

Author's note

There's an assumption – an unfair one – that if you work in a library you are a cardigan-wearing, introvert. Bethnal Green Library, where my novel is set, is 100 years old this year, so I set myself the goal of interviewing one hundred library workers. From post-war librarians, to feminist and activist librarians, school librarians to Britain's oldest library reading volunteer (can we all say hello to the inimitable Nanny Maureen) qualified and unqualified, all share one thing in common, a passionate belief in the power of books and reading to change lives. I've started each chapter with some of my favourite quotes. These interviews make for lively, eye-opening reading so please do take a look at the article I've written further on, *Save Our Libraries*.

As a child, in the 1970s and '80s, I loved visiting my local library. Coming from a noisy household, I embraced the feeling of solitude and order. As soon as I caught the intoxicating scent of old paper and polish and heard that satisfying *thunk* of the librarian's stamp, I relaxed. It was no red brick, or arts and crafts architectural beauty, more of a concrete civic centre box, with scratchy grey carpets and spider plants behind the desk, but that didn't matter. It was a destination and I can still vividly remember the feeling of calm and freedom that came over me as I walked through the door. It was my haven.

First came the ritual of choosing the book, then I'd take it to the furthest end of the library, rather like a dog scurries off with a juicy bone, sit on a small green plastic chair and fall into a story, while my mum stood at the counter and gossiped (in a theatrical whisper) with smiley Jacky the librarian, who always let her off the late fines. I

vividly remember thinking as a small child, *how interesting, so rules can be broken!*

What did your childhood library look, feel and smell like? Bet you can remember!

Like most, when it came to Enid Blyton I virtually read the print off the page. *Malory Towers* gave me the keys to a boarding school experience I'd never have. *Black Beauty* the opportunity to own the horse I so desperately wanted, *The Secret Garden* the delicious possibility of finding undiscovered doors.

It unlocked my imagination in a way that always made me feel safe. Without weekly trips to my local library, I'm fairly certain I wouldn't be a writer today and I'm forever grateful to my mum for taking me.

Libraries have changed from quiet, hushed repositories of books to vibrant cultural community hubs and I can confidently say, that the people who work in libraries are amongst the nicest and most hard-working on earth. I have a hunch they do a lot of unpaid work.

BC (Before Corona) I did a lot of library talks and experienced the behind the scenes planning that goes into these events. The homemade cakes, the posters, the social media and the setting up and clearing away of these evening and weekend events, I'm fairly certain isn't reflected in their pay.

They are frontline workers used to dealing with the mentally ill, the disenfranchised, homeless, the lonely, and vulnerable. A librarian is often the only person someone might talk to all day. What's more, they have the emotional intelligence to deal with whoever walks in through the door, which to my mind, makes them more than someone who loans out books. They are part counsellor, social worker, listening ear, facilitator and friend. They regularly go above and beyond.

When I started my interviews, the COVID-19 pandemic began and I saw first-hand how many librarians changed roles

almost overnight to helping out with supporting the elderly and those in need, by dropping off food parcels, collecting medication and checking that those people who could so easily slip between the cracks in society, did not go ignored.

During the Second World War, at the time this book is set, libraries were in peril from bombs, rockets and paper rationing. Today, our much-loved but beleaguered public libraries are under threat once more from something more stealthy. Cuts and closures. After years of austerity and now COVID, they are under strain to deliver more services than ever before, whilst council leaders, under pressure to make cuts, sharpen their knives.

They are, as Chief Librarian John Pateman told me, ‘low hanging fruits. There is hardly any money saved by closing libraries, but when you close a library bad things start to happen in the neighbourhood where the library used to be. It is difficult to prove the positive value of a library, but it is easy to prove once it has been taken away. The library is the glue that holds a community together and you only miss it after it has gone unfortunately.’

Another librarian told me that after the closure of the local children’s centre, babies are now weighed in her library! Don’t hard-working communities deserve more?

The importance of libraries was recognised by the Public Libraries Act 1850. Since a further Act in 1964, there has been a statutory requirement for the provision of a free local library service. The surge in reading throughout the pandemic and the flexibility and skill of library staff in dealing with the outbreak, proves how relevant and important libraries are within the community. They are our birthright and our inheritance.

A library is the only place you can go from cradle to grave that is free, safe, democratic and no one will try to flog you anything. You don’t have to part with a penny to travel the world. It’s the heartbeat of a community, offering precious resources to people in need. It’s a place just to be, to dream and to escape - *with books*. And

what's more precious than that? So here's to all library workers. We need you.

Prologue
September 7th, 2020

People come into the library to make sense of the world.

Carol Stump, President of Libraries Connected and Chief Librarian of Kirklees Council

An old woman walks up the westbound platform of Bethnal Green Underground station, moving painfully slowly on account of her arthritis.

