

ELLINE IRVING

Billie Templar's
WAR

For Queen.
For Country. For Dad.



Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six Chapter Twenty-Seven

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Ellie Irving](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

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About the Book

Dear Your Majesty,

My name is Billie Templar. I am eleven years old. I live in Merchant Stanton which is all right, but it's not as nice as Buckingham Palace, I bet. Anyway, I know you're really busy, what with being Queen, and all the tiaras and jewels and dogs you have, but I have a favour to ask you.

Please can you send my dad home from the war? He's been out there for the last eleven weeks. His best friend got blown up today, and I don't want him to get hurt, so please can you excuse him from the fighting?

Billie

ELITE IRVING

RHCP DIGITAL

For all the Billies with family in the Armed Forces.



CHAPTER ONE

DON'T YOU JUST hate it when you get into a fight, and it's really not your fault, but nobody believes you, and your auntie sits in the headmaster's office glowering after he called her when she was in the middle of getting her hair dyed because she *hates* being a redhead even though the brilliant companion in *Doctor Who*'s ginger? And here I am, trying to tell Mr Law that I didn't start it, but he's not bothered. In fact, he's fuming. There's a little vein bulging out of his neck.

'Now, listen here, Billie,' he says, and his eyebrows knit together like they've been superglued. Actually, they might have been - I've never seen Mr Law look at me *without* his eyebrows knitted together. 'This is the third scrape you've got into this term. And while I do appreciate your home situation is' - he looks across at Kirsty as he searches for the word - '*challenging*, this fighting has simply got to stop.'

I look up from my scuffed school shoes. 'That's what I keep saying,' I cry, pleased that at last someone has started to pay attention. 'It's been going on for years, and even though the Coalition government have said troops will be withdrawn by—'

Mr Law raises a hand to stop me. 'Not *that* fighting, Billie. You.'

'Oh,' I say softly.

He picks up a folder with BILLIE TEMPLAR, 6H written on it. Great. My very own folder. Mr Law frowns as he thumbs through it. 'An incident involving Charlie Walters on the twenty-eighth of May—'

'He started it!' I blurt out, and the vein in Mr Law's neck looks like it's in a disco-dancing competition.

'On the eleventh of June,' he continues, ignoring me, 'Matilda Midgely suffered two grazed knees.'

'She started it!' I say, but Mr Law snaps shut the folder.

'And now this,' he thunders on. 'Of all the things to do. What were you thinking?'

I fold my arms. 'She started it!' I mumble.

'She's the midday supervisor!' Mr Law draws himself up to his full height and rubs his temples. His black hair's going a bit grey, even though he's younger than my dad. 'You've been uncharacteristically quiet,' he says to Kirsty.

Kirsty wrinkles her nose, and all the freckles join up to make one big patch. 'I don't know what you want me to say. There are only so many times I can tell her.'

Mr Law sits back down behind his desk and nods. 'I know. You're doing your best with her.'

'I am *here*, you know,' I say. Though when Mr Law fixes me with his piercing brown eyes, I wish I wasn't.

'What would your dad make of all this, Billie?' he asks softly. 'Arguing. Being abrasive to other children. Fighting for no reason.'

I swallow hard. He's only blinking gone and got me there. Mr Law knows my dad would be disappointed in me. *I* know Dad would be disappointed in me. And fighting's just top of the list why.

Mr Law lets out a long sigh. 'I guess it's detention then,' he says. 'Again. You can start this afternoon.'

Just as I'm thinking, *Well, isn't this marvellous? Isn't this just tickety-boo fan-tas-tic?* Kirsty pipes up.

'We've got an appointment this afternoon,' she says. 'Can it be Monday?'

Mr Law frowns.

‘Hope Springs,’ Kirsty adds.

He obviously knows what she’s going on about, because he nods and says, ‘Fine. Detention for the whole of next week.’ Then he looks as if he’s had an idea. ‘On second thoughts,’ he continues, ‘I know the manager. I’ll give him a ring, see if Billie can help out while she’s there.’

