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THE CONSEQUENCES OF FEAR

A Maisie Dobbs Novel

JACQUELINE WINSPEAR

Allison & Busby Limited
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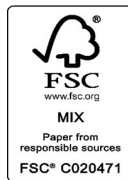
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PROLOGUE

St Ermin's Hotel, Caxton Street, Westminster,
Friday evening, 3rd October 1941

'Right, son, this one's going to that address in Leverstone Road – you go over Vauxhall Bridge and after a few lefts you're almost there. Know where it is?' The porter pointed to the handwritten address on the envelope as he handed it across the desk to the boy, who grasped it, ready to leave for his next destination.

'Reckon I know it,' said the boy, glancing at the address. 'It's on my way home.'

'Not so fast, young Freddie Hackett. You might have to leg it back here with a reply before you can run all the way to your gaff. The bloke you give this to will let you know.' The porter glanced at the boy over half-moon glasses, pulled a fob watch from his waistcoat pocket and nodded as he checked the time. He regarded the boy again. 'Now you mind how you go, laddie – this run's a good couple of miles, so let's hope he don't have a return message. You're quick on your pins all right, but them bloody Gerry bombers are at it again.'

‘I’m like a cat, Mr Larkin – I can see in the dark.’ The boy grinned and held out his hand, wiggling his fingers.

‘Don’t you worry – I wouldn’t forget this.’ The porter reached into his pocket and brought out a shilling, then flicked it towards the boy. The boy caught it between two fingers, slipped the money into his jacket pocket, fastened a safety pin to keep the pocket closed and pushed the envelope into his trouser band, covering it with his pullover. Then he was gone.

Poor little bugger, thought Larkin as he made his way back into the foyer. *Poor little legs running all over the blimmin’ place.*

‘The runner get off all right?’

Larkin looked up as a large man in a well-cut pinstripe suit descended the sweeping staircase leading to the upper floors of a grand building that seemed designed to give an impression of strength and yet genteel hospitality, as one might expect of a hotel with a series of upstairs rooms requisitioned by clandestine government services.

‘Yes, sir, Mr MacFarlane. He just left.’

MacFarlane ran a hand across hair that was fast balding, and nodded. ‘You don’t like it any more than I do, Larkin – sending boys not old enough to shave off along the streets of London when bombs are falling.’

‘Can’t say as I do, Mr MacFarlane. But that one has got some speed to him, make no mistake. I reckon he could run a marathon, could young Freddie Hackett. The Air Raid Precautions bods who recruited him when they went round the schools, well, they said he was the fastest runner they’d seen – and with enough speed on him to go to the Olympics one day.’

‘Good – we can all be there to watch him get his gold – and beat Hitler’s bloody Germans,’ said MacFarlane.

‘Not a chance. By the time this war is over and they get around to having an Olympics, I’d say his best will have passed him by – that’s if he comes out the other side, poor little bugger. He’s only twelve.’

‘And he’s not the only one out there, Larkin. Not the only youngster doing war work.’

The porter nodded and tapped an evening newspaper he’d picked up from a nearby table. ‘Seen this? Turns out Hitler has said that the Germans have all but destroyed Russia and that they can beat all possible enemies no matter how much money they’ve got, even billions. What do you reckon to that, Mr MacFarlane? Sticking his neck out a bit, don’t you think?’

MacFarlane raised his eyebrows as he answered in a low voice. ‘Probably trying to wave a red cape at the Yanks, is my guess. Trying to pull them in so he can say he’s knocking them into the next world.’ He looked at his watch. ‘Right, I’m leaving. Got to see a man about a dog and then I’m off to Baker Street.’

Larkin smiled as MacFarlane turned and made his way towards the side entrance. *Got to see a man about a dog.* See a pint or two in the Cuillins of Skye more like, thought Larkin. He could just as easily have had his drink in the Caxton Bar at the hotel, but who could blame the bloke for wanting to get out to his favourite pub for a bit of a breather? After all, it wasn’t as if he had anyone at home, waiting for him. And he worked all hours, if Larkin’s ledger was anything to go by.

