



MYSTERY CELEBRATION

PATRICIA
HUCKLE

Mystery Celebration

by
Patricia Huckle



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Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.
12620 FM 1960, Suite A4-507
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*In loving memory of my husband,
John Beresford Lester Huckle
1934–2001*

Chapter One

The fronds of the newly planted palm whipping against the window and the rain pelting down, curtaining off the road, reminded Joseph Beresford that the wet season could no longer be delayed. He rested the book he'd been reading about World War II on his chest, and, with the image of his mother permeating his thoughts, he stretched out in his black leather recliner, shut his eyes tightly, and once again thought about that dreadful day when he was just a little lad living in cold, frightening London.

* * *

The noisy warplanes flew in at speed, the pilots cruelly giving no thought to the countless innocent men, women and children below. Alone and terrified as the bombs exploded above him, the skinny little blond fellow clamped his tiny frozen hands over his aching ears in a desperate attempt at blocking out the deafening sounds reverberating in his bewildered head.

At the sound of the siren, Joseph had ditched the game he'd been playing, tumbled clumsily into an underground shelter, and struggled to pull the heavy metal door shut—the procedure having been drummed into his head many times by his war-widowed mother.

The little boy had no idea how long he'd been crouching in that dark, damp hellhole. With as much force as his young years could muster, he pushed repeatedly at the solid metal door, but it wouldn't budge. He was alone and scared out of his wits; his need to get out became desperate. Hot tears overflowed from his panicked blue eyes, and, mixed with grey dust permeating the air, the liquid flow formed dark streaks down his flushed cheeks.

There was an awful lot of activity going on out there—sounds of tinkling glass, crashing metal, heavy vehicles overhead, terrified screams—and he wondered why his mother hadn't come looking for him, to pull him out and give him lunch. "Mummy, get me out of here," he shouted again and again, his weeping escalating as she failed to rescue him. It was unbearably cold being buried alive down in the shelter. His sobs grew louder, and he screamed as panic took over. "Help!" he yelled. "Will somebody please help me?"

With blessed relief, he heard the response of a man's gruff voice. "Where are you?"

Excitedly, he called out as loud as he could, "Down here, under the ground! Call my mummy! She knows where to find me!" With utter relief galloping through his tiny body, he dropped upon the dirty, cold, concrete floor and waited.

As the last of the debris was removed from his grave, he saw through a crack the man whose voice came through, loud and clear. "You down there?"

"Yes," the child shouted.

Joseph watched as the heavy door was lifted a few inches then dropped back down. A man said, "Jack! Come here and give me a hand to lift this."

"You need help?" Jack said with a raucous laugh. "The lad down there got himself locked in all by himself, and you need help?"

"Shut up, you idiot, my back's giving me hell. You take hold of that side."

"Hello, young man. Do you want us to pull you out of there?"

"Yes, please, I do, I do," Joseph said, his voice high-pitched and tremulous. He beamed from ear to ear as the thick, grubby, beefy fingers of two men, each with their own war injuries, took hold of his bony wrists and pulled him out, thus releasing him from his prison.

Jack wore a patch over his left eye, and Joseph could see that the skin all around that eye had been burned. Harry obviously had a bad back.

All Joseph wanted was to be held by his beautiful mother, so he pulled away from his rescuers and turned to run into his house but was stopped dead in his tracks as Jack grabbed him by the shirt collar. Overcome by unbelievable horror, Joseph watched a wave of smoke waft upward from his flattened home, taking on the hues of the flashing lights from the emergency vehicles. Looking around, bewildered at the sight before him, he cried out once more for his mother, jerked free, and ran wildly toward the pile of hot rubble.

“Stop!” Jack yelled. “You’ll get burned. It’s very hot over there.”

Joseph looked up and down the street, and soon discovered that the neighbours’ homes had also been bombed. He watched firemen working frantically to control the flames. Overcome by horror and self-pity, he dropped to the muddy ground. With his head on the rubble of what was left of the street, he sobbed.

“Was that your home?” Jack asked, lifting the small child and placing him upon his feet, thus regaining control.

“Yes,” he said amid sobs. “I want my mummy. She told me not to stay out too long ’cause it was cold and lunch was almost ready.”

He squirmed as those two men took hold of an arm each and swung him, unceremoniously, into the back of a sombre-looking black truck. Several pairs of equally panic-stricken eyes stared at Joseph as he joined the other heart-broken homeless. A few lucky children clung to their mothers, but most were alone. He pointed at his mangled tricycle as they drove away but said nothing. His life was in turmoil and he trembled uncontrollably.

Staring, aghast, at the bombed-out London buildings lining the rough, bumpy road on which they journeyed, the puzzled, tearful group finally arrived at their destination on the eastern side of the city.

“Okay, out you get,” Harry said as he turned to greet the lady behind him. “Hello, Sister Rose. Sorry to say we’ve brought you another group of unfortunates.”

