a robust man, but after their fish and chip business on the Commercial Road was torched by a rampaging mob the night Mussolini declared war on Enrico's adopted country, her father's spirits had never quite recovered.

With his sleeves rolled up and a long white apron covering his clothes, Enrico was taking orders and money at one end of the counter. However, when he spotted her as she walked in, his golden-brown eyes – so like Giovanni's – grew warm. Taking a cup from the upturned pile at his elbow, he opened one of the enamel tins behind him.

Wending her way through the customers, Francesca lifted the counter flap and joined her father on the business side of the counter.

‘Morning, Papa,’ she said, giving him a peck on the cheek.

‘You’re late, luv,’ he said, as he ran the spout of the enamel teapot along the lines of mugs on a tray.

‘I had to walk to the Green Man,’ she replied, unbuttoning her coat. ‘Then a bomb had landed smack bang in the middle of the road by the Plough so the bus had to go all the way down Danes Road before it could get back to Maryland Point. I tell you, Dad, I’m so tired I could beat Rip Van Winkle hands down in a sleeping contest.’

He regarded her thoughtfully for a moment. ‘It’s not right you working like a mole under—’

‘Papa!’ Francesca gave her father a long-suffering look.

He opened his mouth as if to speak, but then thought better of it and pressed his lips together.

Two plates of liver, sausage and fried bread appeared in the hatch. Taking the tea towel dangling from his apron straps, Francesca’s father wrapped it around his hands and picked up the order. Sliding past her he took it over to a couple of ARP wardens at the window table.

As he returned, a yawn stole over Francesca so she put her hand over her mouth.

‘I have to go to bed before I fall down,’ she said, tiredness dragging at her eyelids.

She turned to make her way through to the parlour and spotted a folded copy of the *Herald* lying on an empty table. She picked it up and continued towards the family parlour behind the shop.

‘Wait.’

Her father spooned three heaped tablespoons of cocoa into a mug, then stirred in hot milk.

‘That’s got to last us until next Wednesday,’ she protested, as he added two teaspoons of sugar from their weekly catering rations.

'You deserve it,' her father replied, handing her the frothy hot drink. 'I put a jug of hot water in your room half an hour ago so it should still be warm.'

'Thanks.' Francesca gave him another peck on the cheek. 'Give me a shout about two, Papa, and I'll help you with the afternoon rush.'

He nodded as a plate of kippers arrived in the hatch.

Tucking the newspaper under her arm and clutching her hot drink, Francesca waved to Olive, who was now busy flipping bacon, scrambling eggs and doling out bowls of porridge, and headed wearily up to the first floor.

Although the sun had only been up for an hour, her bedroom was warm from the cafe below. It was simply furnished with a single brass bedstead, wardrobe, dressing table and washstand. Thankfully, even though the wallpaper with its pink and blue flowers and entwining greenery was a little old fashioned, the colours were still sharp. She'd also found a pair of second-hand curtains down Petticoat Lane which matched the green of the foliage so, even with the blackout blinds visible behind them, the room looked bright and cheery.

Closing the door, she put her hot drink on the bedside table, threw the newspaper on the bed and then kicked off her shoes, wriggling her toes to ease their stiffness. As her father had predicted, the water in the enamel jug on the washstand was still warm and, after stripping to her underwear, she had a quick wash and changed into her nightdress. Throwing back the patchwork counterpane and blankets, Francesca upended her two pillows and slipped beneath the cool sheets. Resting back onto the metal framework between the two bed knobs, she picked up her mug of cocoa and opened the newspaper.

Although the appointment of Sir James Griggs as the new Secretary of State for War was splashed all across the front page, the story that caught her eye was the one beside it; about the

Eighth Army's desperate attempt to hold on to Benghazi in North Africa.

Taking a sip of her cocoa, Francesca let her gaze drift onto the photo sitting beneath the lamp on her bedside table that had been taken four years ago, in 1938, at the annual St Patrick's Day dance at the Catholic club, adjacent to St Breda and St Brendan's church.

It was of Francesca and her very best friend in the world, Mattie Brogan, and her brother Charlie. She and Mattie were wearing their new dresses, made specially for the occasion, and both had wide, happy smiles.