‘Mum, can we go?’ asks her eldest daughter Miranda, trying to hide her irritation. She has an Ocado delivery due later and she’s dying for a coffee. ‘We shouldn’t be on public transport, not in the middle of a pandemic.’

‘Tsk.’ Her mother waves her walking stick dismissively. ‘You go if you like, but I’m not leaving.’

Miranda glances over at her younger sister Rosemary and rolls her eyes. God their mother could be tricky. ‘All piss and vinegar,’ as her ex-husband once memorably described her.

‘At the very least Mum, pull your mask up over your nose,’ Rosemary orders. But the older lady ignores them both, moving with a tortoise like determination.

They reach the end of the platform and all pause, staring into the gaping black mouth of the tunnel.

‘We clean our transport network regularly with antiviral disinfectant,’ mutters the old lady, reading out loud from a poster pasted to the tunnel wall. ‘That’s nothing new. They did this nightly

during the war.’

‘You came here in the war?’ asks Miranda, thoughts of her latte fast fading.

‘We lived down here.’ Their mother smiles, her face slightly crooked since the stroke. ‘Your auntie Marie even took tap-dancing classes down here.’

Miranda presses her lips together, worried.

‘You’re getting confused, Mum. People only slept down here during the Blitz.’

‘I might have snow on the roof, but I’ve still got all my marbles!’ the old lady barks, her voice stiletto sharp. She loves her daughters desperately, but she wishes they didn’t keep on doing this, fussing over her, checking her constantly for signs of senility.

She closes her eyes. Intrusive thoughts march through her brain like a brass band. *Heat. Blood. Smoke.*

Memories she had bolted down, assumed had turned to rust, only to resurface, sharp and slippery enough to get through the cracks. She stumbles, her stick clattering loudly up the platform. A few commuters glance up in alarm, then return like lemmings to their phones.

‘Sit down, Mum.’ Rosemary rushes forward, guides her to a bench under the Bethnal Green Underground sign. ‘We need to get you home.’

‘No...’ she snaps. ‘Not until we’ve found the library.’

She catches her daughters exchanging worried glances over their masks.

‘Mum,’ says Rosemary slowly, pointing upwards. ‘The library’s above ground, we’re in the Tube remember?’

‘Technically it’s not even a library at the moment,’ says Miranda. ‘It’s a COVID-19 testing centre. I saw on the way down.’

A Central Line train comes rushing in like a hot exhale of air. Her brain is tired, her thoughts slow and muddy. What do they mean, it’s a testing centre, not a library? She doesn’t understand this

world anymore.

‘Mrs Rodinski?’

Two men in TFL high-vis jackets, their faces covered with shining plastic walk towards them.

‘Yes, that’s me.’

‘I’m Peter Mayhew, the press officer, and this is Grant Marshall, station manager. Thanks for getting in touch.’

‘Thank you, young man, for agreeing to return my belongings. They’re very precious to me.’

‘I can imagine,’ says the press officer, sensing a good publicity angle.

‘How old are you, Mrs Rodinski?’ asks the station manager. ‘If that’s not too forward.’

‘Not at all. I’m 88. I spent most of my formative years down this tunnel.’

‘Gracious, you’re holding up well,’ he chuckles.

‘I’m a woman, not a piece of scaffolding, Sonny. Now, do you have my letters?’

‘Mum, what’s all this about?’ Rosemary asks, but her mother isn’t listening, for the press officer has lifted a bundle of letters and is handing them to her in a sealed plastic bag.

‘We found them during the recent renovation, behind the tiles in this tunnel, tucked inside a book, in some sort of boxed-out unit.’

She nods. ‘That was the back of the library.’

Her hands tremble slightly as she removes them from the bag and takes the letters bound in cream ribbon, raising them to her nose.

‘They still smell of the library.’

‘It would be wonderful if you would agree to be interviewed by the BBC about the return of your wartime letters.’

‘Of course, but if you don’t mind, I should like a quiet word with my daughters first.’

‘Certainly, come and see me before you go.’

They leave and the old lady turns to a bemused Rosemary and Miranda.

‘These,’ she says, holding up her bundle of letters, ‘are why we’re here. I thought I’d lost them forever.’

Smell is evocative, the scent of old mildewy paper has opened up the pathways of her mind and memories crowd in. She hears the shriek of children’s laughter rushing through the tunnels. The soft rustle of pages turning. *Thunk*, a metal fist stamping a library book. The creak of a book cart. She catches the scent of carbolic, the 20th century equivalent of hand sanitiser. These are the smells of her personal history.

But deep down, deeper even than these tunnels, hide the *other* memories. One thought drums persistently, what if this virus gets her? Sometimes she feels it’s not even a case of *if* but *when*. If she dies without telling her daughters’ the truth, then her story will end with her, and surely that would be a betrayal far more devastating than the secrets she has kept? What was it Clara told her?