“Bless you, young man,” Sister Rose said. “Come inside. You and Jack deserve a cup of tea.”

“We’d love to, Sister, but we have a large area to cover.” Harry wiped his brow and added, “You have no idea how much carnage there is, Sister. There are so many dead and maimed. These are the lucky ones.”

Sister Rose crossed herself, her hands flipping quickly, and prayed, “Dear God, please help us.”

Watching the volunteer workers as they shoved the truck into gear to carry on their duties, Joseph asked the nun holding him and a little girl by their hands, “Is my mother dead?” Joseph’s jaw dropped and tears rolled down his pink cheeks once again as he gazed up at the nun who confirmed his worst fears.

“Yes, laddie,” she said. “Don’t worry; we’ll take care of you from now on.”

He was speechless. A large lump had formed in his throat and he tried desperately not to weep out loud. *Don’t worry?* he thought. *What could she possibly mean?* Of course he would worry. His mother was dead. Dead! He’d seen lots of death in his short few years to understand that all life had left his beloved mother. He’d never see her lovely smiling face or feel her soft golden curls again. There’d be no one to read bedtime stories to him, tuck him in at night, or hold and soothe him as the bombs echoed through the night.

The pretty, rosy-cheeked nun interrupted his sad thoughts. “Come along, young man. I’m Sister Rose. What’s your name?”

“Joseph Beresford, and I live at 22 Chelsea Lane, but the house is gone.” Still puzzled, he looked into the sad green eyes of Sister Rose. “What will happen to my mother?”

“They’ll find her and bury her, Joseph. You can pray for her soul tonight,” Sister Rose said. “Now you can help by telling me your mother’s name.”

“Mummy.”

Sister Rose smiled. “What did your daddy call her?”

“Darl.”

The nun laughed. Joseph wondered what the joke could be. He saw nothing funny, and he was quite sure he wouldn't ever laugh again. Pushing his long, damp hair away from his tear-filled eyes, he stared up at the sad face before him.

"Can you remember anyone calling your mother by any other name?"

"Mrs. Flynn called her Valerie."

"Good, now we're getting somewhere," she said, patting him on the back. "And what did Mrs. Flynn call your daddy?"

"Your old man," Joseph answered in all innocence.

"What did Mr. Flynn call your father?"

"Patrick," he said.

"Good boy!"

Joseph wondered why Sister Rose kept hitting him as another pat was slapped upon his back.

Then she asked, "Joseph, do you know where your father is?"

"Yes, Daddy's in Heaven." Sister Rose placed an arm around his shoulders and squeezed gently. *Much better than a slap*, he thought.

"You did well, Joseph. You may go and play now." She turned to another nun, and Joseph heard her saying, "I have an identity for you, Sister Mary. Another poor orphan."

Play with what? he wondered. In the absence of toys, swings, and a rocking horse, he walked dejectedly up to the tall, wooden gates and watched the monstrous, noisy vehicles with flashing lights.

* * *

Joseph's earliest memory was of the uniformed postal delivery lad handing a telegram to his mother at their cottage gate. His mother had placed her long, slender hand over her mouth as she uttered a guttural cry.

"Oh, dear God, no!" Mrs. Flynn had screamed as she saw the young man approaching her neighbour. She ran to his mother. Women dreaded receiving telegrams during those

dark, uncertain days of war. Valerie Beresford couldn't bring herself to read her own telegram, and pressed it into her friend's hand. Mrs. Flynn ripped open the envelope and read aloud:

"We regret to inform you Captain Patrick George Beresford has been killed in action. He died a hero during a . . ."

As hatred reduced Valerie's mind to vertiginous dizziness, she spat out the words "bloody Germans" before collapsing on to the cold veranda floor. Mrs. Flynn flung the telegram aside and dropped down beside Joseph's mother. She held her as the sobbing came fast and furiously. Huge tears rushed down the new widow's cheeks; she was an injured woman whose world had been cruelly shattered by a stupid damn war. Mrs. Flynn helped her up, led her inside to a chair, and made a pot of tea. The "hero" part of the message hadn't helped one tiny iota; neither had the tea.

"Is there anyone I can call for you, Valerie?"

"No, we don't have any family."

His mother cried until she had no more tears to shed, and Joseph joined her in their mutual misery. "Your father was a wonderful man—a good man," his mother said. "I want you to grow up to be just like him." The unbelievable torture that she'd never see him again edged deep into her now wrinkled brow. "You're the spitting image of your daddy, Joseph. Never tell lies and always do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Joseph nodded, but didn't understand what she meant until many years later when he'd heard a priest repeating those words during a sermon at Mass. He sat erect on the hard, wooden church pew and thought, *Mummy's words*. At that moment, he vowed never to forget them.

* * *

That heralded the same era in which their already dreadful life became unbearable. Early each morning, Joseph and his mother stood in long queues with hundreds of equally