‘Oi!’ I protest. ‘While I’m where?’

‘Billie,’ Kirsty snaps, ‘mind your manners.’

‘Exactly,’ Mr Law says. ‘Hopefully she’ll pick up manners. And patience. And she’ll learn to respect others.’ His face brightens as he thinks of something else. ‘She can make tea and chat to the residents – that sort of thing. And if it is a’ – he looks to Kirsty again – ‘permanent arrangement, the residents could be a wonderful influence on her. She could help out more often.’

Residents? Where’s he sending me? Oh God. They call *prisoners* ‘residents’ these days. I saw it on *Look North*.

‘Please don’t put me in jail,’ I shout. ‘I can’t go in the clink!’

Mr Law and Kirsty look at me in surprise for a moment. And then they both burst out laughing, though Mr Law tries really hard to turn his laugh into a cough.

‘Seriously,’ I say, ‘I won’t fight any more, I promise.’ I’m desperate. Then I remember what they always say on *EastEnders*. ‘I’m not going down!’ I cry. ‘It was just one little scuffle. You can’t make me do time for that.’

Mr Law exchanges a glance with Kirsty. ‘It’s a nursing home,’ he says.

‘What? For old people?’ I say, surprised. ‘You want me to hang out with a load of old people?’

Mr Law nods.

‘But old people are odd,’ I say, ‘and they forget things all the time, and they need help getting out of their chair, and they fart and pretend it was the dog, which Nana May’s always doing, even though we haven’t *got* a dog, and they

say things like: *It'll never happen in a month of Sundays*, which just goes to show how odd they all are, because there's no month that is full of Sundays, and—'

Mr Law glowers at me again, so I shut up. 'The Board of Governors are always telling me I should do more to encourage pupils to get involved in our community,' he says. 'So here goes. You need to realize that there's more to life than fighting, Billie.'

I start trying to tell him about the war again, but Mr Law holds up his hand to stop me. 'I mean,' he says, 'you have to learn to be a team player.'

I frown at him, but he just says, 'Help out at Hope Springs today, or it's detention for a whole month' – he laughs – 'Sundays or otherwise.'

'You just said a week!' I cry.

'Take it or leave it,' he says matter-of-factly.

I look to Kirsty, but she just shrugs at me, being her usual unhelpful self.

'Fine,' I sigh. But then I think of something else. 'Wait – why are we going to Hope Springs anyway? Is it to do with Nana May?'

Mr Law gets up and ushers me and Kirsty out of his office. 'I'll let your aunt explain.'

*

The talk with Mr Law means I'm late back to class after lunch, and everyone turns to stare as I walk over to my seat. Andy Nelson gives me this smirk, like he knows I got into trouble. Everyone knows. It didn't help that Mrs English, the midday supervisor whose shin accidentally got caught on my foot, shouted, 'They may as well make you a plaque for that seat, you've sat on it so many times,' as Mrs Hussein bundled me off to sit outside Mr Law's office.

Mrs Hussein looks up from her desk in the corner of the classroom. 'It's Golden Hour, Billie,' she says. 'You can

work on your project if you like.'

Golden Hour's all right for everyone else. They can paint or finish their project work, as Mrs Hussein puts classical music on the radio, and lets us do whatever we want while she catches up on her marking. But I use the time to write to my dad, and all the lying and making stuff up is exhausting.

I sit down at my desk, and take out the letter I've been working on for the last couple of days.

Dear Dad,

Lots of news to report this time. I had tea at Linda's last night, and I taught Fur Ball a new trick with some wool. She can now jump three metres in the air, which is brilliant!

I'm thinking of going on 'Britain's Got Talent' - we'd be the only eleven-year-old-girl-and-six-year-old-cat combo, I bet.

