

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Keep Safe For Me

Patricia Burns

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About the Author

Patricia Burns was born in Essex. After a variety of jobs, she decided to train as a teacher, which she combines with writing novels.

She is now happily single and lives in Essex with her three children, a cat and a delinquent tortoise. *Keep Safe For Me* is Patricia Burns's third novel. Her previous two, *Trinidad Street* and *Cinnamon Alley*, are also available in Arrow paperback.

ALSO BY PATRICIA BURNS

Trinidad Street
Cinnamon Alley

KEEP SAFE FOR ME

Patricia Burns



arrow books

To the Novel Group - a source of inspiration

1941

IT WAS ALWAYS the same thought that dominated their minds as they got near to the corner of Trinidad Street - will it still be there?

Rita Johnson hitched up her bundle of bedding and held on tighter to the handbag containing all the precious papers, the special photos and her one lipstick. She was not quite sure how she would feel if she found her home reduced to rubble. It was not as if she was happy there. Around her, the family were talking loudly, all of them trying to cover up their anxiety.

'Like the Ritz down the shelter now they got them bunks fixed up, ain't it?'

'I bet they don't have lice down the bleeding Ritz.'

'I wonder what it's been like down at Dagenham last night,' Rita said. Her children were there, with her sister Joan at their brother George's place.

'Let's hope they had a nice quiet one in their own beds,' her mother said.

Her mother-in-law fetched a great sigh.

'I wish I could have a night in my own bed.'

'Perhaps I'll fetch them back here again soon. It ain't as bad as it was, is it? Not like what it was back in the autumn,' Rita said. She knew it was an empty thought. She couldn't risk her children's lives here on the Isle of Dogs, and she did not want to drag them down the Underground every night.

'We're always going to get it bad here, ain't we?' her husband Ron said. 'Stands to reason, with the docks and

all. I don't know why you don't just take 'em back to the country again. You was safe there. Bleeding stupid, coming back here again.'

He was right, in a way. It was safe in the country. But Rita knew very well that wasn't the reason why he kept on about her evacuating with the children again. He just wanted them all out of his way.

'I'm not letting flaming Hitler drive me out of my home,' she said.

'That's right, ducky,' her mother agreed. 'He thought we was all going to run away, but we ain't.'

They were a scruffy little group, returning from their night in the Underground. They had all slept in their clothes and were crumpled and unwashed. They carried their bedding and bags of personal possessions and their gas-mask boxes dangled from their shoulders. Rita had fared the best since she had taken to wearing trousers, which suited her tall, slim figure. She had combed and pinned her fair hair into a fashionable style and pulled her beret on at a jaunty angle, but nothing could disguise the heavy eyes and pale face brought on by months of broken sleep. The two older women were a study in contrasts. Rita's mother Florrie was small and thin, her back straight and her mouth set in a line from refusing to give way to the many worries that beset her. Her mother-in-law Maisie lumbered along, her swollen feet in slippers, her shapeless body wobbling as she walked. Ron slouched in the rear of the party, hands in pockets. With his shoulders slumped, he was slightly shorter than Rita. Stubble sprouted from his cheeks and the difficulties with the water supply made the ideal excuse for him not to wash for days at a time.

'I wish I knew where our Lily's got to,' Florrie said for the hundredth time.

Rita sighed.

'Don't worry, Mum. She'll be safe somewhere. There's shelters near the dance hall, and that Jack Wilkinson

sounds like a nice bloke.'

'All her boyfriends sound like nice blokes till she goes and gives them the elbow. I just don't like her out when the raids are on. I like to know where everyone is.'

'I know, Mum. But you can't expect a young girl like her to stay in every night.'

It was a family argument that went on and on. Rita took her sister's side, but envied her. How lucky Lily was to be young and free, bouncing from one boyfriend to another. At her age, Rita was already married.

They made a detour round a huge crater in the West Ferry Road. Three shops had been reduced to rubble, unsafe buildings all around were roped off and a cloud of brick dust still hung in the air with the smell of gas and drains and burning. They were so used to it now that they were no longer shocked by the devastation. They asked after the people who had lived there. A whole family killed, they were told. Refused to go down the shelter. The three women shook their heads in sympathy. Ron just shrugged.