But it was Charlie, Mattie's older brother, standing on the other side of her best friend that Francesca's gaze returned to again and again.

In truth, she needed no photo to remind her what the man she'd held a torch for since she was just six years old looked like. However, since the day he'd slipped a ring onto Stella Miggles' finger, just over a year ago, Francesca had been training her heart.

She'd been schooling it not to conjure up that quirky sideways smile of his or to remember his rumbling laughter at the opening bars of a song or the whiff of Burlington aftershave and she was working hard to forget the memory of his arms around her as he gave her a brotherly hug. She was very pleased that now she could go days without imagining what it would feel like to have his mouth pressed onto hers or to have his arms around her. Of course, he did still invade her dreams almost every time she closed her eyes, which was annoying, but...

Her gaze started to drift back to the photo, but Francesca forced her attention back to the newspaper and scanned an article about a new food called Spam. She was about to turn the page when something caught her eye.

The cup hovered halfway to her mouth as she read the advertisement at the top right-hand corner.

The British Broadcasting Corporation's Overseas Service
requires young lady for clerical and general duties.
Must be able to read Italian and speak it fluently,
preferably as their mother tongue.
Please apply to Miss Kirk, European Service,
Bush House, the Strand, WC1.

Cradling her cup between her hands, Francesca reread it and then looked back at the photo of Charlie Brogan, dressed in a suit with one of his flamboyant waistcoats beneath and a neckerchief tied at a jaunty angle at his throat.

The yearning for him niggled at her, but Francesca cut it short.

Joan was right. As Charlie flipping Brogan could never be hers, perhaps she needed to start looking for a big, strong, handsome man somewhere else. And perhaps the BBC Overseas Service would be a good place to start.

Chapter two

REGARDING HIMSELF IN the small oblong mirror that dangled from a piece of string in front of him, Bombardier Charlie Brogan in the Royal Artillery ran his fingers over the four-day bristles on his chin. Ideally, he'd like to have a shave, but he was down to his last two razor blades and the saints in Heaven only knew when he'd get another pack; he'd have to leave his beard for another day. Not that it mattered. Stuck in the middle of the North African desert, hundreds of miles from civilisation, it wasn't as if he had a string of social gatherings to attend. If he'd kept his tally correctly, today was the last day of February but days of being surrounded by nothing but dunes and flies, one day often merged into another.

He picked up the bucket of water at his feet, raised it and tipped half of it over him, enjoying the sensation of the cool water over his hot naked body.

Setting it back on the scorching sand, he took the bar of coal tar soap balancing on the shelf in front of him and rubbed it into a lather all over his chest. As he scrubbed under his arms, he looked over the top of the improvised khaki canvas cubicle that served as a shower. His Royal Artillery regiment's Howitzers were over to the right and although it was only two hours since dawn, having had the full benefit of the North African sun on them ever since, you could probably already fry an egg on the breach block.

Between the assorted tanks, lorries and personal carriers, men dressed in the sand-coloured tropical uniform of shorts and loose open-necked shirts were checking equipment, replenishing machine-gun belts and repacking shells into metal cases.

Charlie raked his soap-laden fingers through his hair and poured the remaining water slowly over his head, rubbing vigorously to remove the soap, then secured a towel around his waist.

Pushing back the canvas, he stepped out. Taking his uniform from the hook, he picked up his right boot. Upending it he shook it, then banged it a couple of times against the iron pole of the shower block.

Satisfied no scorpions or red ants had taken up residence in his footwear while he'd been at his ablutions, Charlie shoved his foot in his unlaced boot. After repeating the action with his other boot, he strolled over to the oil drum lying on its side a little way off. He'd scrubbed his smalls out before showering and had laid them there to dry. Stopping in front of it he shrugged on his shirt to protect his shoulders from the blazing sun.

They had been warned on the troop ships before they landed about the dangers of the sun. Some of the poor sods with fair or red hair looked like they'd been deep fried, and several had to be hospitalised with second-degree burns. But with his darker skin and having been out in all weathers since he was twelve helping on his father's rag and bone wagon, he'd fared better than most and was now so tanned he could almost pass for a local. Well, he could if it wasn't for the fact that at six foot one, he towered over them and he'd yet to see an Arab with blue-grey eyes.