You die twice. Once when your heart stops beating and again when your name is spoken for the last time.

It’s time to blow the dust off her wartime secrets.

‘I’ve been a coward not to tell you the whole truth,’ she admits quietly, lowering her mask. ‘I’m going to tell you everything. Let’s start in the library.’

One
March 3rd 1944
6.00 pm

Clara

I always felt that librarians should try to be encouraging, not judgmental, about reading. What you want to do is give people a great experience. Who are you to judge what that experience is?

Alison Wheeler, MBE. Former Chief Executive of Suffolk Libraries, library campaigner and a trustee of CILIP

‘Is crying allowed in the library?’

‘Heavens above! Where did you spring from?’ Clara blinked back her tears. ‘I thought I’d locked the door!’

It wasn’t exactly seemly for a librarian to be seen blubbing, red-eyed and snotty over her returns trolley.

Clara peered over the top of the counter. A small face peeked back behind a long fringe.

‘Sorry sweetheart, shall we start again?’ I’m Clara Button, I’m the Branch Librarian.’

‘lo. I’m Marie.’ The girl blew up and her fringe parted to reveal curious brown eyes.

‘Want a boiled sweet, Marie?’

‘Are sweets allowed?’

‘I have a secret stash of sherbet lemons.’ She winked. ‘For emergencies.’

The eyes widened.

'I knew it, your favourite.'

Marie's hand shot out to take the sweet and crammed it in her mouth.

'How do you know?'

'I know everyone's favourite.'

'Bet you don't know my favourite book.'

'Bet I do! Now let me see. How old are you?'

She pressed eight fingers close to Clara's face.

'Eight, what a grand age to be!'

Clara walked to the children's section of the library and scuttled her fingers along the shelves like a little spider. The little girl grinned, amused by the game.

Her finger stopped at *Black Beauty* – too sad – then travelled on to *Cinderella* – too pink – before slowly coming to rest on *Wind in the Willows*.

'Am I right?'

'How did you know?' Marie's eyes ran greedily over Clara's carefully stocked library.

'It's like Aladdin's cave in here.'

Clara felt a thunderclap of pride. It had taken her nearly four years to get her library as well stocked as this after the bombing.

'Can I borrow it? I had to leave my copy behind.'

'Are you an evacuee?'

Marie nodded. 'We left my dad in Jersey.'

'I'm sorry to hear that. Bet you miss him.'

She nodded and twisted her snot-encrusted sleeve over her fingers.

'My sister says I'm not to talk about it. Can I join then?'

'I'm sure we can get you enrolled,' Clara replied. 'If you can get your mum to come and see me and fill in the form. I only need to see her bunk ticket.'

'She can't come, my sister says to say she's very busy on war

work.'

'Oh righto, well maybe your sister could spare five minutes.'

'So why was you crying?' Marie mumbled, one side of her cheek bulging like a hamster.

'Because I was sad.'

'Why?'

'Because I miss someone special, well three people actually.'

'Me too. I miss my dad... Can you keep a secret?' Her dew-bright eyes drew even wider. Perhaps it was the sweet that had softened her tongue, or the promise of *Wind in the Willows*, but Clara felt this little girl desperately needed a confidante.

'Cross my heart,' she promised, licking her finger. 'Librarians are excellent at keeping secrets.'

'My m...'

'Marie Rose Kolsky!' interrupted a sharp little voice from the door. 'What do you think you're doing in here!'

Clara instinctively sized up the girl in the doorway, taking in the pale, serious face.

'I'm so sorry, Miss, my sister oughtn't be in here bothering you. I told her to meet by our bunk.'

'I came to the bedtime story session,' Marie protested.

'Don't be such a silly goose Marie, they're shut.'

'Oh, no,' interrupted Clara, feeling the need to defend the little girl. 'Your sister's quite right. Every evening, we have a bedtime story session in the library at 6pm, only I've had to close early this evening on account of a function. But do come back tomorrow.'

'P'rhaps. Come on, Marie.'

She pulled her little sister's arm and wrenched her in the direction of the door.

Her angry voice carried back.

'*N'en souffl'ye un mot.*' Clara didn't speak French, but it was obvious Marie was getting a good ticking off.

'Do come back, I'll save that book for you.'

But they were already gone, their footsteps echoing down the westbound platform.

Clara walked to the door and stared after them, intrigued, as they walked past the shelter theatre and disappeared into the acrid gloom of the Underground.

Dot and Alice in the café up in the booking hall above were frying up fish for the Jewish residents of the shelter in preparation for the Sabbath and the odour drifted down and curled through the carbolic. You could cut the smell down here in the tunnels.

Marie skipped as she was half-dragged, in odd socks and plimsols. Her older sister was tight and buttoned-up. Not a bit like most of the adolescent young girls who slept nightly down Bethnal Green Tube shelter in a great rabble of noise. The Minksy Agombars and Pat Spicers of this world were all mouth and swank. She saw them every evening huddled round their metal bunks when she locked up the library to go home, plotting or piercing each other's ears with their mothers' sewing needles. Not this one.