I hope everything is OK. You said that it was especially hot out there last month, so I hope you remember to put extra sun cream on, otherwise you'll get as burned as the time we went to Great Yarmouth, when Mark and I buried you in the sand and forgot to put sun cream on you, and your back went all blistery and you couldn't move for a week. Remember? When Mum was there.

I pick up my pen and cross out that last bit. Dad doesn't like me talking about Mum. No one does, really, and I don't want to upset him. He's got more than enough on his mind, what with trying to stay alive and not get shot and all.

I try and think of something else exciting to say, because I really want to cheer him up. Trouble is, nothing exciting happens to me, and it's probably best not to mention the midday supervisor. But I'm sure Dad doesn't want to hear

about stuff like Fur Ball, because it's pretty boring, actually. I want to give him something worth fighting for.

Before I can start thinking of new tall tales to tell, there's a cry from the next table, and the entire contents of Sarah Knowles's pencil case scatter to the floor.

Sarah ducks down and starts picking up crayons and pencils. They're all chewed and most of them are broken. Andy Nelson looks over at his mate Sabrina Mitchell and the pair of them hold their noses and go, 'Eeeeeewwwwww!' The rest of blue table giggle - but quietly, so Mrs Hussein doesn't hear over the violins blaring from the radio.

Sarah's scraggly mousy hair covers her face, but I can see she's gone bright red. Her hands are shaking.

'Wet yourself again?' Andy taunts her, and everyone laughs as he and Sabrina wave their hands under their noses to waft away the smell of wee.

I don't say anything, but I go over to help Sarah. I have to bite my lip to stop my eyes from watering, because Sarah Knowles really *does* smell a bit.

Sarah looks at me dead gratefully as I pick everything up. 'Thanks,' she mutters. I shrug my shoulders. It's not Sarah's fault she only has one school uniform. It's her mum and dad's job to buy and wash her clothes, isn't it? Kirsty may not be my mum, because I haven't got one any more, but at least she knows how to use a washing machine.

I go back to my seat and Mrs Hussein switches off the radio and claps her hands. 'Right, everyone,' she says, and moves to the front of the class. 'This year's carnival . . .'

Everyone stops what they're doing and practically runs to sit on the carpet in front of her. 'What day's the race, miss?' Sabrina Mitchell asks.

'The last day of the summer term is Tuesday the seventeenth of July,' Mrs Hussein replies. 'The race will take place the Saturday that week and the king chosen then. The carnival will be the day after, Sunday the twenty-

second. Which gives you plenty of time to work on your carnival costumes.'

I stick my hand in the air. Mrs Hussein glances at me, then quickly looks away.

Sabrina Mitchell pipes up again. 'My dad's started going to the gym. He's determined to win the race.'

I waggle my hand around. 'Uh, miss,' I say.

'He'll have to beat mine,' Andy Nelson tells her. 'And there's no way he'll do that.'

I stand up to try and get Mrs Hussein's attention. 'Mrs Hussein,' I say loudly.

She turns to me. 'Sit down, Billie,' she says, 'and stop mithering me.'

'But—'

'Sit down,' she says sharply.

I can't believe it. Why is she being so mean? And why are we even having a conversation about who will win the race?

'Yeah, sit down, Billie,' Andy sneers at me. 'It's got nothing to do with you.'

'What are you talking about?' I hiss as I sit down on the carpet again.

'Billie Templar,' Mrs Hussein cuts in. 'I've told you to be quiet. Do you want to go back to Mr Law's office?'

I shake my head, but my cheeks are going red. 'No, miss, it's just—'

Mrs Hussein interrupts me again. 'Billie,' she says, but her voice is softer this time, 'that's enough.'

She turns to the rest of the class. 'You'll need to pass the information on to your fathers, and then get practising. Only one of them can be crowned Merchant Stanton's carnival king.'

I've had enough of this. What's a person got to do to get a word in edgeways round here? 'Well, we all know who that'll be!' I yell.

The whole class turns to stare at me. Mrs Hussein readjusts her headscarf. 'And who's that, Billie?'