Taking his lighter from the top pocket, Charlie flipped his shorts over his shoulder and picked up his pants. Holding the elasticated band taut over his knuckles he flicked the lighter into a flame then ran it across the fabric, hearing the satisfying crackle of bursting lice eggs as the aroma of scorched wool drifted up. Satisfied that the heat had completed what no amount of washing could, Charlie shook them out then, gathering up the rest of his now-dried clothing, strolled back to his tent. Ducking beneath the overhanging flap of canvas, he walked in.

Ginger, who was called that not because of his colouring but because his surname was Rogers, looked up from his copy of *Striperama*. 'Blimey, corp, we thought you'd fallen down the plughole.'

'Or been captured by some randy sheikh on account of you smelling like a bleeding tart,' added Smudge, who was sitting on the cot opposite, paring his toenails with his knife.

The tent that had been Charlie and his gun crew's home for most of the past two years was octagonal in shape and had a central pole where the primus stove and crew provision were stored. The camp beds faced inwards with the heads towards the outer walls and the feet towards the middle. Each man had a narrow metal locker about three foot high next to his bed on which were stuck photos of wives and children, if the owner were married, saucy pin-ups if they were not. Each man had a lockable chest for his personal gear stowed under the bed. The sides of their abode were rolled up to let in the air, but, as any breeze likely to come their way would be scorching, the interior of the tent was only a degree or two cooler than the outside.

'We might be called the Desert Rats but you don't have to smell like one,' Charlie replied, as he reached his bunk.

'I don't know why you bother,' said Thin Jim, who was sitting crossed-legged on his bunk and playing Patience. 'Five minutes in this heat and you're sweating like a pig, anyhow.'

Feeling his backbone starting to prickly already, Charlie couldn't disagree. Dropping the towel over the end of the bed, he took his pants from his shoulder.

The tent flap opened and a wiry youth, who looked too young to shave never mind fight the Hun, stepped into the tent.

'Post for gun crew eight?' he asked, his pale eyes casting over them.

'That's us,' said Charlie, crossing the space in two strides. 'Brogan? Anything for Brogan.'

‘I’m not sure,’ said the young man reaching into his bulging bag and shuffling through the pile of correspondence he was carrying. ‘Robinson, Crow, Riley—’

‘Come on, man,’ snapped Charlie, his heart thumping painfully in his chest. ‘It’s been almost two weeks since the last delivery from home so there must be at least one.’

‘Give the boy a chance, Charlie,’ said Smudge, waving a fly from his face. ‘He’s doing his best.’

Charlie took a deep breath and tried to master his impatience.

‘Brogan.’ The youth grinned and pulled out a small package and a letter.

Charlie took them and looked at the writing on each.

A pang of homesickness swept over him as he read his name, written in his sister Mattie’s bold hand on the parcel, but it was the squiggly writing on the letter that took the tension from his shoulders.

At last!

Returning to his bed he quickly finished dressing, then, having pulled up his socks high enough to foil any sand fleas from having a nibble and tied his bootlaces tight, Charlie flicked a couple of sand beetles off his covers and made himself comfortable. As he opened his wife’s letter, the post boy who was about to leave glanced at the photo fixed to the door of Charlie’s locker.

‘I can see why you were so keen for a letter, chum,’ he said, a smirk spreading across his beardless face. ‘I’d be keen to hear from a bit of skirt with knockers that size.’

The other men in the tent fell silent and Charlie felt their uncertain gazes on him as he regarded the young lad standing two feet away.

‘Sorry, *chum*,’ he said, fixing the lad with a look that had stopped seventeen-stone bruisers in their tracks. ‘Are you talking about my wife?’

The colour drained from the youth’s face. ‘Er...sorry. It’s just

that...you know, she's nice-looking...pretty, you know. I didn't mean nothing by it. No offence, chu... Sir.'

Charlie held the quaking lad's stare for a few moments more, then smiled. 'None taken. But you should be watching yourself, boy. Next time you might find yourself up against someone who's not as even-tempered as me.'

The post boy nodded like a rag doll being shaken, then scurried out of the tent.

'Even-tempered!' snorted Ginger. 'That's a laugh. Don't forget it were me who was with you in that bar in Winchester when you panned that fella for calling you a thick bastard from Paddyland.'