'Bleeding stupid, then, weren't they? Asking for it.'

Rita rounded on him.

'It's you that's stupid. Nobody asks to be bombed, do they? We didn't start this war. We're just getting it all.'

But inside her a small guilty thought had taken root. This was just round the corner from Trinidad Street. If a bomb had dropped here, perhaps they would be all right.

'I ain't got time to stand round here arguing. I got to get to work,' Ron said.

'You ain't the only one,' Rita told him.

Ron threw her a venomous look. He hated her being out at work. With her own money, Rita had escaped from his total control.

On the dirty brick wall of the corner building the street sign remained, Trinidad Street. Home. Now for it. Rita looked at her mum's tense face and repeated the prayer that always rose in her heart at this moment. *Please God,*

don't let it be Dad or the shop. You can take my place, God, but keep Dad safe for Mum. She held her mum's arm as they turned the corner.

They all stopped dead. There was glass and roofing slates all over the road and thick black smoke drifting in the cold wind. A crowd had gathered to assess the damage. Rita's eyes strained to see the far end of the street, where her parents' corner shop stood. At first she could not make it out, then the smoke drifted and there it was, still intact. Her heart calmed a little. Behind her, Maisie let out a wail.

'My house! What's happened to my house?'

It was only then that Rita realised that the section of terrace that she and Ron shared with his mother was wrecked. It was still standing, but the front door sagged open on one hinge, the tattered remains of the blackout curtains flapped at the broken windows and bits of china and furniture lay scattered about the street. With a cry, Maisie started forward, rolling as she trotted towards her home. Rita and Florrie swooped one either side of her, took her arms, tried to reassure her.

'It's still there, dearie. It ain't a hole in the ground.'

'It mightn't be as bad as it looks. We can soon clean it up. Everyone'll help.'

A figure detached itself from the crowd in the street and came towards them, a thin man in an ARP uniform, covered in dirt.

'Dad!'

'Jim - oh thank God!'

Jim Croft gave his wife a brief hug. His face was grey with fatigue, the lines on it etched in grime.

'It's all right, me old girl, I'm still in one piece.'

'My house,' Maisie sobbed. Fat tears ran down her cheeks. She made to break away from Rita and Florrie.

Jim laid a restraining hand on her arm.

'I'm sorry, Maisie, but you can't go in. It ain't safe. The gas has gone and it might fall down at any minute.'

'But it's my home! Me and my Will moved in there just before the last war. My Ron was born there -'

'It's for your own safety, Maisie. There's a flaming great bomb landed just over the back and there's a big hole where your privy used to be. The whole back wall might fall into it.'

'But my things - all my things are in there -'

'They're only things, Maisie. Them Bateses was under the stairs. They're digging them out now.'

Rita stared in the direction of the house at the back of theirs. The neighbours there swore by their little den, retreating there every night while others made the trek to the Underground or the public shelters. It was fine when other places went down, but it couldn't have protected them from a direct hit.

'Dad's right,' she said. 'We're all still alive, ain't we?'

But Maisie seemed not to hear.

Gazing over her mother-in-law's shaking shoulders to the house in which she had spent all of her married life, Rita expected to be feeling shock or loss or anger. She had seen enough people return to their bombed-out homes to know how most of them reacted. But for her there was only relief. At last, something had happened that might change things between her and Ron. That was what she had hoped at the beginning of the war. She had been evacuated with the children in the first rush, on top of the world at leaving him behind in London, but then the bombs had not come and her mother had missed her terribly so she came back, only to find that her marriage was still as phoney as the war seemed to be. Then she had got a job in a factory making parts for submarines and loved that, despite the long hours and the grinding boredom. The money gave her economic freedom for the first time in five years, but Ron resented that and took it out on her. Now they were living with almost nightly bomb raids and at least down the public shelter Ron couldn't touch her, but that made him even

more bad tempered, so still things went on the same between them. But now - now they no longer had a home. Now something had to change.

'What am I going to do?' Maisie was sobbing. 'Where am I going to go?'

