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TO DIE BUT ONCE

A Maisie Dobbs Novel

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PROLOGUE

Hampshire, England, May 1940

The boy had not had a day without a headache in weeks. How many weeks was it now? And how many aspirin powders had he taken, every night when he arrived back at his digs – a shared room in another lodging house in another town? Another town with airfields close by, and buildings to be painted with that viscous grey emulsion. He wondered about the aspirin and the emulsion as he walked home from the pub, and deep down inside himself, he knew that one had something to do with the other, though his mates on the job hadn't complained. Not that he'd dare say anything – no, he had to keep his mouth shut, because he was lucky to have a job at all, so there was nothing to whine about. And, if truth be told, he should not have been at the pub drinking – but the landlord didn't mind, probably didn't even know. After all, the boy had come in with the older lads, and it's not as if he looked like an apprentice.

He missed his mum. He'd never have mentioned it, not to any of the lads – they teased him enough about being the boy – though

he might have said to Freddie Mayes, ‘Freddie, you would love my mum’s spotted dick pudding.’ And he’d describe the way she kneaded the suet dough, how she added handfuls of sultanas, currants and raisins. Then she’d take a large square of clean white cloth, place the round ball of dough in the middle and tie the ends nice and tight. Then it would go into the saucepan of boiling water to steam for hours. Hours, it would be, and the sweet smell would envelop the kitchen. And if the pudding had been put on the heat later in the day, it would be long after supper time that she’d take it out of the saucepan, unknitting the hot wet cloth with her fingertips, then she’d spoon the pudding into bowls and pour a big dollop of Tate & Lyle Golden Syrup onto every helping. If it was a Sunday, she’d make custard. She’d said in a letter that they were having to cut back on sugar, what with the war. But he couldn’t complain, not really – after all, this job was on account of the war, though for the life of him he’d never come across paint like it. He sighed. At first he’d had trouble getting used to the silence in the country. In London, back in the Smoke, you never heard a footstep behind you, because there were footsteps everywhere. There were always people out on the street, and there was more life. Human life, that is. Mind you, if there was a smog, that made the footsteps sound different, as if someone was messing about with the echo, twisting it, like a plumber shaping a length of pipe to get it around a bend in the house. But now he loved being close to the land, and all that green. It was quiet. Peaceful. Well, it was peaceful once he’d done his work for the day, and when he could get over to the farm.

Not long now. Not far to his tiny room in that strange house with the loopy woman, and all them WAAFs on the floor below.

According to Freddie, they were moving on to the next job in a

couple of days, though this stop had been a good one – a lot of work to do, so the crew had stayed longer, had a chance to settle in a bit, get to know a few locals. And there was the overtime. More money to send home. He stopped. *Blimey my noddle hurts.* He pressed his fingers to his temples, massaging the bluish thin flesh. It wasn't only the emulsion that was giving him the pain, though he was sure it was doing a fair job of killing off a few brain cells. There had been nothing but trouble since he'd come here. Not being in the country trouble, and not work trouble – no, it was people trouble. He wanted to stay, but because of the other business, he wanted to get going. If he had to stick with this job, like his dad said he should, then he wanted to get on with it. He wanted to move on soon, and soon couldn't come fast enough, because his heart would break anyway, leaving the old boy. If only he hadn't . . . but what was it his dad always said? 'You can't look back, son, not in this life. No, you can only look forward and step out in its direction.' And when he'd said, 'What direction?', his dad had said, 'The future, son. The future – always look to your future.' Well, the future wasn't turning out to be the one he wanted. Instead, the future was the next place, another airfield and this painting job. The past was two days ago and two blokes he would rather not see again, though he knew he would, but for now he wanted to forget it. Forget them. *Christ, this head!*

The boy walked on along the path by the stream, then across the rickety wooden bridge, down an alley, a shortcut to his landlady's house. Freddie would wake him later when he came staggering back, in his cups, making more noise because he was trying to be quiet. But the boy knew he'd at least get a bit of shut-eye before he had to pretend to be interested in Freddie bragging about a girl he'd been eyeing up, how they didn't all go for a man in uniform, so he was in

with a chance. Which was just as well, because Freddie wasn't giving up this job in a hurry – reserved occupations, it was, and he'd said he had no blimmin' intention of joining the army and going the way of his father, and look what happened to him the last time the country went to war.