Charlie shrugged. 'He's just a boy pretending to be a man.'

He turned his attention back to his letter and silence descended again as the four men read about the loved ones they'd left behind – the ones they were fighting for in this insect-infested desert of North Africa.

As he read about his wife's daily struggle to feed her and their son, Patrick, because of rationing and shortages, her exhaustion from working in the ball bearing factory at night and caring for a lively eight month old by day, plus the nightly bombing raids, guilt tugged at Charlie's chest. No wonder she hadn't written to him since before Christmas. He knew Stella had never been much of a one for writing, but three months without a single letter was a bit much...

Brushing away a fly crawling over his knee, Charlie returned to his correspondence. His smile widened as he read about his son, Patrick, sitting up all by himself, his fretful nights with his teeth and how his mum had rubbed whiskey on them to numb the pain.

As always, he was told not to worry because although the Germans still bombed the London docks most nights, Patrick's granny, Charlie's mum Ida, took him to the Tilbury shelter at the end of Cable Street on the nights Stella worked.

Charlie moved on to the last paragraph. Along with saying how much she loved and missed him, Stella then went on to give such

a detailed description of how she would be welcoming him home that it must have made the censor blush; it certainly caused a jolt in Charlie's crotch.

His gaze shifted from the letter to the photo of his wife with his son in her arms. Patrick had been only five months old when it was taken and the letter had taken a month to catch up with him. It arrived with his Christmas present of socks, chocolate, writing paper and envelopes. A lump caught in Charlie's throat as he thought of all the little things about his son's first year he'd missed. His attention shifted to the woman holding the child, his wife Stella.

She was wearing a skin-tight evening dress with a plunging neckline that showed off her cleavage. Perched on a bar stool, she had one high heel on the ground and the other on the footrest. Patrick, dressed in a knitted matinee jacket and leggings, was held tightly by his mother as he balanced on her raised knee.

The lad was right. Stella had an amazing figure and she'd never been short of male attention. When she'd turned her sights on him, she'd caught his attention, too. After all, he was a man with blood pumping in his veins, wasn't he? Of course he'd heard the whispers about her but then he was no angel either, so he'd shrugged them off. However, as he'd got to know the woman beneath the generously endowed figure, his interest had quickly waned, but it was too late. He was not a man to shirk his responsibilities so, two months after she told him she was in the family way, he'd made a respectable woman of her.

It wasn't the best start to a marriage, but Patrick was born four months later on the twentieth of June, a month after he'd shipped out from Portsmouth to North Africa. He'd received the letter telling him of Patrick's birth while he was trudging across the desert towards Cairo and although he'd never set eyes on his son, he'd loved him from that moment. He'd been raised in a happy, loving family and Charlie was determined that for Patrick's sake,

and any other children that came after, he would make a go of it with Stella.

‘Right,’ said Ginger, folding his letter and tucking it into his top pocket. ‘Who’s for a brew?’

‘Count me in,’ said Smudge.

Shoving his disheartening thoughts about his marriage aside, Charlie swung his legs off the bed and sat up.

‘And me,’ said Charlie, putting Mattie’s letter aside to read later. ‘And you’d better do one for Ted as he should be back from Stores soon.’

Waving away the flies circling the jerry can containing the fresh water, Ginger refilled the kettle then placed it on the primus stove and lit it.

Charlie reached beneath his bed and extracted the metal box that contained all his personal belongings. Unlocking it he tucked his letters and parcel inside. However, as he sat up again, a commotion on the other side of the compound caught his attention.

‘Oi, oi, something’s up,’ he said, rising to his feet. The others looked around as Charlie went to the door and stepped outside.

Shading his eyes from the glare, he saw plumes of sand rising up. There was a second or two pause, then the throaty sound of tanks, lorries and jeeps revving up drifted across in the blistering air. Men were shouting and dashing back and forth now. The sharp blast from a whistle sounded out, followed by a couple of horns tooting.

‘Is it the Windmill Girls come to give us a show?’ shouted Smudge from inside the tent.

‘No!’ Charlie shouted back. ‘But you can forget having a cuppa, cos after five weeks of moping around this godforsaken wilderness, we’re on the move!’