The other families who had been made homeless commiserated with her, but pointed out that at least they were still here to tell the tale, unlike the Bateses. The neighbours were gathering round with offers of help, while the kids that still remained at home capered about smashing the glass into still smaller pieces and looking for shrapnel. All the people whom Maisie had grown up with - the Turners, the Johnsons, the Crofts and the O'Donoghues - were there with sympathy and practical suggestions.

'You better come and stop with us, Maisie. We still got room.'

'Come and have breakfast with us, love. Make you feel more the thing. Can't do you anything cooked, but we got bread and a bit of ham.'

'I got some clothes might do for you. They ain't what you might call fashionable but they'll serve you a turn.'

Someone even managed to conjure up a cup of sweet tea.

'They still got the gas on down my daughter's street. She done me a thermos.'

One of Maisie's daughters-in-law appeared.

'I just heard the news. Ain't it a terrible sight? Breaks your heart, don't it? Now, you come and stop with me and Bert, Mum. Best thing to do. What with the kids away and all, we got a spare room. Make you comfy as anything.' She stopped and looked at Rita and Ron, indecision creasing her face. 'You're welcome to come and all,' she said, rather less convincingly. 'We got a put-u-up in the front, if you don't mind that.'

'Thanks,' Rita said, equally half-hearted. A put-u-up in a relative's house could only be a change for the worse.

'They'll come to us,' Florrie said, in a voice that stood for no argument.

It was no less than Rita expected, but still she was relieved. She turned to Ron.

'Of course, if you want to go and stay at Bert's with your mum -' she said hopefully.

But it was no use. Ron disliked his big brother, who regarded him as the spoilt baby of the family and was always on at him to be a man and join up. Even staying with Rita's family was preferable to that.

People were beginning to disperse, taking the newly homeless with them, beginning to cope with the problems of the new day.

'Where's the nearest standpipe, Jim? There's all this bleeding mess to clear up.'

'I got some full buckets in my kitchen, dearie, I'll bring 'em along your place.'

'God, I'd kill for a cuppa.'

'Mobile canteen's turned up over the back. They got tea and cheese rolls.'

'I got to go and see if them poor Bateses is out yet. They might of made it, you never know.'

'How long till we know when we can go back in the house, Jim? It don't look too bad. There's all sorts of things I want to get out.'

The full meaning of the situation suddenly came home to Rita. Until she could find out if anything could be salvaged, all she had left in the world was a bedroll, a handbag and what she stood up in.

'My soap!' she cried. 'I got a whole new bar of Gardenia soap in there. I'm filthy and I stink and I can't get my soap.'

'Bleeding hell, if you're going to start snivelling I'm off. I'll get something at the mobile canteen,' Ron said, and sloped off up the street, hands in pockets.

'Huh. Going without a wash never did bother him,' Rita said.

'Come on, dear,' Florrie said. 'I've got some soap and some water, and I'm sure our Lil will lend you something to change into - oh!' She stopped and clapped a hand to her face. 'Lily! I only went and forgot about her with all this going on. Jim - has our Lily come home yet?'

Jim patted her on the shoulder.

'Now then, old girl. She'll be back, right as ninepence, don't you worry.'

Florrie shook her head.

'I don't know - I don't think I'll ever get used to it. There's Joan and all the kiddies down at Dagenham and Lily out I don't know where and you on ARP duty in the middle of it all. I can stand the bombs and the shelters and all, but I do like to know where we all are. If we're going to go, we ought to all go together. If it weren't for Rita here, I don't know what I'd do.'

Rita gave her a hug.

'Well, there you are. Mum, I'm coming back to live with you proper now.'

She looked down the little street she had lived in all her life, except for the brief evacuation. It had never been much of a place, Trinidad Street. Just two rows of two-up, two-down houses letting straight on to the pavement, with a break two-thirds down where Cinnamon Alley led to some warehouses. It had been an ugly enough place before the war, built of yellow brick that had blackened over the years and overhung with the filth and fumes of the myriad factories, foundries and processing works around it. Now it looked far worse. The first terrifying night of the Blitz had brought down half the houses on the north side. Four whole families whom Jim had not been able to persuade to take shelter had been killed. Over the months since then, many more homes had, like Rita's, become uninhabitable and Cinnamon Alley obliterated. Even so, the street had been lucky compared with others on the Isle of Dogs. Whole terraces had been bombed flat or gutted by fire. And yet

the people were still there. Of those who had not been killed or injured, some had taken flight and gone to seek safety elsewhere. Many more had dispatched their children back to the country again. But in Trinidad Street, nearly half the original inhabitants remained, defying the bombs and getting on with their daily lives as best they could.