What was that? The boy turned and looked back, stood for a second, perhaps two. *Nothing. Just country sounds. Probably someone's cat on the prowl.* And then the pain again. But this time it was different, this time it was sudden, a deep terrible searing crack across his skull. Night-time turned to light, turned to lots of light, and he could hear his father telling him to look to the future, but the shock felled him, brought him to his knees, and then another wave of pain across his head again, taking him down, grinding his cheek into the path's loose gravel. He reached up with his fingers – shaking fingers, fingers he could not seem to steer – and he touched his head and brought back his hand wet. Wet with his own blood. He felt tears begin to stream from his eyes. Oh, he missed his mum. He missed his dad and, in that moment, he even missed London. Then there was nothing more to think, no other thoughts crossed the boy's mind and time felt so slow, so very slow, though he could hear voices. Long, drawn-out voices. One seemed familiar and he struggled to find the word, the right word to call out to that person, but the word that was the person's name just would not come and he did not know if it was a man or a woman. And as he felt his body being lifted, the streetlight ahead grew faint, and at once he knew his breath was shallow, and then more shallow, and his heartbeat was slowing down, as if an engine inside him had been deprived of fuel.

It was as if someone had reached out and snuffed out a candle.

Just like that, finger and thumb around the flame as he made one last attempt to form the words that would not come. Darkness enveloped him, pressed against his chest, filled his mouth, suffocated him, and the future his dad had told him to step out towards ceased to exist.



CHAPTER ONE

London, 20th May, 1940

Maisie Dobbs pulled off Tottenham Court Road, manoeuvring her Alvis drophead coupe motor car into Warren Street. She waved to Jack Barker, who she knew should have retired by now – he had been selling newspapers on his patch outside the Tube station for years, and in that time she had seen him become more and more stooped, taking precious seconds to fold the newspapers ready to hand to busy office workers and shop assistants as they rushed to and from work. There was a time when his grandson had helped out before and after school, but now young Peter was not so young any more, and was in the army.

Maisie wound down the window and slowed the motor car. She held out a coin for the man to take. ‘No need for change, Mr Barker,’ said Maisie, as she placed the newspaper on the passenger seat. ‘I bet you miss your helper.’

‘I do at that, Miss Dobbs. I had another one of ’em lined up to give me a hand, only he was evacuated to Wales. But I reckon

he'll be home soon. His mum keeps saying that what with this Bore War, there's nothing happening. But I've told her – there's war happening all right – it's just not reached us. I reckon your Mr Beale must be worried sick – knowing what he went through in the last war, and now his eldest is over there with the expeditionary force. He must be losing sleep over it. According to the *Express*, the Germans have marched right across the Ardennes, through Holland and now they're into France – too blimmin' close to us, for my liking.'

Maisie nodded. Her assistant, Billy Beale, was indeed losing sleep worrying about his son, who was serving with the army in France, but he was also concerned for his wife, Doreen. Years before they had already lost a little girl, Lizzie, who had died after contracting diphtheria – Doreen had suffered a breakdown following the tragedy. Billy had therefore decided it was best for her to take their youngest child, Margaret Rose, to stay with an aunt in Hampshire, leaving him at home with his second son, Bobby, an apprentice mechanic.

'Did you see they've put more sandbags around the station?' said Barker. 'Before long there won't be room for me out here on the pavement.'

'Oh, they'll make room for you, Mr Barker – what would we all do without you!' replied Maisie, turning her head to check for traffic as she moved away from the kerb.

Barker laughed and waved, but Maisie's smile faded as she rolled up the window. While the newspapers kept up a stream of positive rhetoric, she had heard from Douglas Partridge, who now worked for the wartime Ministry of Information, that the expeditionary force in France was considered to be in a precarious position.

She drove along the street, passing the Prince of Wales pub, where the landlord, Phil Coombes, had just emerged and was ambling along to a cafe just a short way down Tottenham Court Road. Maisie thought she could set a clock by Phil Coombes, for he left the premises at the same time each morning to walk to a nearby cafe, where he would order a bacon sandwich and a cup of tea. It was his one break in the day, otherwise he never left the pub because he was either behind the bar or, when the doors were locked for the night, in the flat above. Coombes and his wife had raised two sons and a daughter in the flat, but now only Vivian, the middle child, remained at home.