Pandemonium broke out behind him and by the time he’d got back to his bunk the other chaps had already stowed their gear and were starting to pull up the guy ropes.

‘Come on, Brogan, look lively,’ Ginger shouted, cutting through his thoughts. ‘Or we’ll win the war without you.’

‘Don’t worry about me, chaps,’ he said, grabbing his backpack that was leaning against the locker. ‘I’ll be in Benghazi before the lot of you.’

A shell exploded somewhere to the right of Charlie’s truck as the battle sergeant standing in front of them signalled them into their position at the end of the newly formed artillery line. His battalion had broken camp four hours before and they had been travelling east to meet the enemy ever since. With handkerchiefs secured over their noses and mouths to keep out the sand thrown up by the vehicles travelling over it, he and the five men sitting behind him in the Bedford looked more like bandits from a Western than a crack gunner team.

Jamming the gears into reverse, Charlie swivelled around in the driver’s seat and looked over his shoulder through the canvas arch at his rear. He turned the steering wheel back and forth with his right hand and swung the seven-pound gun to face the German Afrika Korps. The enemy were situated behind the ridge just to the east and had the advantage of the high ground where, judging by the ferocity and accuracy of the shells exploding around them, they had been in position waiting for them.

Hitler’s crack troops were very different from the hotchpotch of conscripts Mussolini had sent to seize British possessions in North Africa. The Eighth Army had gone through the Italian defences at Tobruk like a hot knife through butter, many of the ill-trained and ill-equipped men surrendering without so much as firing a shot. However, now the Germans had arrived to assist their allies, the British had a fight on their hands to prevent Field Marshal Rommel’s Panzer divisions pushing them back into the sea.

A shell, probably a twelve-pounder by the flash of light, exploded to the left of them, sending the canvas awning covering the men flapping as the munition sucked in the air.

Charlie yanked on the handbrake.

'Right, lads!' he shouted, over the sound of exploding armaments and the returning fire from the British guns. 'Let's get this bugger in position and give the Jerrys a taste of their own medicine.'

Ginger, who was at the back of the truck, unhooked the tailgate and kicked it down. He jumped out and the rest of the gun team did the same. Charlie felt the back of the truck lift as they unhooked the artillery gun from the towbar.

A German shell landed some hundred yards in front of him and peppered the windscreen with sand and pebbles. Getting back into the Bedford, Charlie revved the truck's engine again, then circled the vehicle around behind his pals who were getting the gun into position and breaking shells from their cases. Churning up sand as he went, Charlie sped off to where the transport lorries and armoured personnel carriers were parked away from the front line. A shell whizzed over his head and a light tank at the rear of the formation burst apart in a ball of flames, sending fragments of metal high into the air.

Coming to a stop, Charlie pulled on the handbrake. He picked up his tin hat, leapt down from the cabin and slammed the door behind him. Over on the right flank his crew were already returning fire, the five men working like a well-oiled machine, loading and then standing aside as the gun spat out its shell at the enemy.

With debris and twisted metal flying all around him, Charlie hurried back to join his comrades. Another mortar shell exploded behind him but, mercifully, landed short of the line of armoured vehicles waiting to take the infantry forward once the German guns had been silenced.

Above the noise of gunfire, Charlie could hear a low rumble as the British tanks made ready for the offensive, the smell of diesel

from their exhausts mingling with the burnt phosphorus of the armaments giving the air a sour taste.

Halfway across the open space between the lorries and guns, a mortar shell burst in front of him sending up a shower of grit. Tucking his chin in to avoid the dust from getting in his eyes, Charlie continued, the ground beneath his feet shaking as missiles crashed to the ground.

However, just as he had nearly reached his destination, something flashed in the sky. Charlie looked up to see a dart of light streaking across the dusty plan. The missile hit an armoured tank just fifty yards away, destroying it as if it were a child's toy.

A combination of hot sand and spent sulphate blasted Charlie in the face as distorted curls of metal, like giant hornets scorching the air, whizzed past him.

Something thumped into Charlie's left shoulder, spinning him around. He tried to get his balance but pain like a burning javelin cut through him. Gasping, he stumbled forward and then the world turned black.