The boy raced across Vauxhall Bridge, looking up every few paces as he ran, feet light on the ground and not even breaking a sweat. He was the best and always had been. He’d won every race at school – the teacher told him he would smash the stopwatch wide open one

day. He ran fast because the winner always got a sweet, and he really wanted that sweet the teacher held in his hand. He would have run to the moon for a bit of chocolate. Sometimes he saved it for Iris, his sister – a special treat for their lovely little Iris. But most of the time he couldn't wait and would pop it in his mouth, ready to run again.

Two florins and a half-crown jangled in his pocket – he couldn't hear the jangling on account of the bombers, but he could feel the coins bumping against this hip. He slowed down towards the end of the bridge, looking left across the water in the direction of the East End. It was burning again and he could see fires south of the river, in Walworth and Bermondsey. And there was that sound the bombs made when they dropped, a sort of *crump-crump-crump*, and he could hear the bells from ambulances and fire engines. Those were the only sounds on his run over Vauxhall Bridge.

The bombers didn't come over like they did in the Blitz, like a swarm of big death-dealing insects blackening the sky, but they still came and they still had it in for London, and all over the country. He sometimes read the papers while he was waiting for a message, so he knew all about the other cities and towns that had copped it. He wondered if boys like him in Leeds and Portsmouth had to run through the night with envelopes tucked in their trousers. But he reckoned that if he kept running, he'd be all right: a moving target was harder to hit. It was stopping that scared him. It had been a warm couple of days, for October, but he didn't want to slow down to take off his jacket in case his money dropped out. If he didn't hand his earnings over to his father, he'd get the belt for his trouble.

He turned onto one street, then another on his way to the address on the envelope – he never had to look twice at an address – and at once the sky lit up again. *Crump-crump-crump*. That's when he

saw two men ahead, illuminated by a Bomber's Moon and falling incendiaries. He didn't like what he saw – there was shouting, and then the men were struggling, hanging onto each other, fighting, and he didn't want to run into any trouble. This blimmin' bombing was trouble enough. He slowed down, but felt a finger of fear, of warning, shimmy down his spine. A doorway offered refuge, but was he too close? Could they see him? Bloody hell, he might as well have asked for the lights to go on all over London. He flattened himself against the wall. If the house behind him hadn't been a bombed-out shell, he would have knocked on the door and begged to be let in. He heard his heart beating in his ears and hoped that whatever was going to happen, happened soon – bombs he could tolerate, but people trying to kill each other when the Germans were trying to slaughter everyone in the blimmin' country, well, no, he couldn't understand that at all. People going for each other like that, it scared him something rotten.

Freddie crouched down in the doorway. One of the men appeared to have the upper hand now. He'd taken the other man and whisked him round, and had his neck in the crook of his elbow. Blimey, that bloke had big hands. Another flash of light and he saw everything, as if someone had turned up the gas lamp. The big bloke was wearing a raincoat, his dark hair swept back. If he'd had a hat, he wasn't wearing it now. More flashes and the man was illuminated again. Who was that film star he looked like? Freddie had gone to the pictures one Saturday morning, spending the bit extra Larkin had given him out of his own pocket. Old Larkin was a good sort – it was as if he knew what it was like for Freddie at home. Victor Mature! That was his name. Lon Chaney Jr was in the picture too. It was called *One Million B.C.* But this bloke looked nastier than old Victor – and, blimey, that's a scar.