Even before Maisie raised her hand to wave, and to receive from the landlord a desultory lifting of the hand in response, Maisie knew that all was not well. The way Coombes carried himself – with shoulders drooping and his head forward, as if trying to set a pace for his lagging feet – indicated a troubled man. As she turned left onto Fitzroy Street to park the Alvis, Maisie wondered if she should approach Coombes, ask him what was wrong and perhaps offer help of some sort. But had she not learnt her lesson time and again, that not everyone in straitened circumstances wants to be helped? Yet when she looked back at Phil Coombes, she felt an ache of concern in her chest, as if the man's emotions had traced a direct line to her heart.

She was just about to set off in the direction of the cafe on Tottenham Court Road, hoping to catch up with Coombes, when Billy Beale walked around the corner, his gas mask in its box hanging over one shoulder by the strap, and bouncing up and down on his hip.

'Mornin', miss.' With a deft pinch to the lighted end, he extinguished the cigarette he was smoking, and put the stub in his pocket.

‘Did you come up from Hampshire this morning?’ asked Maisie.

Billy nodded. ‘Makes all the difference, not having to come into work until late on a Monday, or even a Tuesday morning. I miss my girls, so it’s been handy, you giving me the extra time so I can get down there once a week. And you should see little Margaret Rose – all apple cheeks and growing like ivy. She’ll be almost as tall as the boys, make no mistake.’

‘I thought as much when she was a toddler – she was like a mannequin even then.’ They fell into step towards the office on Fitzroy Square. ‘Have you heard from young Billy?’

Billy shook his head. ‘Boys of his age are not exactly known for writing, are they? Doreen sends a letter or card once a week – keeping it short because she knows he won’t read anything too long – but even when he was over here in barracks, it was as much as he could do to pick up a pencil and write a quick note home. I know – I was like it myself at that age. It was only when I came back from over there that it occurred to me that it wouldn’t have hurt to write a bit more – but then there’s the censor peering at everything, so half the letter would have been blacked out anyway.’

They reached the front door of the grey, smoke-stained mansion that housed the first-floor offices of Maisie Dobbs, Psychologist and Investigator.

‘I don’t like him being in France though,’ Billy continued. ‘And I reckon it was a shock to him. He only joined up because he wanted to drive a tank. Well, he’s driving something, but I don’t know how far they’ll get with it – I heard talk in the Prince that they could be in the thick of it, if Hitler’s boys get any farther into France.’ He shook his head. ‘My worst fear since the day he was born – and his brother – was that they would be in uniform. By the way, miss, where’s your gas mask?’

‘As usual I’ve either left it at home or it’s still hanging on the hook behind the office door – I keep forgetting it, which means I’m in good company with almost half the people in London,’ said Maisie.

As they made their way up the stairs, and Maisie unlocked the door to the two-room office, Billy went on talking about his sons – not only Billy, who was named for his father, but sixteen-year-old Bobby, now an apprentice mechanic who was proving to be very good at his job. And it seemed Billy always had a story to tell about his role with the local Air Raid Precautions station – as an ARP man, he patrolled his neighbourhood after dark to ensure that people had blackout curtains closed, and that everything was as it should be in case of an attack by Hitler’s Luftwaffe.

‘Talking about the Prince – Billy, have you spoken to Phil Coombes lately?’ said Maisie. ‘I saw him this morning, and he seemed troubled. I – I’ve been thinking about him all the time you’ve been talking about Billy and Bobby. Do you know anything about his sons? Perhaps he’s worried about them.’

‘Don’t know what he has to worry about. The youngest is an apprentice painter and decorator who managed to cop himself some jammy job where he won’t have to enlist when his time comes, and the older boy is in some other reserved occupation, so he can sit out the war too, for as long as it lasts. I’d feel a lot better if my Billy were home on British soil.’