'Does that hurt?' asked Major Frederick Willard, the senior officer in charge of the battalion's field hospital, as he prodded around the dressing on Charlie's left shoulder and chest.

'A little,' Charlie replied, through gritted teeth.

Looking over his half-rim spectacles, the consultant gave a grim smile. 'I'm not surprised. That bit of metal went through your shoulder muscles like an apple corer.'

It was just after two in the afternoon and three days since Charlie had been struck in the shoulder by flying shrapnel. Truthfully, he had very little recollection of the past seventy-two hours, thanks to the morphine he'd had pumped into him since the medic carried him from the battlefield. However, when the nurse arrived

carrying a loaded syringe an hour ago, he'd refused it, which after ten minutes of the major's poking and prodding, he was beginning to regret.

He was reclining on a narrow hospital bed in a long camouflaged, painted tent a few miles outside Algiers. Around him were a dozen or so other wounded soldiers swathed in bandages or staring blindly up at the canvas ceiling.

The sides of the ward were pegged down in a somewhat futile attempt to keep the flies out, so the temperature inside was hotter than the sun. Charlie, like most of the other patients, was lying on top of the prickly army blanket and wearing only his underpants.

'What about this?' asked the consultant, pressing on the ball of Charlie's shoulder.

'About the same,' Charlie replied, as a streak of pain shot down the inside of his arm.

Major Willard, a stout man wearing a white coat over his sand-coloured desert shirt and shorts, stepped back a few paces.

'Keeping it straight, raise your arm up,' he said, his eyes fixed on Charlie's shoulder.

Looking straight ahead at the tent pole opposite, Charlie clenched his teeth and raised his left arm a few inches before pain forced him to abandon the attempt.

'Not bad,' said Major Willard. 'Not bad.'

The flaps of the tent at the far end opened and a red-headed Queen Alexandra nurse, dressed in battle fatigues like the doctor, came in carrying a large buff folder.

She spotted the major and hurried towards him.

'The X-rays you asked for, sir,' she said.

'Thank you, nurse,' he replied, taking them from her.

Her eyes flickered over Charlie's chest. She gave him a shy smile and fled the tent.

Pulling the large black negatives from the folder, Major Willard held them up to the square of ventilation mesh above his head.

'Benghazi, wasn't it?' asked the consultant, as he studied the X-ray plates. 'Where you copped a lump of metal in your shoulder.' Charlie nodded.

'Jerry put up a stiff resistance, so I hear,' said the consultant without looking around.

'You could say that,' Charlie replied, as the memory of the SS 3rd Panzer division's sudden onslaught flitted through his mind.

Major Willard lowered the X-rays and then shoved them back in the file.

'What's the verdict, sir?' asked Charlie.

'To be frank with you, Mr Brogan, you're lucky to be alive. If that lump of metal had gone in two inches lower, it would have gone straight through your heart.'

'But it is healing?' said Charlie.

'Indeed it is.' The consultant's substantial eyebrows rose. 'Surprisingly well, too. However, it will be some time before you are fit to return to active duty so we've decided to ship you home to recuperate.'

'How long for?'

'With an injury like that I don't see you being fit for front-line soldiering until the end of the summer,' Major Willard replied. 'You'll have a few weeks in an army hospital to rebuild the muscles and give those bones time to start knitting together and then you can go home to recover fully.'

'Home!' said Charlie. 'You mean to my family?'

'Yes,' said Major Willard.

The major's gaze flickered to the photo of Stella and Patrick propped up on the locker. Charlie's gun crew had sent it to the hospital along with his personal effects and one of the nurses had kindly set it on the locker beside him while he'd been unconscious.

'We've sent a telegram to your wife telling her of your injury and that you'll be returning to Blighty.' His bushy moustache lifted as he smiled. 'I'm sure she'll soon have you fighting fit again.'

Charlie grinned.

'I'm sure she will.' He saluted. 'Thank you, sir.'

Major Willard returned the salute, then moved on to the next bed.

Charlie lay back on the pillow until the pain from his poked and prodded shoulder subsided a little, then he turned his head and studied the photo of his wife and son.

Tears pinched the corners of Charlie's eyes. Thanks to a flying tank fragment, not only could he look forward to enjoying Stella's warm welcome home but, more importantly, he would soon be able to hold his son for the first time.