More flashes of light, more *crump-crump-crump* as bombs fell. Freddie wanted to get moving, but was now paralysed by the violence before him. The big man with the dark hair pulled out a knife – Freddie saw it glint in the flashes of light coming from the skies. And then it was done. He saw the man push the knife straight into the other man’s left side, then pull it out, and with a snarl across his face, he plunged the weapon into the man’s heart. It wasn’t like one of those pictures at the Gaumont. This poor sod went down with his eyes wide open, blood pouring from his mouth, and the murderer – oh dear God, he had just seen a real murder – pulled the knife out of the dead man’s body and wiped it across his chest. For a second, Freddie thought he saw two men standing over the body, but his eyes had gone all blurry, so he wiped the back of his hand across his face to stop himself seeing double and looked up again in time to see the man – the killer – calmly put the knife in his pocket. He looked about him, then he’d gone on his way. Just walked off, steady as you like, into the darkness.

The boy leant over and vomited onto the dusty red tiles outside the remains of the door. And he’d wet himself. He felt his bottom lip tremble and his hands were shaking. *Oh Christ, I hope the envelope . . .* but it was all right, it was dry. Not like his trousers.

Freddie Hackett sat for a while longer, trying not to sob. The envelope had to be delivered soon, or there would be trouble. But trouble would come when he got home and his father found out about the mess he’d made of his trousers. If he was lucky, Arthur Hackett wouldn’t be home when he got there. And perhaps they’d dry with the heat of his body. That’s what his mum said when the washing hadn’t dried properly on the line out the back. ‘Never mind, love,’ she’d say. ‘It’ll dry out with the heat of your body.’ He sometimes

wondered why she bothered at all, scrubbing the clothes and putting them through the wringer, only to see smuts from the trains all over them when she brought in the laundry.

Another minute, that's all he'd need, and he'd be ready to start running again.

After a while the patch on his trousers didn't feel so wet, so he emerged from the doorway. He jumped up and down to get his legs moving, as if he were letting a motor car idle in neutral so the oil could get around the engine before putting it into gear, and then he started running again, making sure to look the other way as he passed the body of a man he'd seen murdered while bombs fell across London, probably killing a few hundred more when they landed. Or a few thousand.

It took another ten minutes to find the address, a row of houses still standing in a street that had otherwise been razed to the ground. He looked up at the Victorian terrace house and reached for the door knocker – but the door opened without him even touching the brass ring. A man holding an oil lamp put his hand on Freddie's shoulder and pulled him in.

'I don't want the air raid patrol round here because someone's seen a light coming from my house,' said the man.

Freddie looked up and saw a scar move. No. Two scars moved, one on each side of his face, and there was another little one under his eye too, or was that the way the lamp flickered, making a bit of skin seem extra white? Freddie didn't like scars – they frightened him. But were they scars, or was it just the man's face? It didn't matter, because right now this bloke scared him something rotten, even though he was smiling. Freddie was as frightened as he had been in that doorway, because he could have sworn on his grandmother's grave that this

was the very same man he'd just seen murder another bloke. He was standing right there, in front of him – a killer.

'You're a brave boy, running through all that. Which way did you come?'

Freddie might have wanted to vomit again, but he was no fool and took care not to reveal his route. 'Oh, I took a shortcut I know after the bridge – down Chamois Street and then round the back of Watsons' factory.'

'I don't know that way.'

Freddie shrugged, looking down at his feet because he didn't want to see the man's face again, not if he could help it. 'Any message to go back, sir?'

'Just a minute. You can wait in there by the fire.' The man pushed open the door to the parlour, where a small fire was beginning to catch. 'Looks like you could do with drying out. Nasty out there when those bombers come in. I'd shit myself every night, if I were you.'

Freddie entered the room and held his hands out to the flames. If he moved closer the growing heat might finish the drying on his trousers. Funny that, having a fire – it's not as if it was chilly in the house. Mind you, he never felt the cold much, even in winter. But there were papers in the grate, scorched, as if the man had been burning documents. Freddie knew that wasn't unusual – he'd often seen people do that with a message he'd just delivered. They'd take a match to the paper, or open the door to a stove and push it in with a poker. But there was this room, and it was strange too, he thought. His family didn't have much, but his dad had an old armchair and there was a straight-backed wooden chair for his mum, while he and Iris had orange crates to sit on. And there was a bit of scraggy carpet on the floor that his dad told him had 'fallen off the back of

a lorry'. This room was almost empty. No pictures, no mirror, no plant in the window – his nan always had a plant in the window to stop the neighbours nosing in. Well, she did until she and Grandad were killed when the house was bombed out.