Still, she saw all sorts in her little underground library. With a heavy sigh, Clara realised she had even less time to repair her face and paint on a new one before the excruciating pantomime that lay ahead.

Her gaze fell heavily on the evening edition of the *Daily Express* that lay open on the library counter.

BLITZ CAUSES BOOK BOOM trumpeted the front-page headline over an awful photo of her captioned: *Library lovely goes underground.*

Library lovely?

The article hadn't stopped there either. *Young childless widow Clara Button is doing her bit for the war effort, running Britain's only Underground Shelter Library built over the westbound tracks of Bethnal Green Tube. When the Central Library in Bethnal Green was bombed in the first week of the Blitz, resulting in the tragic death of Branch Librarian Peter Hinton, Children's Librarian Mrs Button found*

herself propelled into the senior role. In the absence of male colleagues, she bravely stepped into the breach and arranged the transfer of 4,000 volumes underground, where she oversaw the construction of a temporary shelter library operating 78-feet below ground.

Our barbarous foes may be hell-bent on burning London to the ground, but beneath the city's surface, Mrs Button calmly carries on stamping books and ensuring everyone has a thumping good read to take their mind off the bombs.

It was the 'childless widow' bit that had brought on her tears. It was true, right enough, but did anyone need to have their status so bluntly announced to the nation?

Clara thought again of Duncan and her grief sliced deep, a hot knife to the heart. That was all it took. The thought of his face on the doorstep as he left to fight, boots buffed to a high shine, excited as a kid at a summer fair. Questions curled through her mind like weeds.

What had he been thinking in the moments before his death? Should she have given up work at the library? How much longer would the lies persist?

'No!' she scolded herself, pushing her knuckles into her eyes. 'We're not doing this now. Not today of all days.' One good cry a day and never in the library. Those was her rules and she'd already broken one. Besides, who here in Bethnal Green wasn't carrying an Atlas load of grief. People needed to see a bright and jolly librarian, not this.

A rustle at the door tore Clara from the churn of her thoughts.

'Bleedin' hell, it might be March, but it's colder than a polar bear's cock out there...'

An enormous tray of sandwiches and sausage rolls was thumped onto the counter.

'Ham off the bone, real butter... What a touch. Dot from the café did me a deal... I promised her double the tickets next week.

Hang about, you ain't even ready! The *Picture Post* photographer's parking.' A slim hand shot out to snatch up the copy of the *Daily Express* Clara had just been reading.

'Triffic, ain't it? Didn't capture your best side though, did they? You look a right dog's dinner in this picture,' she remarked with eviscerating honesty. 'We better get you scrubbed up so you look better in the next ones.'

'Thanks Rubes!' Clara laughed.

Ruby Munroe was her best friend and, latterly, library assistant. 'Not qualified, unlike our Clara,' as she told anyone who enquired, and those that didn't. 'Thick as two short planks me.' Except she wasn't. She possessed more guts and guile than most men Clara had ever met. Her best pal since primary school breezed through life, Formica coated and with more chutzpah than the average Bethnal Greener. Nothing was impossible in Ruby's world, no deal that couldn't be fixed or negotiated.

It was true that Clara selected the books, oversaw the cataloguing and Browne Issue System, answered the more complex enquiries and did bibliographic searches. But it was Ruby who had the social intelligence to be able to connect with the vast spectrum of life they saw in the library.

'Oh, doll, you've been crying.' Ruby unknotted her towering headscarf and pulled a face. 'Thinking about him?'

Clara nodded.

'Duncan or Peter?'

'Both really. Just this award, it's got me thinking about how much they'd have loved this evening.'

Ruby shook her head. 'This is your night, Clara Button. We're going to have a quick tickler, and yes, I know it's no smoking in the library, but you can make an exception for one night. Then, while you get changed into this,' she rummaged around in her string bag and pulled out something entirely unsuitable in fire-engine red, 'I'm going to mix us a quick heart-starter.'

Clara felt acid churn in her stomach. 'I don't think I can do this.'

'Nothing two aspirin and a gin won't fix, Cla,' Ruby grinned as she lit a black Sobranie and poured a generous splash of clear liquid from a flask into two jam jars. 'You've got half the East End Reading for Victory. All they want to do is say thanks.'

'Bad times are good for books,' she went on, chucking back her drink in one gulp and shuddering. 'Hell's teeth, that's got some poke in it. You're an essential cog in the war machine, so enjoy your moment, girl.'

'But Rubes, don't you think this award, the timing of it, tonight of all nights, is a bit charry?'

'Course,' Ruby shrugged. 'It's called burying bad news. Accentuate the positives of the shelter to hide its past. Anyone can see through that.'