I look at her like she's lost her mind. 'My dad, obviously.'

Next to me, Andy Nelson laughs. 'You're such an idiot,' he whispers so Mrs Hussein can't hear.

'We'll be needing a new king this year, Billie,' Mrs Hussein says quietly.

'Why on earth would we?' I reply. Ever since Dad got a new army post and we moved to Merchant Stanton we've won the father-and-child three-legged race. Meaning my dad, Don Templar, the fastest, bestest racer in the world, gets to be the carnival king.

I fold my arms across my chest. 'Dad and me have won the last four years in a row,' I say firmly. 'I don't know why anyone else bothers to turn up, to be honest.'

This time, the whole class laughs at me. My cheeks get hot again. 'What?' I say, though I'm practically yelling, I'm so annoyed at everyone. 'What *possible* reason would there be for us not to win this year? Hey? Anyone?'

Mrs Hussein clears her throat. 'Your dad's not here, Billie.' She gives me this look, almost like pity. 'He's not coming back for the carnival.'

Everyone shuts up at that.

I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. Mrs Hussein ploughs on. 'He's off fighting for Queen and Country,' she says. 'He's a very brave man, and our thoughts are with him, and all the troops.'

She goes back to talking about fancy dress again, but I'm not really listening. My mind's whirring.

'Not home for the carnival?' I say eventually. The thought had never even crossed my mind.

Mrs Hussein stops talking and looks straight at me. She shakes her head. 'No, love,' she says. 'Your dad's on tour for a few more months yet. You know that.' She turns to the rest of the class. 'Now, homework for the weekend . . .'

Before I can say anything else, the smell of wee drifts under my nose. 'If it's any consolation, my dad's not entering the race this year, either,' Sarah Knowles whispers to me. It isn't.

Just then the bell rings, and everyone scrambles to their feet and runs to get their coats and bags.

As Mrs Hussein shouts out something about spellings, I slowly stand up and walk back to my desk. Before I know it, I'm the only one left in the classroom. 6H are a speedy lot, that's for sure.

'Billie?' Mrs Hussein says, looking up from her desk, where she's packing her things away. 'Come on, it's home time.'

I bite my lip. I knew Dad was going away for a long time, but I just thought . . . I mean, it's the carnival. He's *always* here for the carnival. We've never not done it before. 'I forgot he wasn't coming back,' I murmur. 'Do you think he *could* come back, just for this?'

A car horn honks in the car park, and Mrs Hussein gestures for me to pick up my things. She holds the door open and ushers me outside, stepping out after me. 'I don't think so, love,' she says, shutting the door. 'I'm sorry.' And she strides off into the car park.

Fat lot of good 'I'm sorry' is. Where does 'I'm sorry' ever get you?

'Dad's *always* the carnival king,' I whisper.

But there's nobody left to hear me.



CHAPTER TWO

I'M STANDING OUTSIDE Hope Springs Retirement Home with Kirsty and Nana May, because this, Kirsty told me, is going to be Nana May's new home. She's a bit of a handful, is my nan. She's dead funny – even when she doesn't mean to be. She's comes out with things like, *Turn your tripod off when I'm talking to you*, when I'm listening to music. She's been living in the little bit at the side of our house that used to be the garage – until Dad put in a washbasin and a handrail so Nana May didn't have to use the stairs – but things have changed since he went away. A couple of weeks ago, Kirsty got a call in the middle of the night because Nana May had been found dressed in her bathing costume and slippers, dancing on top of the old Second World War tank Mr Clewson bought on eBay and keeps in his front garden. Now everyone thinks it's Best All Round if she comes to live here.

Hope Springs doesn't look as nice as its name suggests – at least, not from the outside. One of the front gates is off its hinges, and the patch of lawn beside the concrete drive has gone all yellow. There's an apple tree, but its branches are withered and leafless. The care home's three storeys high and has a little attic room at the top. I count one, two, three, four boarded-up windows, and the green paint on the front porch is peeling. It looks like a run-down B&B.