‘I know you would,’ said Maisie, as she pulled a sheaf of papers from her bag and placed them on the desk used by her part-time secretary, Sandra. ‘But I can’t get Mr Coombes out of my mind. I might . . . well, we’ll see.’

Billy looked up from leafing through the post he had picked up on the hall table at the foot of the stairs. ‘Don’t mind me saying so, miss,

but when you have one of your thoughts like that, there's usually something to it. Do you want me to have a word with him? I can go in for a swift half o'shandy come twelve o'clock.'

Maisie nodded. 'Would you? That's a good idea. Just to put my mind at rest, and—'

She was interrupted by the bell above the office door – a short blast, then a second's silence before two longer blasts, as if the caller had at first been reticent, but had then drawn upon a strength of resolve.

'Bit early for a visitor. Were we expecting anyone?' asked Billy.

Maisie shook her head. 'Go and let him in, Billy.'

'Him?'

'Yes. I'm sure it's Phil Coombes.'

Billy reached for the door handle. 'I won't bet against it.'

Maisie shrugged and bit the inside of her lip. 'It's one of those serendipitous things, isn't it? You talk about someone or they enter your thoughts, and then there they are. And he seemed so troubled. He knows what we do here – to a point – so let's hope we can help him.'

Billy returned with the caller, who was indeed Phil Coombes. Maisie held out her hand to a chair pulled up by the gas fire. 'It might be spring, Mr Coombes, but I find mornings are still a bit chilly, especially in this old building.'

Coombes nodded, and looked around at Billy.

'Cup of tea for you, mate?'

Coombes shook his head. 'Nah, thanks all the same, Bill – just had a cup around the corner.'

'With your usual?' asked Billy.

‘I didn’t have the stomach for it, and I look forward to that bacon sandwich, as a rule. I just had a bit of toast and didn’t really fancy that.’ He looked at Maisie, who tapped the back of the chair, though she realised Coombes was waiting for her to be seated first.

‘Come and sit down, Mr Coombes. You too, Billy – we can have a cuppa later.’ She nodded in the direction of Billy’s desk, reminding him to pick up his notebook and a pencil. Bringing her attention back to Coombes, she leant forward. ‘You’re troubled about something, Mr Coombes – you’re not your usual cheery self, and you haven’t been for a while. How can we help you?’

‘I didn’t want to bother you, Miss Dobbs, really I didn’t, but I thought that, what with your line of work, you could help out.’

Billy glanced at Maisie, and raised an eyebrow.

‘We’re here to listen, so please go on,’ encouraged Maisie.

‘I – I don’t have anything to pay you, and I know, Miss Dobbs, that you work for Scotland Yard now and again, and you’ve had all them big cases – missing persons, unexplained deaths and what have you. I don’t miss much. And I’m sure you can charge a pretty penny, but we’ve nothing put by for this sort of thing.’

‘Please don’t worry about money, Mr Coombes. Really – what’s important now is to talk about what’s on your mind. Should Billy nip round to bring Mrs Coombes to the office? Would you feel better if she were here?’

The man looked up at Maisie and shook his head, his eyes wide, fearful. ‘Oh no. No, I don’t want her to know how much it’s bothering me. It’s best if she thinks there’s nothing to worry about.’

‘So what is bothering you, mate?’ said Billy. ‘Come on, Phil, get it off your chest. You’ll be all the better for it.’

Coombes nodded. ‘I know this sounds like it’s nothing, but I can’t

ignore this terrible ache I've got here every time I think about our boy, Joe. He's the youngest one. We haven't heard from him for a few days, and it's unlike him not to get on the blower once on a Wednesday night, and again of a Sunday morning – well, I say it's not like him, but for the past couple of weeks it's as if he hasn't wanted to give us a ring, hasn't wanted to say much.'

'I didn't know you had a telephone in there, Phil,' said Billy.