'But don't you mind?' Clara persisted. 'After everything you and your mum went through. To say nothing of half the people in this shelter. There's not a person down here unaffected by that night.'

Ruby smiled tightly as she reapplied her red lipstick. 'It happened, who down this shelter ain't lost someone? Now come on, slowpoke, get changed.'

'I thought I'd just wear this,' Clara replied, looking down at her usual rig-out of blouse tucked into slacks.

'You're going to be on the front page of every newspaper tomorrow, you ain't looking like a spinster librarian.'

'I'm not far off it,' she laughed.

Ruby lifted one pencilled brow. 'Behave. You're only 25.'

'Fair enough, but I draw the line at this!' Clara grimaced, pulling out the red dress.

'Let's talk about it while I zip you up,' Ruby winked, clamping her Sobranie between her teeth.

Half-an-hour later, poured into the dress and a pair of Ruby's

vertiginous heels, Clara had never seen her little library so busy: officials from the Ministry of Information mingled with the press and regular library users. Due to the curved roof of the underground tunnel, the acoustics were such that the noise seemed to have reached a crescendo in her head. The shelter theatre next door was hosting a Russian opera singer that evening and as he warmed up for his evening performance, his rich voice rolled like a Tube train up the Central Line tunnel.

Mrs Chumbley, the officious Deputy Shelter Manager was doing her best to hold back the sea of inquisitive shelter kids all clamouring to get into the library and filch one of the sausage rolls.

Clara caught sight of Maggie May and her best pal Molly, along with Sparrow, Ronnie, Tubby and the rest of the Tube Rats as they called themselves, crawling in on their hands and knees.

Clara winked at them. She'd far rather be sitting cross-legged and shoeless on the floor reading aloud with the children, than trussed up in here like some sort of show pony. They were halfway through *The Family from One End Street* by Eve Garnett, and a couple of chapters in the antics of the Ruggles family were already proving irresistible.

'Out!' boomed Mrs Chumbley, catching sight of the group and grabbing Sparrow by the scruff of the neck.

A gentle tap at her shoulder and Clara turned to see one of her regular library users, Mr Pepper, an elderly gentleman, and his wife, who had been bombed out of their home two years ago and now lived down the Tube permanently.

'I shan't take up your time, my dear,' he said. 'It's a bit noisy in here for my wife so we're retiring to our bunks, but I just wanted to say jolly well done on this award. This library is the best thing to happen to this shelter.' He smiled, showing off a web of crinkles around his eyes.

'Thanks Mr Pepper. You're one of my most prolific readers.' She glanced at his wife. 'There's not many who can say they've got

through *War and Peace* in two weeks.’

‘He’d read the print off our entire collection at home, until we were bombed out,’ said his wife in such a little voice, Clara had to lean in closer to listen to the elderly lady. She smelt of Yardley’s Lavender and had the softest-looking skin.

‘Losing his whole library was quite a blow but finding your little wartime library has been a tonic, my dear.’

Mr Pepper gazed adoringly at his wife.

‘Alas, my eyesight prevents me reading what I used to in my youth, but I’ll admit, it’s been my luxury and my escape this past few years. I can’t tell you what you’ve done for me, Mrs Button.’

‘Come now, Mr Pepper,’ she teased, ‘you’ve known me three years now, please call me Clara.’

‘He’s always been a stickler for formality, comes with being a headmaster all those years,’ smiled Mrs Pepper. ‘You shan’t get him to change now, my dear. Before we go, I must just tell you, I’ve a cousin in Pinner who’s giving away some books for the salvage drive, but we’ve persuaded her to give them to us instead, so we can donate them to your library.’

‘Oh, how terrific!’

‘She’s a devil of a reader, particularly loves her thrillers and mysteries. She’s built up quite the collection of Agatha Christie, Dorothy L Sayers and Margery Allingham. Would you like them?’

‘Can a duck swim? Thrillers, along with historical romance, are our most borrowed books, they fly off the shelves.’

‘You’d think people would have had enough of violence in the real world,’ Mr Pepper remarked.

‘It’s the intrigue, the whodunnit suspense. It’s the perfect antidote to this war,’ Clara mused.

‘Downright queer!’

The figure of Mrs Chumbley loomed over them. Even in heels, Clara had to strain her neck to look up at her. Poor Mrs Chumbley. She’d never been married. She was only called Mrs as a

courtesy. Her face was always fixed in one permanent expression, disapproval.

‘More of a Mills and Boon reader, are you? Mr Pepper smiled.

‘Don’t be absurd.’

‘What do you like to read then, Mrs Chumbley?’ Mrs Pepper politely enquired.

‘Read?’ she scoffed. ‘And where would I find the time to read! Keeping this shelter running smoothly demands all my time. Tubby Rosen, put that book down this instant!’

‘I don’t mind them pi...’ Clara began.