Beside Rita, her mother was also surveying the destruction.

'Blimey, if I was a man I'd join the RAF and go and give it back to that Hitler.'

There was such venom in her voice that it made Rita uneasy. She tried to turn it into a joke.

'If you got in one of them bombers, Mum, he'd run for his life.'

'I mean it and all,' her mother insisted. 'If he thinks he's softening us up, he's got another think coming, 'cause we ain't soft. And if he thinks he's going to come up the flaming Thames and invade London, well, just let him try, that's what I say, 'cause I'd like to have a go at him, killing people like this and smashing up their homes.'

She said it with such total conviction that Rita knew it was true. Her mother, a thin middle-aged woman, worn from childbirth and constant work, would stand up and defend her loved ones with her own bare hands.

'He won't beat us, Mum. Not any of us,' she said. 'Come on, I got to get to work. I'm late already.'

They were just turning away when there was a call from the far end of the street.

'Coo-ee! Mum! I'm back!'

'Lily -' Florrie pressed a hand to her heart. 'Lily - thank God - she's back.'

But Rita hardly noticed her sister as she came tripping through the rubble in her high-heeled dancing shoes. Her eyes were fastened on the man whose arm Lily clung to, a tall young man in an RAF bomber jacket. She was suddenly

very conscious of her appearance, creased and dirty and still in her shelter outfit.

Lily hurried forward and gave her mother a hug and a kiss. Her eyes were bright and her face glowing.

'Oh Mum - now don't you be cross, because I couldn't of got back, honest I couldn't. Oh - it was dreadful over Poplar, weren't it, Jack? Oh, by the way, this is Jack Wilkinson. He's a navigator on the bombers.' This was said with palpable pride. RAF men were very sought after as boyfriends, and those who actually flew even more so. Lily had caught herself a real prize.

RITA AND LILY looked at their mother. Florrie was normally deeply suspicious of all Lily's boyfriends as a matter of course, and this one had been out all night with her, even though there was the good excuse that there had been a raid on.

'Morning,' she said pointedly, looking the newcomer up and down.

Jack Wilkinson was not intimidated.

'Pleased to meet you, Mrs Croft.'

Rita was surprised. From his voice, it was obvious that he was a local man, yet she had to look up to study his face as he spoke to her mother. It was not often that she met a man who was nearly a head taller than she was, not round this area. There was something faintly foreign, too, about his dark colouring and the set of his features. And he had a charming smile, which he now had trained on Florrie.

'I hope you won't be too hard on Lily, Mrs Croft. I didn't think you'd want me to try to take her home through the raid.'

Florrie held out against him.

'Yeah, well, time was when me and her dad said she had to be back home by half-past ten. That was before the war, of course. Decent girls was in by half-past ten then, and no argument.'

'Things was different then,' Jack Wilkinson pointed out.

Florrie pursed her lips.

'No reason for standards to slip. But I suppose if there was a raid on you didn't have no choice. Mind you, when

the raids first started I said she had to stay with us every night and not go gallivanting out.'

'We was in a public shelter with a couple of hundred other people,' Jack said, with a persuasive smile.

'Yeah well -' To everyone's amazement, Florrie suddenly gave way. 'I suppose you're only young once.'

Rita heard Lily's suppressed gasp. Being allowed out was the biggest battle in her life, causing endless family arguments, yet here was her mother actually seeing it her way.

Jack Wilkinson, unaware of the great concession that had just been made, was making a joke about it being war work, entertaining men like him on leave. Florrie took it seriously.

'I don't mind so much if she's with someone like you. You look like you'd look after her proper. And you're on the bombers and all.'

She suddenly held out her hand, which Jack clasped.

'It's a pleasure to meet someone what's giving it back to them, Jack. That's what keeps us all going, knowing what they're going through and all. How about coming back for a cuppa? I'll send one of them kids round the canteen for some.'