Kirsty's still mad at me, and as she leads Nana May up the front steps I skulk behind. We walk through the porch and then the front door, and Kirsty heads towards reception. Me and Nana May hang back.

'Nana May?' I ask as soon as Kirsty's out of earshot. 'Do you know if Dad can come back before his tour's over?'

'What's that, love?' Nana May replies. She doesn't look at me; her eyes are sweeping over the drab carpet and gloomy corridor, trying to make out what's going on.

'Dad,' I say. 'Is he coming back for the end of term, do you know?'

'Do you know . . .' Nana May repeats slowly, and I lean forward in anticipation. 'Burton's haven't had sticky toffee pudding on their menu for ages,' she finishes eventually.

I let out a sigh. 'Have they not?' I ask – but I've got other things to worry about than the local café's line in desserts.

Kirsty heads back towards us, accompanied by a tall man in a sharp suit. He shakes our hands enthusiastically. 'Welcome, welcome,' he says. 'My name's Brian Stephens. I'll be giving you the grand tour this afternoon.' He frowns as he looks around. I follow his gaze to the peeling paint on the wall. 'We're waiting to hear from the council about a grant.' He smiles, almost apologetically.

Nana May just beams at him. I'm not entirely convinced she knows what's going on. She's probably still thinking about pudding.

Mr Stephens looks at me and narrows his eyes a little. 'It's Billie, isn't it? I've had a phone call from Mr Law.'

I don't like the sound of this.

'Why don't you head in there and ask for Derek while I show your nan and aunt around?' He jerks his thumb to a door off the corridor. 'You're just in time for supper.'

I check my watch. It's ten past four.

Kirsty nods at me. 'Come on, Mum.' She and Nana May start the grand tour while I trudge off along the corridor.

Call me crazy, but standing in a dining room watching old people try and eat their tea while one old man bangs on about Hitler and another keeps taking his false teeth out and leaving them in the gravy boat is *not* my idea of fun. Especially when you've just been told your nan's moving in because she's a danger to herself, and your dad's not coming home for the Merchant Stanton Carnival.

I go round pouring tea into everyone's mug. There's an empty space at the far corner of the dining table. 'Shall I do this one?' I ask Derek, the head carer, holding the teapot over the mug.

He looks over, but before he can answer, everyone starts giggling. 'You're having a laugh, aren't you?' the old man with the false teeth cries. Though because they're currently floating in the gravy, it's more like, 'Yoravinalaffrntyoo?'

An old woman with hair as red as Kirsty's pipes up next to him. 'The Lord of the Manor never deigns to eat with us,' she trills.

Derek frowns at her. 'Mr Featherstone always takes his tea in his room,' he explains.

I shrug my shoulders. 'Shall I take it to him, then?'

Everyone bursts out laughing again. Honestly, it's like a blinking sitcom round here. An unfunny, boring, smelly sitcom.

'He never has visitors,' the old woman whispers. 'Thinks he's above it.'

'Literally,' the old man next to her cackles. 'He's on the top floor.'

The teapot's practically empty so I wander into the little kitchen to refill it. A young nurse is in there, buttering a bread roll. She puts it on a tray, along with a slice of quiche and a bowl of salad. She picks up the tray and heads out of the kitchen. I shove the teapot on the counter and follow. 'Is that for Mr Featherstone?' I ask.

She nods and carries on down the corridor.

'Derek asked me to take it up to him.'

The nurse looks at me in surprise. 'Are you sure? Mr F wouldn't want that.'

I shrug. I don't *quite* know why I'm doing this, but I'm curious, like. I want to see who Nana May's going to be living with. I reach out to take the tray, but the nurse hesitates. Just then, a tinkling sound comes from round the corner and she looks at me in horror. 'Mr McIntyre!' she cries. She shoves the tray at me and races off. 'Not again!' she yells, rounding the corner.