Coombes sighed, as if answering even the most simple question would exhaust him. 'The brewery had it put in a year ago now, and it's come in handy for us, not only for the business, but since the war, with the boys not at home any more. When Joe picks up the telephone wherever he is, it's not that he can talk for long – he's never got enough pennies on him for a start, you know what lads are like – but at least we hear from him, and he knows we like to have a word, even if it's a quick one, but as I say, something feels off to me.' He looked at Billy as if for affirmation. Billy nodded. *Keep going.* 'Viv's a different kettle of fish,' continued Coombes. 'She started work at the telephone exchange when she left school, as a trainee, so she always gives us a bell when she's on her way home from a shift, and then we don't worry. What with soldiers coming in from all over – Australia, Canada, just like it was in the last war – you want to know your daughter's safe. She's turned nineteen now, doing well at her job – they've promoted her to working on the government exchanges – and she's a nice-looking girl, which is a father's worry.'

Billy leant forward. 'Isn't Joe the same age as my Bobby – about sixteen?'

'Another six months. Archie, the eldest, is going on twenty-one now. Not that we see much of him – different kettle of fish to his sister

and brother. Couldn't wait to get off on his own, though he sometimes comes along to see us after closing time of a Sunday afternoon, for a spot of dinner before we open again. Then he's off. It's all I can do to get him to stay and help me change a barrel – I reckon he had enough of pubs when he was a youngster.'

'Tell us about Joe, Mr Coombes,' said Maisie.

Phil Coombes wiped the back of his hand across one eye and then the other. 'I know it's only a short stretch since we heard from him – last Wednesday, it was – but like I said, something seems off to me . . .' His voice tapered off, and he looked down at the carpet, as if tracing its paisley patterns with his eyes.

'Go on,' said Maisie. 'First tell us what he's doing and why he's not living at home – he's only fifteen.'

'He apprenticed to Yates and Sons, the painters and decorators.' Coombes paused and shook his head, as if not quite believing the turn of events. 'One of the regulars got him the job when he was coming up to leaving school, couple of year ago, come October. Seemed a good position, learning a trade, and old Bill Yates was always very good at pushing for the big jobs, and his son, Mike, is even better at it. He gets jobs over in those mansions. Belgravia, Mayfair and the like. So Joe was learning from the ground up – and it's a job with prospects.' Maisie was about to ask another question when Coombes smiled as he thought about his son. 'Very easy-going boy, my Joe. Very solid young bloke – see his hands' – Coombes held out his hands – 'calm. Very precise with his hands, he was – even Yates himself said Joe's laying out of the wallpaper ready for hanging was perfect, exact, just as it should be. He said he'd known blokes on the job for years who couldn't lay out paper like that – pasted and folded, ready to hold up and brush out to keep the pattern running right.'

‘But does that work take him away from London?’ asked Maisie.

Coombes shook his head. ‘Just before war was declared, it all changed. Yates had a visit from the RAF brass. They wanted him for special war work – it was a big contract, all tied up and a sizeable down payment, according to one of the other lads who works for him, name of Freddie Mayes. Yates has got a big enough business, and what with the war, both Bill and Mike Yates realised that people would probably start pulling in their horns and wouldn’t be having so much painting and decorating done on their big houses, and the council contracts would probably dry up too, so they jumped at the chance. And like I said, they’re being paid a pretty penny – laying out government money for the painters to be in lodgings, the lot.’

‘What sort of contract was it, Phil?’ asked Billy.

‘Joe said he couldn’t talk much about it – that he had to sign some papers to say he wouldn’t let on about his job. But he told me when I promised him I didn’t have any spies in the pub walls, and that it was a father’s right to know his son’s work.’ Coombes looked up at Maisie and Billy. ‘So this is secret, right? Anything I say in this room to you two? I don’t want this getting out, because if it’s supposed to be on the QT, I don’t want my son’s name in the dirt.’

‘Every conversation that takes place in my office is held in strict confidence, Mr Coombes – Phil.’ Maisie laid her hand upon her chest.

Coombes pressed his lips together, then continued. ‘Turns out the job was to take the crew to every single airfield or RAF station in the whole of the British Isles, with the most important being the ones within striking distance of the coast – they were to be the priority. Here’s how Joe explained it to me: the lads on the crew go in a

Yates' van down to a place – as far as I know, they've just been in Hampshire, not far from Southampton and Portsmouth, as the crow flies – and when they get there they're put up in lodgings, and they report to the airfield. Paint is brought in on a special lorry – a Yates' lorry, not RAF, but special all the same – then they have to set about painting all the buildings with this emulsion, but only the outside for most of them.'