'That'd be lovely, Mrs Croft. Thanks.'

Lily glowed with triumph. At this rate, she was going to be allowed out with her new conquest as often as she wanted.

Jack turned to Rita.

'And you must be Lily's sister.'

From being a bystander in the conversation, Rita suddenly found herself at its centre. She looked up to find the brown eyes focused on her, and was horribly conscious of her scruffy, unwashed state.

'That's Rita,' she heard Lily explain.

'Pleased to meet you, Rita.'

She found that she was shaking his hand, that his clasp was strong and warm. She tried to smile naturally, to say something bright and clever, but instead found herself grinning like an idiot and nothing at all coming out of her dry throat. After what felt like an age, she managed to croak, 'Me too.' Somewhere far away, she could vaguely hear her mother saying something about her having been bombed out.

'That's terrible for you,' Jack said. He sounded genuinely sympathetic. Lily was babbling away, saying how awful it was and how sorry she felt, but Jack was not listening to her. His attention was entirely on Rita. 'Is there anything I can do?'

With absolute certainty, she knew that if anyone could do anything, then he could. She thought of poor Maisie. She was not over-fond of her mother-in-law, but Maisie had been devastated by the loss of her home.

'There must still be some things that can be rescued, but my dad says it's not safe to go in,' she explained.

'Where is it?' Jack asked.

Rita nodded towards her house.

'That one.'

'Don't look too bad to me. Let's have a recce.'

'Oh no!' Fear made her lay her hand on his arm. 'You mustn't. It's dangerous. They're only things, after all. We're still alive, that's the main thing.'

Lily chimed in, holding tight to his other arm, begging him not to be silly, but Jack just laughed.

'Get away with you! Anyone'd think there was a machine-gun nest inside there. If I don't go in, someone else will, and there'll be nothing left to rescue then.'

'There ain't no looters in our street,' Florrie declared.

'Maybe not, Mrs Croft, but there's plenty ready to come in from elsewhere. They sniff out a likely place and they're in before you know it. It's happened in my mum and dad's

street. I'll have a look round now, before they have time to arrive.'

'I'll come too,' Rita said.

This sparked off a new round of argument, but Rita insisted.

'It's my home, and I'm going in,' she said.

They crunched their way over the glass and debris to where the front door hung drunkenly off its hinges. Through the gap the parlour could be seen, grey with fallen plaster. The door through to the kitchen was also open, and unaccustomed light laden with dirt and dust came in through the great gap in the back wall. In the middle of the floor lay a blue china vase, intact.

'There you are,' Jack said, 'prize number one. Come on.'

While Florrie and Lily stayed by the front door, urging them to be careful, Jack and Rita stepped inside. There was a smell of wet plaster, dirt, gas and drains. The parlour was bad enough, but the kitchen was much worse. The sink had been ripped off and was lying in the middle of the floor, surrounded by bricks and rubble. Water from the fractured pipes had soaked everywhere. It was hardly recognisable as the place where Maisie had sat by the fire drinking tea and complaining about how tired she was while Rita set about washing the sheets or scrubbing the floor. Just clues remained to tell whose property this had been - the rag rug, full of glass splinters, fragments of the blue and white striped plates, the postcard of Clacton still stuck to the wall, souvenir of her Aunt Ellen's last holiday that hot summer of 1939. Rita found one of Maisie's floral overalls that had miraculously escaped without a hole, and they piled in everything that was usable. It was precious little, for there had not been much to start with, but Rita knew that Maisie would be delighted to see her kettle, only slightly dented, and her fancy tea tin.

'You're very brave. It must be heartbreaking to see your home ruined like this,' Jack said, picking up two cups

without handles.

'Not really -' Rita straightened up and looked around her, thinking it through. 'It ain't heartbreaking, because my heart was never in it. It was never really my home, y'see, it was my mother-in-law's.'

'Ah well - that must make a difference.'