Framed pictures of countryside scenes hang on the walls up the stairs as I make for the little attic room at the top. My stomach growls and I try not to look at the bread roll. It's practically calling out to me. I knock on the door.

'Leave it outside,' Mr Featherstone grunts after a moment.

And to think Mr Law wanted me to learn manners.

I slowly open the door and peek inside. An old man, smartly dressed in grey jumper and beige slacks, sits on the single bed, staring down at a blue envelope and a little black comb in his lap. I don't reckon Mr Featherstone's used the comb though, because he's got shockingly messy hair. It's white and sticks out, a bit like the picture I once saw of Albert Einstein. Maybe this Mr Featherstone's a mad scientist too.

'What part of "Leave it outside—"?' Mr Featherstone starts – but he stops when he sees me. 'Who are you? Are you . . . *visiting*?'

'Something like that,' I reply. I walk into the room and have to duck because the roof slants on one side. It's got a skylight, and there's a little window looking onto the front lawn. I plonk the tray down on the chest of drawers beside the bed.

Mr Featherstone just grunts at me. 'You can go now,' he mutters.

I guess the others were right about him. 'You're welcome,' I say, not without sarcasm. Honestly, I reckon Mr

Law needs to come and see this for himself. I turn to leave, but then I spot a framed black-and-white photo above the little washbasin in the corner of the room. 'That's a Supermarine Spitfire,' I blurt out before I can stop myself. I lean in for a closer look at the aeroplane. 'It was designed by R. J. Mitchell and first flown in nineteen thirty-five.' I know this because Dad told me. There's a framed picture of the same plane on the wall of *his* bedroom - Grandad Templar was in the RAF but Dad didn't fancy flying, so joined the army instead, and I'm always getting him to tell me about it. At least, I did when he was here.

'Nineteen thirty-six,' Mr Featherstone corrects me.

I turn round and see that he's peering at me in surprise. 'You sure?' I ask.

He nods. 'I was around then,' he replies. 'Were you?' His grey eyes twinkle a little and I realize he's making a joke.

I laugh. 'Yep,' I reply. 'I just look good for my age.'

Mr Featherstone opens his mouth to say something, but then my stomach gives an unearthly growl. I clutch it and try to stop staring at the tea tray. He raises his bushy white eyebrows at me. 'Hungry, are we, lass?'

I nod and feel my cheeks go red, 'cos it's a bit embarrassing, like.

Mr Featherstone looks me over for a moment and then nods towards the tray. 'You can have the roll, if you like.'

As I grab the roll, I notice that the letter on his lap says AIRMAIL; the little black comb has gold letters running up the side spelling GRANDAD.

'Ta, guv'nor,' I say after I've wolfed the roll down practically in one. 'That's what they say on *EastEnders*,' I explain, seeing Mr Featherstone's confusion.

He frowns. 'You don't watch that rubbish, do you?'

'When Mark and Kirsty are out and I've got the house to myself, I sometimes watch the omnibus, even if I've seen all the episodes anyway,' I tell him.

Before Mr Featherstone can reply, Derek blunders into the room, wiping his hands on the trousers of his dark blue nurse's uniform. He starts when he sees me. 'Billie . . .?' He purses his lips. 'I'm so sorry, Mr F, I didn't know she was up here.' He narrows his eyes at me. 'Have you been eating his tea?' He's seen the crumbs round my mouth.

I turn to Mr Featherstone in panic.

He looks Derek over. 'I keep telling you not to call me Mr F,' he says after a moment.

Derek adjusts his glasses, distracted. 'It's a term of endearment,' he replies. 'You're Mr F in Room F.'

'It's disrespectful,' Mr Featherstone mutters. 'Even the Pope called me Mr *Featherstone*.'

It takes me a second to register what he's just said. Clearly he's less 'mad scientist', more just plain 'mad'.

But Derek calms down and sighs. 'Mr Stephens is looking for you,' he says to me, less angry with me now.