'Was it for camouflage? Did he say?' asked Maisie.

Coombes shook his head. 'He said it was a sort of grey in colour, so I suppose there was that camouflage business, but that's not what it was for. It was a sort of – what do they call it?' He frowned. 'For fire. To stop a building catching on fire – that's it, it's called a fire *retardant*.'

'Sounds like a jammy job to me – paint buildings for the government and take their money. And wasn't it a reserved profession?' said Billy.

Coombes looked at Billy Beale. 'Yes, it was a protected job – he could spend the rest of the war for however long it lasts, just painting airfield buildings for the RAF. But he said the paint wasn't like anything he'd ever come across. Sort of thick, very viscous, he said – his word, "viscous". And he reckoned it gave him headaches, terrible headaches, what with the vapour coming off it. It sounded like strong stuff.'

'What do you mean?' asked Maisie, pressing a hand to her right temple. As Coombes described his son's work, a headache had started behind her eyes, moving to her crown. She felt unsettled, and her vision was blurred, just for a second. 'Did he describe what was strong about the paint? Just the smell?'

'Joe told me that after they'd finished putting a few coats onto each wall, they had to line up a row of blowtorches against the wall,

right close to where they'd just painted it, and they had to leave them there burning for a good few hours while they moved on to the next wall, or the next building.'

'It's a wonder the wall didn't come down,' said Billy.

'No, it didn't come down – that's the thing. Joe said there wasn't a mark on it, not even a small smoke stain. They'd run those blowtorches, and after they took them away hours later, the wall looked like they'd just finished painting.'

'And what was this emulsion called?' asked Maisie.

'Oh, it didn't have a name. Just a number.' Phil Coombes shook his head. 'Blessed if I can remember the number – I don't know if he even told me. If I find it, I'll let you know, because I'm sure I wrote something down.'

'And you think Joe has been affected by this paint, that he might be ill,' said Billy, making a note in his book.

'I don't know, mate. I just know we haven't heard, and that he hasn't been himself lately. You know your own, and I know something's wrong.'

Maisie allowed a few seconds of silence as Coombes' story of his son's work lingered in the air. 'First of all, have you spoken to Mr Yates? Or to a foreman at their works? Where's their depot?'

'I've been on the blower a couple of times. A young lady in the office told me Mr Yates would return my call, but he hasn't. I had my other boy go round there to the works – it's just across the river, in Kennington – and he said there was no one there to talk to. He said the typist said she'd only been in a couple of hours, and that since she arrived, everyone was out on a job, and that she didn't have any notes regarding the whereabouts of an individual employee.'

Maisie nodded. 'I would imagine all the workers are out during

the day, on job sites. Do you know how Joe got on with his work mates? He was an apprentice – were there others, or was he the youngest of the crew? Do you know if the men working with him were beyond apprenticeship?’

‘I reckon he was the only apprentice on the crew, and the youngest of them. The other painters were always sent all around London, working for Yates – the business lost a number to the services, so apparently it sort of balanced out when a few contracts were cancelled, after war was declared. Mind you, I would imagine they’ll get it back if this government work goes well. But according to Joe, Mike Yates can manage the work still going on in London, plus this contract. The older painters and decorators are too long in the tooth for the army, so they can teach the apprentices, who are too young. They’ve got a few younger men in the crew with Joe, probably ones that don’t want to get dirty fighting. Before he . . . before he sort of changed, Joe said that they were all looking out for him, being the apprentice on the job, and that he was eating well and getting his sleep. No late nights with the boys – he was brought up in a pub, so he knows how to take care of himself.’

‘What do you mean by “sort of changed”?’ asked Maisie. ‘Can you be more specific? I know it’s hard, because when it’s someone we’re close to, it’s often something we feel and it’s not anything easy to describe.’

Coombes rubbed his chin. ‘Oh, I don’t know. It’s been four weeks since he was last home for a Saturday and Sunday. He was quiet then. Me and the missus put it down to him being a bit tired, what with knocking around the country, sleeping in different places. She thought he could do with a tonic, and even went around to Boots, to see what she could get for him. You know, it probably seemed like a

big adventure at first, this job, but them lads are working at a clip, and then there were the headaches, like I said.'