He must think her very hard, she thought. But it was no more than the truth. It was not like having your own place wrecked. Her sister Joan had been devastated when she heard that her house had been hit, even though she was in the country at the time. For Joan it had been the place where she had lived with the man she loved; her little kingdom. It had never been like that for Rita. She looked at Jack Wilkinson as he sifted through the wreckage, retrieving bent pieces of cutlery. The warmth had gone out of his expression, and there was a severe set to his features. She wanted desperately to explain, to tell him that hers had not been a love match, that she had had to marry Ron. But what was it to Jack Wilkinson, after all? He was Lily's boyfriend. She was just the older sister, the married sister, someone to keep the right side of so that he could take Lily out as often and as late as they both wanted. As if to confirm this, Lily's voice floated in from outside.

'Are you all right?'

'Yeah, fine,' Jack called back.

'I don't think we're going to find much more in here,' Rita said.

'Do you want to try upstairs?'

Rita looked up. The ceiling was bare in places where the plaster had come down. The whole top floor could be ready to fall.

'Why not?' she said. 'No point in stopping now.'

The stairs creaked as they went up, but neither of them worried about that. It was well known that stairs were the strongest part of a house. The little front bedroom was not

in too bad a state. The plaster had come down from the ceiling, but most of the glass had fallen outwards. The room was almost completely filled by the two single beds. Rita looked at the nearest one, stripped and bare now. This was the bed her two children had shared. For the first time a lump came to her throat.

'I'm glad the boys ain't here,' she said, and the words came out as a croak.

'You sent them away?'

She thought she heard disapproval in his voice. Sent them away. As if they were a couple of unwanted parcels. Not only did she not care about her home being destroyed, but she got rid of her kids as well. Rita rounded on him.

'Well, I couldn't keep 'em here, could I? Not with things like what they are. I know some people do, but I think that's wicked. I couldn't risk their lives like that.'

'All right, all right. Keep your hair on. I only asked.'

He raised his hands in mock submission. He was grinning at her, a teasing light in his eyes.

Rita felt foolish. She had over-reacted. All the same, she had to defend herself.

'You got no right to judge,' she told him.

'I'm sorry.' He was serious now. 'You're right. Where are your kids? In the country somewhere?'

'They're with my sister down Dagenham.'

'But they get raids there, don't they?'

'Yeah, but not like here, and they got their own Anderson. It ain't like dragging 'em down the Underground every night. And with my sister they're still with their own family, see. If I sent them to the country they'd be with strangers. There's people round here sent their kids off to the country and when they go to see them the little horrors don't want to know. They got used to living in posh families and they got all the manners and that. Just imagine! Having your own kid turn round and tell you you're not talking proper English! Enough to break your heart. But it's not

like that with my lot – they can't wait to see me again.' She stopped, a new thought striking her. 'I suppose I'll have to tell them about this. Oh hell. What am I going to say? But maybe they won't take it too bad – they're both little still and it's eighteen months now since they actually lived here. I hope so.'

'Anything of their's here we can get?'

'No, I've taken it all down Dagenham. There's just some baby stuff –'

Rita stepped forward carefully and pulled a cardboard box out from under the bed. She opened the flaps and peeped inside. There was the yellowing shawl, the tiny mittens and bonnets, the little gowns. She picked up a pair of bootees and held them to her cheek. It was all she had here of the boys except for the one precious photo that she kept in her handbag. She took a deep breath and stood up.

'I'm glad I got these, anyway. We better get Maisie's things, and all the bedclothes. She'll be wanting them.'

At last there was only the back bedroom. Rita did not want to go in there, but Jack carefully pushed the door open. There, exposed to the world by the gaping hole in the wall and covered with dirt and glass, was the bed she shared with Ron. Rita flushed with embarrassment, then was cross with herself. He knew she was married, didn't he? But still she did not want to rub it in.

'I'll get the bedclothes,' she said, without looking at Jack.

She pulled off the top blanket and shook it, then groaned with disappointment. The shards of glass had ripped into it, making a lacework of holes. When she turned to her clothes, hung on pegs behind the door, they were almost as bad.

'Oh no –' she cried, holding out tattered fabric. 'Look at this. My favourite dress. I can't mend that, it's had it. All this lot's good for is salvage.'