‘I know what bunk you sleep in and I shall be talking to your mother! Where was I? Oh yes, I shall take up reading when we’ve blitzed Hitlerism out of the world.’

‘Come now, Mrs Chumbley, it’s not self-indulgent to read,’ Mr Pepper remarked. ‘Mrs Button here could recommend something perfect for you. She seems to have something of a gift of matching people to their perfect book.’

Mrs Chumbley softened as she stared at Mr Pepper. The elderly gentleman was held in high esteem by the occupants of the underground shelter, and even Mrs C wasn’t immune to his debonair charm.

‘Perhaps,’ she blustered. ‘But only if it were educational. I recently read a technical book *War Wounds and Fractures: The Definitive Guide*. It was capital!’

‘Sounds riveting,’ said Ruby dryly, as she sidled up next to them, clutching the arms of not one but two men. ‘Watch out Georgette Heyer.’

‘Now, Clara darlin’, sorry to interrupt, but there are some people here you must meet. This is Minister John Hilton, Director of Home Publicity at the Ministry of Information, he’s been trying to talk to you for the past half-hour.’ She turned to the smaller of the men. In her heels, Clara found herself in the unfortunate position of standing two inches taller than him.

‘And this is Mr Pink-Smythe.’

‘Pinkerton-Smythe,’ he corrected, taking out a handkerchief and wiping it over head, which had the unfortunate effect of sticking up the last few strands of hair he had left like an antenna.

‘He’s the Chair of the Library Committee. Which makes him our new boss,’ said Ruby.

‘It’s lovely to meet you,’ said Clara. ‘I’m looking forward to working with you.’ She turned to the man from the Ministry, wishing she hadn’t let Ruby talk her into this dress. ‘And welcome to our underground library, Minister.’

‘So, *you’re* the librarian everyone’s talking about,’ he beamed, shaking her hand enthusiastically. ‘This place is quite the find. Never thought I’d see the day where I came down the Tube to find books instead of trains. What are we, 60, 70 feet underground?’

‘Seventy-eight feet, the only place in Bethnal Green you can’t hear the bombs,’ Clara replied proudly.

‘And forgive my ignorance. What happened to the trains?’

‘Bethnal Green was an unfinished stop on the Central Line, connecting Mile End with Liverpool Street Station,’ she explained. ‘At the outbreak of war, construction was suspended. It was locked up and left to the rats, until the bombings began.’

‘So how did it get opened up to this...’ he spread his arms wide in wonder, ‘underground village? If that doesn’t sound too daft.’

‘Not at all. Everyone who lives and works down here in this other London, often think of ourselves as inhabitants of a secret village.’

Clara’s eyes shone as she looked about. ‘We are all very proud of our subterranean community. Not many Tube stations can boast triple bunks for 5,000, a library, theatre for shows, plays and dancing lessons...’

‘With a grand piano, if you please,’ interrupted Ruby.

‘Quite. Not to mention a nursery, café, first aid post with nurses and doctor’s quarters, all below ground,’ Clara continued.

‘Even got our own Tube hairdresser,’ winked Ruby, plumping the back of her wavy updo.

‘Can you hear the opera singer warming up next door? They’re putting on a performance this evening. Sadler’s Wells are bringing a ballet here next week.’

‘Good grief. Culture, books and a built-in community. I may have to move here myself if this is what life underground has to offer.’

Clara felt herself relax. If there was one thing she loved to talk about it, it was shelter life and its people. They were a community, albeit it a strange one, living along the Central Line but going nowhere. The way Clara saw it, she had a captive audience. Her little library lay firmly at the heart of this underground community, the cultural equivalent of the village pump.

‘Astonishing what lies beneath one’s feet, without one even really knowing,’ he mused. ‘How did it begin?’

‘It was the people who got this place opened,’ Clara enthused. ‘Everyone had their pride, the street shelters weren’t fit for a dog. It was little Phoebe’s dad who,’ and here she inverted her fingers, “acquired” the keys during the first week of the Blitz and in came the families, in their thousands, in search of safety.’

Ruby laughed. ‘Old Harry’s a terrible gambler, he’d bet on two flies crawling up a wall, but he weren’t prepared to take a chance on his family’s life.’

‘I hardly think the Minister wants to hear about the lawlessness of the subversive elements of Bethnal Green,’ said Mr Pinkerton-Smythe quickly.

‘On the contrary,’ he replied. ‘I find it intriguing. I know in Whitehall there was a fear of deep shelter mentality, that people would descend and never come back up again, but quite clearly that’s not the case here.’

‘Chanced’d be a fine thing,’ scoffed Ruby. ‘In the day, people have jobs to go to. We’re working people, not moles!’

The Minister roared with laughter, clearly very taken with

Ruby.

‘Do you have sun-lamps?’ he continued, ‘to counteract the lack of daylight?’