Maisie allowed another moment of silence to pass before asking her next question. 'Is there anything else you can add?'

Coombes shook his head. 'I know he was all right before that last visit. One of Archie's mates was stationed in the area, so he looked in on Joe at his digs in Whitchurch and said he was on top form. Those were his words. *Top form*. But I don't think he's on any top form now, or he would have picked up the blower and made a call to me and his mum. And all we know is that he's near this place called Whitchurch.'

'Hampshire. I can—' Billy began to speak, but Maisie shook her head, aware Phil Coombes was watching her, waiting.

'As Billy was about to say, he's making regular visits to Hampshire to see his wife and daughter. I believe he's not too far from Whitchurch.' She paused again. 'Phil – Mr Coombes – I think I should speak to your wife. She should know you came to talk to us. I understand you don't want her to be worried, but the thing is, I bet she is worried sick too, and it might help if she's given the opportunity to air her feelings without thinking she's adding to your worries. Something she says might throw more light on Joe's situation.' Maisie smiled at Coombes. 'I promise I will take care of her. And in the meantime, Billy here will go along to Yates' yard, and have a word with them – you know Billy, he's a terrier. He won't be put off by anyone and will find out if something's amiss about Joe's working conditions. They're probably not used to dealing with families, because their workers have always been in London, so they go home at night. Your questions might easily be settled.'

‘I never thought of it that way.’

‘But all the same, I am taking your concerns seriously, and we will do all we can to help.’ Maisie came to her feet. ‘And you’re not to worry about the money.’

She caught Billy’s eye.

‘I’ll see you out, mate,’ offered Billy.

Coombes nodded and held out his hand to Maisie. ‘Thank you, Miss Dobbs. I feel better, having got that off my chest. I’ll tell Sally to come round after closing time this afternoon – that all right?’

‘Perfect. I’ll be here. And she’ll have a chance to see Sandra’s baby – she comes in one or two afternoons a week with him, to catch up with the paperwork. It’s a treat for all of us, seeing young Martin. Anna, our evacuee, loves it when he comes to the country.’

‘How’s the little lady getting on?’

‘Very well, Mr Coombes – thank you for asking. We’ll see Sally at about three o’clock then.’

‘Three o’clock it is.’

Billy was holding the office door open for Phil Coombes, when Maisie called out.

‘Oh, just one more small thing – do you have the name of the lad who was in touch with Joe – his brother’s friend?’

‘Teddy Wickham. Nice lad – known the family for years.’

Maisie thanked Coombes, and nodded to indicate that it was her final question.

Maisie was waiting, still sitting by the gas fire, staring into the flame, when Billy returned to the office and took his seat again.

‘What do you think, miss?’

‘I think he has cause for concern. I know it’s easy to say boys

will be boys, that they don't keep up with their parents when they're away like Joe's away, but he's a lad who always struck me as someone who is respectful of his family. They're a tight little unit – look at how he grew up, over the pub. In some respects, he probably was looking forward to getting away, setting out on a big adventure – but that aside, Phil's description of the past weeks is a bit unsettling. Joe might not be well and his fellow workmates have failed to notice, so he's soldiering on. Or he might have been ill and told his mates not to say anything to Yates – he might be fearful about losing his apprenticeship.'

'I can see that.'

'So can I – to a point. But there's something that worries me far more.'

'Miss?'

'Think back to when Mr Coombes first started telling us about his son, about his worries – not a few minutes into the conversation. He made a slip.'

'What sort of slip.'

'“Very precise with his hands, he was . . .” He used the past tense, Billy. When he looked down at his own hands, and talked about his son, about his steady hands. Past tense.'

'You don't think he's got something to do with his son going quiet?'

'At this point . . . no, I don't think so. But I believe Mr Coombes has a greater sensitivity with regard to his children than he might give himself credit for. We must get to work without delay, Billy – I fear for Joe's safety.'

'But if you look at it another way, he's been working for the government.'

‘We’re at war, Billy. There are thousands of sons – and daughters – working for the government. Army, air force, navy, and in jobs like Joe’s that no one knows about. They’re all government jobs. No one is guaranteeing their safety.’

‘And don’t I know it.’