She looked towards the chest of drawers in the alcove next to where the window used to be. That was still standing miraculously intact, so at least her underwear must still be all right. She started towards it. The floorboards creaked and showers of dirt and plaster fell from the ceiling.

'Come back,' Jack said. 'It ain't safe.'

But the chest of drawers held all that was left of her clothes.

'It's all right,' she insisted.

She stepped carefully. There was only about a foot of floor between her and the hole where the wall used to be. A thin rain was falling; it wet her face and chilled her skin. She was just one step away when an ominous shudder went through the house.

'Stand still!' Jack said.

Rita stood, her heart thudding in her throat. Two bricks fell from the edge of the gap.

'Come back, very slowly.'

Rita lifted a foot, and the floor groaned beneath her. She looked back at Jack, who was edging his way round the walls towards her. He reached the chimney breast.

'Come on -' he held out his hand across the corner of the bed. 'Slowly . . .'

She stretched out and grasped his hand, and as she did so there was a tremendous crack, and a sliding, rumbling roar as the back of the house collapsed. Rita screamed as the floor gave way and she felt herself falling. There was a wrenching jerk on her arm and she hung, suspended. She yelped with pain as the foot of the bed thudded into her stomach and scraped down her shins. She was choking, her mouth and throat full of grit. Then she was being dragged back up. Her flailing feet found something firm to stand on, and at last she was being held by two strong arms. She clung on, coughing up the suffocating dust as the whole world seemed to fall around her. In the middle of the noise

and dirt and fear she felt Jack's firm body and his arms around her, his hand cradling her head against his shoulder.

'Hold on - it's all right,' his voice reassured her.

For what seemed like an age they stood, a still island in a landslide nightmare, until the roar died away, the monsoon of debris died to a shower, the remains of the house settled. Jack carefully released his tight hold. Rita slowly opened her eyes and looked up at him. She gave a shaky laugh.

'You should see yourself! You got dust in your *eyebrows* -'

'You don't look a fashion plate yourself,' he retorted.

Voices could be heard from outside, shrill with fear.

'Rita, you there? You all right, Rita?'

'Jack, Jack - answer me, Jack!'

Jack drew breath to reply, choked on the dust and tried desperately not to succumb to a fit of coughing. Rita called out for both of them.

'Yeah - we're all right, we're safe.'

'Don't come in,' Jack managed to wheeze.

'Don't come in,' Rita repeated. 'Stay there. We're coming out.'

She looked around at what was left of her bedroom. The floor had almost completely collapsed into the kitchen below, and the back wall of the house was gone. As the dust settled a little, she could see just the ends of splintered joists sticking out from the walls.

'How?' she said to Jack. 'How we going to get out?'

'Very carefully,' he told her.

Rita looked down. The bed lay twisted in a heap of rubble and jutting timber. If she had fallen down there . . . She found she was shaking.

'You saved my life,' she whispered.

'We got to get out yet,' Jack said.

He shifted a foot on to the nearest joist, testing it to see if it would hold.

'Right. Follow me. Hold my hand.'

Their backs to the wall, they edged along the chimney breast, across the gap where the alcove used to be, along the back wall. Twice they had to stop as the house seemed to shudder again. Once a timber gave way just as Rita put her foot on it.

'Bloody disgrace, the way these places was built. A kid could push 'em down,' Jack said.

They reached the door. There were the stairs, still firm and steady. As she went down them, Rita's legs began to shake, until she had to cling to the rail to stop herself from falling down. She staggered out into the street.

'Rita!'

Her mum flung her arms round her.

'Rita, don't you never do that again. You nearly give me a heart attack.'

Rita was shaking all over now. She fought to hold back tears.

'I won't, Mum. I promise - Look - I'm all in one piece. Jack saved me -'

She looked round to speak to him, and saw that Lily had claimed him. Her sister was clinging on to him, gazing up with adoring eyes. Jack was smiling down at her. Rita felt totally rejected. Just minutes ago, she had been clasped in his arms, snatched from mortal danger. Now she was forgotten. Jack belonged to Lily.