‘No Sir,’ Clara replied. ‘I suppose we’ve got used to working underground. We do suffer with catarrh, the smells down the tunnels can be somewhat, how can I put this, earthy.’

‘But the morning fumigation usually sorts that out,’ Ruby added.

‘And where were the latrines?’ he enquired.

‘Latrines!’ Ruby screeched and Clara braced.

‘We did our business in a bucket!’ she hooted. Ruby had a dirty great dollop of a laugh, she was famous for it in Bethnal Green.

‘To begin with, we all slept here in the westbound tunnels,’ said Clara. ‘But three months after the bombings began, the council officially leased the station from the London Passenger Transport Board.’

‘Which is where I came in,’ jumped in Mrs Chumbley.

‘We scrubbed the tunnels, whitewashed the walls and formed a shelter committee. If you want anything to happen, one needs a committee, don’t you think?’

‘And you are?’ he enquired.

‘Mrs Chumbley, Deputy Shelter Manager under Mr Miller. Besides us, there are 12 full-time wardens, plus the nursery, theatre, café and library staff.’

‘But tell me, why do people sleep down here even now?’

‘Housing,’ Clara replied. ‘There’s a desperate shortage of habitable homes. Besides, people have got used to and like it down here. For some children, it’s the only safe home they’ve ever known.’

She hesitated... ‘That’s not to say we haven’t had our share of tragedies here. Did you hear...’

‘Shall we press on?’ Mr Pinkerton-Smythe said, interrupting Clara.

‘Good idea,’ the Minister remarked, clearing his throat and

calling for silence.

‘And now, without further ado, I should like to award you, Mrs Button, with your official Reading for Victory certification of excellence.’

Clara pushed down her anger. Why were they never allowed to discuss it? Why must their grief always be sacrificed in the name of morale?

Her mother-in-law’s face flashed unnervingly into her mind. The hasty funeral. The doctor’s words. *Pull yourself together.*

‘Clara...’ Ruby hissed, digging her elbow into her side. ‘You all right?’

‘Sorry,’ she mumbled, breathing out slowly and touching her throat.

Her new boss, Mr Pinkerton-Smythe, was staring at her curiously.

The Minister had hustled the photographer of the *Picture Post* to the library counter.

‘Take a photograph of myself and Clara Button, Branch Librarian of Britain’s only Underground Tube Station Library would you Bert? She’s the new poster girl for Reading for Victory.’

‘Am I?’ said Clara, blinking as the camera bulb flashed in her face.

‘Absolutely. Everyone’s talking about this library, word has reached Whitehall...’ He lowered his voice. ‘Even Churchill knows about this little place. Quite the propaganda coup.’

‘Thank you all for joining us underground today.’ A silence finally fell over the library. Clara saw Mr Pepper and his wife slip out the door and wished she could join them.

‘The enemy is trying to infect our minds with the dry rot of doubt and discontent, in the hope that our morale will crumble. We must continue to inform ourselves upon the issues that underlie the conflict and upon what is at stake. To this end, books are indispensable. Bethnal Green Underground Shelter Library is

rendering service to the National Cause by providing the matter and the method of good reading.’

All eyes were on her and Clara wanted to fold herself away in a library book.

‘When the library took a direct hit and its most senior member of staff was killed, there cannot be many gals who would have the gumption to step into the breach.

‘As book sales dip through paper rationing and with the scarcity of new books, the role of the publicly funded municipal library takes on great significance.’

More flash bulbs, reporters scribbled, and Clara prayed for the speech to be over. But the Minister was warming up for a Churchillian finish.

‘Libraries are the engines of our education and our escape, never have they been more important in transforming our lives.

‘Please accept this certificate with the grateful thanks of all at Whitehall.’

Clara took the framed certificate and knew she had to say something.

‘We have been urged to fight for victory, to dig for victory and to save for victory. There can at least be no harm in suggesting that we read for victory,’ she concluded, with a smile.

Applause burst throughout the library and Clara laughed as Ruby put her fingers between her lips and let rip an ear-shattering whistle that drowned out the opera singer next door. The Tube Rats whooped and stamped their feet from outside the door. Mrs Chumbley charged through the crowd in their direction.

‘Gracious,’ said the Minister. ‘I thought libraries were supposed to be quiet spaces.’

‘Not this one,’ chuckled Ruby. ‘It’s always like this. Especially when we have the children’s storytime in the evenings.’

‘First class. Grab them when they’re young and you’ve a reader for life.’

Clara nodded eagerly. 'Absolutely, but we don't just cater for the young. We offer a weekly mobile library service to local factory girls every Friday afternoon. If they can't come to you...'

'You take it to them,' he finished. 'And this must be on the...'
'Bibliobus.'