Mr Featherstone gives me a tight smile and I sneak out of the room.

Mr Stephens is in the corridor, his arm entwined with Nana May's. 'Your aunt had to go,' he says. 'She asked me to send you home when we were done.'

I remember that it's Friday and check my watch. 'Did she go to her Zumba class?' I ask.

Mr Stephens shrugs his shoulders. He hands me Nana May's arm. 'We've had a lovely look round, and I think she'll be very happy here.'

Will she now, I think. I pat Nana May's hand. It's dead wrinkly, with brown liver spots all over it. 'Come on, then,' I say softly. 'Home, sweet home.'

I walk with Nana May past Mr Marsh's farm, through Eddington fields and round the back streets of the Cobsworthy Estate. We play the cloud game 'cos the sky's so clear and blue. 'Look!' I point at a thin cloud scudding

by. It's shaped like a triangle, with two wisps on either side. 'An alien spaceship!'

Nana May smiles. 'Or a trampoline.' She doesn't quite get the game, even though, with this heat wave, we've been playing it practically all summer.

As we walk along the cobbles on Fairfield Lane, I notice something odd. There are loads of cars parked outside number seven. Tons. There are three on our driveway, and two parked up on the pavement.

And then my stomach turns over and my throat goes completely dry as one thought pops into my head.

Dad.

Something's happened to Dad.

I push Nana May up the drive, weave her between the cars and race to our front door. I fumble with the key in the lock, then burst through the door and into our front room.

Everyone turns to stare at me as I stand there, panting, trying to get my breath back.

Oh God. Kirsty's perched on the sofa, definitely *not* at her Zumba class. She's got her arm round Mandy. Mandy's married to Steve, Dad's best friend. Next to them on the sofa is Jade, their daughter. She's my age, but almost twice the size of me. Standing by the sofa next to them is Trish, who's going out with Ed, Dad's second best friend. And there are four other women watching the telly, all of them married to soldiers in Dad's regiment.

And they're all crying.

Oh God. Oh God. Dad's dead. That's it. He's only gone and been blown up.

Nana May heads into the front room as Kirsty gets up and comes towards me.

'What's going on?' I say – though, to be honest, I don't want to know the answer. Not if it's what I think it is.

Kirsty gives me this sad little smile as she says, 'There's been some bad news.'

'It's Dad, isn't it?' I blurt out.

Kirsty looks over her shoulder at Mandy, then back to me. 'It's Steve,' she whispers. 'There was a roadside bomb.'

'Is he dead?'

Kirsty shakes her head. 'No, but it's pretty bad. He's severely injured.'

'And Dad?' I say. There's a lump in my throat. I almost can't get the words out.

Kirsty strokes her hand over my messy ponytail. 'He's fine, sweetie,' she replies.

Relief floods through me in waves. He's fine. Dad's OK. But then Mandy starts crying again and I feel really bad. I like Steve. Every time he sees me he gives me a fireman's lift. Perhaps it's because he can't lift Jade any more.

'They called me when we were at Hope Springs,' Kirsty explains. 'I thought I'd get here before you came home. Was everything OK with Mum?'

I nod absent-mindedly and figure it best not to mention Mr Featherstone. Mandy takes a call on her mobile and goes off into the kitchen to talk. Jade trots along after her. The rest of the ladies huddle together and whisper so that Mandy can't hear.

'I just want my Ed to come home,' Trish sniffs, perched on the edge of the sofa. 'I've not slept for weeks, worrying.' Everyone nods in agreement. She thinks for a moment. 'And I need some shelves put up,' she adds.

'I can't work the DVD player,' someone whispers conspiratorially. 'I've been dying to watch *The Only Way Is Essex*.'

Trish raises her eyebrows in surprise. 'You can watch that on normal telly, you know.'

'I can?' the lady replies, and immediately looks brighter.

Everyone looks at the last woman in the group. She doesn't say anything.

'Lou?' Trish asks her. 'Why do you want your Pete home?'