3

SOMETIMES IT FELT like she spent half her life in the Underground. A mole, that was what she was turning into. A mole, living in tunnels. But today it wasn't so bad, because instead of being on the platform trying to sleep she was on the train travelling down to Dagenham. What was more, she even had a seat. Luxury. But somehow she couldn't settle her mind, not even when she thought about her children. Rita opened her handbag and took out the precious photograph. It had been taken by her Uncle Harry just two weeks before the war started, and showed her boys standing in the back garden of Uncle Harry and Auntie Ellen's house in Tilbury. Peter was glaring rebelliously into the camera while little Mikey wore a happy grin. In the background was the newly turned hump of earth over the Anderson shelter. Rita gazed at the boys' faces, but even they could not hold her attention. The picture blurred before her eyes, and once more she heard the crack and rumble of falling masonry, felt Jack Wilkinson's arms about her. She felt almost sick with the painful stir of emotions.

'Lily's,' she said out loud. 'He's Lily's.'

'What's that, love?' the fat woman next to her asked.

'Oh - nothing . . .'

'You look a bit peaky, dear. You not been well?'

'I'm all right. Working blooming long hours, that's all.'

She did not want to admit to being bombed out. There was too much she had to keep to herself.

'They your kiddies, dear?'

'Yeah, I'm going to see them.'

'Ah, that's nice, ain't it? Hard when you have to send 'em away. Bleeding Hitler. I ain't seen my grandchildren since the summer. Five, I got, and I ain't seen hide nor hair of 'em. Here - I got a picture. I'll show you -'

Normally, Rita would have been glad to have someone to talk to. Today she found it intensely irritating. There never seemed to be any time to sit quietly by herself. At the factory it was noisy and dirty, and even when people weren't shouting things at her, the work was so repetitive that she found her mind going round and round on the same small thought in time with the process of fitting components together. At home, her old home, there was always Maisie going on and on even when Ron wasn't there making demands. Back at her parents' the place was full of people, with the ceaseless jangle of the bell as customers came and went. And at night-time she slept in the middle bunk of a tier of three surrounded by hundreds of other shelterers. She had been looking forward to this journey down to Dagenham, but had reckoned without the new matiness that had got into everyone. Instead of ignoring each other, people struck up conversations with complete strangers.

'Your hubby away, dear?' the woman was asking.

'No, not yet.'

More's the pity.

'Oh - why's that, then?' Faint disapproval coloured the woman's voice. 'Both my boys have gone, and my old man's in the ARP.'

'God knows - his papers just ain't come yet, that's all.'

Plenty of men round her way had gone and joined up almost straight away. It was work, and that was scarce. The pay in the Forces was terrible, but at least it was regular, unlike work on the docks. Ron thought they were stupid.

'I'm not going till they make me,' he said. And by some quirk of luck, the call-up seemed to pass him by.

Rita looked at posters and listened to broadcasts urging women to join the Forces, and longed to go. To see new places, meet new people, learn new skills seemed like an opportunity sent from heaven. To get away from the restrictions of north Millwall, most of all to get away from Ron, would be sheer bliss. She thought about it through the long hours trying to sleep in the Underground, but always the same thing stopped her. If she joined up, she could be posted anywhere, and she would only see the children once every three months. She couldn't bear that.

'All right for some,' her travelling companion commented.

Rita was caught off guard.

'Ha. I can't wait for him to go,' she said.

The woman tut-tutted.

'Never say that, dear. You don't know what they're going to be sent to. My older boy's gone off to North Africa. Dunno where, exactly, but I suppose he's frying in some tank in the middle of the bleeding desert.'

'I'm sorry,' Rita said.

Of course, when Ron finally did get called up, he'd probably be found to have flat feet and end up with some cushy number in a kitchen somewhere. Ron was like that.

'You dunno how much you're going to miss 'em until they go, dearie. Mine went off to the last do. Missed him something terrible, I did. Still, at least he did come back. Plenty didn't.'

'Yeah,' Rita said vaguely. She knew she would miss Ron like a hole in the head.

One mistake, one silly slip, and she had found herself bound for life. It had been at her sister Joan's wedding. It was one of those hot June days and after the ceremony everyone was thirsty and ready for a good knees-up. Off they all went to the Rum Puncture on the corner the moment the doors opened, all their own relations - the Turners, the Johnsons, the Crofts - plus all Ted's lot and