Clara was rather proud of the old 1935 Morris 25 HP saloon donated by Kearley and Tonge cake and biscuit factory on Bethnal Green Road. 'A Library to your Door' service had proved tremendously popular, especially with the local factory girls, who loved their weekly romance fix.

'I think it's marvellous and you are so in tune with Whitehall's thinking. Librarians must be dynamic in their encouragement of reading for victory.'

The Minister was getting excited now as he warmed to his theme. 'I'm going to put you forward to be interviewed for *The Times*. They're investigating the work of public libraries in impoverished areas.'

'Oh, well. I don't know,' Clara hesitated.

'Don't be bashful, my dear,' said the Minister.

Clara's feminine intuition sensed Mr Pinkerton-Smythe radiating resentment next to her.

'Our aim, Minister, should be to raise the borough's reading standards,' he chipped in with a thin smile.

'We have a moral duty, do we not Mrs Button, to educate? There is an awful lot of...' and here he cast an eye over Clara's bookshelves, 'mental opiates available now. Fluff. Whimsy. Dreadful tedious romances. Books written by the half-educated for the uneducated.'

Clara felt a strain of red flush over her chest.

'With respect, Sir, I disagree. Peter... my colleague believed that pleasure in reading is the true function of books.'

She thought wistfully of the man who had nurtured her love of reading, encouraged her parents to allow her to sit the entrance exam

for the Central Foundation Girls Grammar School in Spitalfields and encouraged her to study for the Diploma in Librarianship.

‘Who are we to say what people ought or ought not to read?’ she persisted.

‘She’s a fair point, does she not?’ said the Minister, turning to Mr Pinkerton-Smythe. ‘War has opened the public library door to many users who previously would only have used a tuppenny library, and we should hate to lose them.’

‘Listen,’ ordered Mr Pinkerton-Smythe. ‘I admire your youthful energy, Mrs Button, but let us remember that, as librarians, it is our duty *not* to tamely accept and cater for lack of taste, but to rectify so sad a condition as speedily as we may and educate our patrons.’

Something inside her snapped.

‘No!’ She slammed her glass down on the library counter.

‘You’re wrong! The women in this shelter are seeking escape, not education.’

‘If they have not enough energy left to read anything but trash, we should be doing them a real service if we could prevent them from reading at all,’ he shot back.

‘Prevent them from reading!’ she exclaimed. ‘What would you have me do, build a romance book bonfire on the platform and burn them all? That way lies Hitler!’

Ruby and the Minister observed the heated exchange in growing disbelief.

‘Well, well, well,’ chuckled the Minister. ‘As you can see, Mr Pinkerton-Smythe, there is nothing tame about your young librarian. She has fire in her belly.’

A terrible silence fell between them. The Minister flicked a look at his wristwatch.

‘As much as I love a robust debate, I must be on my way, my car is waiting.’

He shook everyone’s hand.

'Mrs Button, once more, it's been a pleasure to meet you. Mr Pinkerton-Smythe, watch yourself. You've a firecracker on your hands here, what! My people shall be in touch about that *Times* interview.'

'I must be off too,' muttered Mr Pinkerton-Smythe. 'I'll be back soon and we can continue this.' His voice dripped poison as he stalked from Clara's library.

'Drink this,' Ruby muttered, pressing a glass in her hand, 'you're going to need it when you see whose just walked in.'

Clara turned and the glass froze half-way to her lips.

'Mum. You came.'

Her mother's lips were as thin as a paper cut.

'Please tell me you weren't photographed in that! You look like a floozy! Your mother-in-law's still in mourning dress you know.'

'Can't you be pleased for me Mum...?' her voice trailed off as her mother's eyes filled with tears. How did she do that? Cry almost on command.

'Thank God your father's not here to see this,' she wept, pulling out a hankie.

Clara swallowed sharply, her mind muddled with images of her parents sobbing over Duncan's grave. No one had come right out and blamed her for what had happened, but the look of recrimination was thinly concealed.

How many times had she seen them since then? Three, maybe four times in four years? Plus, that awful charade last Christmas.

'I just wanted you to come to the library and see what I've been doing. I thought it might help you to understand why I carried on working.'

'Well I don't understand. This was a mistake to come here, I had hoped you'd have thought better by now and packed it in.'

Clara lowered her voice as she noticed people around her staring.

'Mum, I need to work. Duncan's gone and I can't bring him

back, but at least down here in the library I'm helping people.' She reached for her mother's hand.

'Besides, I'm on war work now. I can't leave even if I wanted to.'

Her mother shook her hand free.

'You won't be told will you madam. It was always the same with you, even as a child.'

She moved to leave.

'Mum please stay...' Clara begged.

'I'm sorry dear but no. You've made your choices. And now you must live with them. I wash my hands of you.'

She tightened her headscarf and left, the air behind her shimmering with condemnation.

Clara stared after her stunned and then looked down at the Reading for Victory certificate. Had she just sacrificed her family, for the library?