The door opened and the man nodded towards the passage.

'No return message. You can go. Get on home, boy, to your people.' Freddie rushed past, ready to scamper out of the house. 'Hey, not so fast, Jesse Owens. Take this.' The man pressed a half-crown into his hand, the long lines on his face appearing to have a life of their own as he smiled and patted him on the head.

Freddie ran down the road, stopping once to slip the half-crown into his sock. If he positioned it right, it would sit nicely on top of the soft bit where there was a hole in his shoe. It would even him up a bit. This coin was one he was keeping. He'd earned it for Mum and Iris tonight, and it wouldn't be piddled up the wall outside the Duke of Northumberland pub when his father turned out in his cups.

As Freddie ran, doubt began to creep in. The man with the scars on his face had been very generous. Almost kind. Could he have imagined it all? Could he have been wrong about witnessing a murder – might he have been mistaken, and the second man just sort of fell? His mum would tell him off for reading too many comics if he told her about it; she'd tell him he had a very active imagination. His mum was a clever one and said things like that. But even though she used long words and read library books in the evening when his dad was down the pub, she never minded him spending a few pennies to go to the pictures of a Saturday morning, if he wasn't running. She said he deserved a little dose of fun. Last week his dad had come home drunk and found her hiding a book behind the clock on the mantelpiece as he walked in the door. He had taken that book down and shoved it in

the stove. Freddie had seen the flames leap up as he stabbed it in with a poker, then he'd pulled out that poker and gone for his mum with it. When Freddie leapt up to get between them, the poker landed across the back of his head. No one had any fun when his dad was around.

Next day at school he'd told the teacher his hair was bloody on account of tripping backwards on a run. His teacher gave him a funny look, but he still won the sweet for sprinting that day when the teacher took the boys out for PT. Not that there were many of them to beat, because a lot of his mates were still evacuated. In fact, half the school buildings had been taken over by the army, the blokes from the Royal Engineers who sorted out unexploded bombs. One of them had told him that the Germans were deliberately dropping some bombs that didn't detonate straightaway, because they knew it made everyone terrified. People would see the bomb sticking out of the ground or down in a big hole, its sharp fins a sign of the threat lying in wait for someone to make just one false move. And then they were frightened to even breathe while soldiers moved along the cordoned-off street, one careful step at a time, to reach the bomb, climbing down into the hole to take out the detonator – sometimes it was so tricky the bomb went off, and those lads never came out again. Blood on the streets wasn't such a strange thing to see any more.

As terrified as Freddie had been half an hour ago, he felt a bit braver now and couldn't resist retracing his steps, just for a quick look. He legged it along the streets until he reached the spot where he'd seen the struggle between two men. But where was the other one? Where was the dead body? *Crump-crump-crump*. Bombs were falling across London, but Freddie could not hear them. He looked around, then knelt down, squinting as the skies lit up above him. Where the blimmin' heck was the body? As he

stared at the ground, hoping that an incendiary might drop just close enough for him to see a bit better, but not so close that he was hurt, it was clear to Freddie that there was nothing there. No blood, no nothing. He felt sick again, and he knew that if he didn't start running right this second, he might have another accident and then his trousers would really stink. That, and he wanted to go home, to see his mum and give her the extra half-crown before the old man walked in the door, drunk as a lord.

And as he ran, his legs pumping like pistons in the bowels of a ship, Freddie Hackett knew that he had to tell someone about what he'd seen, because he was sure it wasn't his imagination. He couldn't keep this to himself. He had to do the right thing, like his old grandad used to tell him before he was killed. The trouble was, he wondered who he could tell, because as far as he could see, there wasn't anything to prove the two men had even been there. He'd have to think of someone. Someone who could do something about it. Someone who would believe him.