

For Bess and Julie

Chapter 1

HIS MOTHER WOKE HIM AS USUAL THAT morning, shaking his shoulder and then kissing him gently as he rolled over. It was pitch black around him, but then he was used to that by now. For months they had slept down in the cellar on the bunks his father had made the last time he was home on leave.

'Here's your apple, dear,' his mother said. 'Sit up and have your apple now.' And she patted the pillow behind him as he pushed himself up on to his elbows. He felt the saucer come into his hand. His early morning apple was the only thing that had not changed since the war started. Every morning as far back as he could remember his mother has

woken him this way – with an apple peeled, cored and quartered lying opened up on a white saucer.

He felt his mother shifting off the bed and watched for the flare of yellow light as she struck the match for the oil lamp. The cellar walls flickered and then settled in the new light, and the boy saw his mother was dressed to go out. She had her coat on and her hat with the brown feather at the back. It was only then that he remembered. His stomach turned over inside him and tears choked at his throat. The morning he had thought would never come, had come. Every night since he'd first heard about it, he prayed it might not happen to him; and the night before, he had prayed he would die in his sleep rather than wake up and have to go.

'You were restless again last night, dear. Did you sleep?' He nodded, not trusting himself to speak. 'Come on now. Eat your apple and get dressed. Quick as you can, dear. It's six o'clock by the station, they said. It's a quarter-to now. I left you as long as I could.'

Fifteen minutes left. Fifteen minutes and he'd be gone. Thirty minutes and she would be back in this house without him. She was bending over him, shaking his shoulder. 'Please, dear. We must hurry.

Eat it down, quickly now. Miss Roberts said you'd be having a roll and jam on the train, but you must have something before you go.'

'Don't want it, Mum.' He handed the saucer back to her. Only moments before he had been savouring that first bite of his apple. They were always crisp, always juicy, like nothing else. But now he felt sick at the sight of it.

'You must, David. You always have your apple. You know you do.'

He had upset her and ate it to make her happy, swallowing it like medicine, trying not to taste it. Each bite reminded him that this was the last apple.

Once out of bed he dressed to keep the cold out. His mother was packing his suitcase and he watched everything going in and wondered where he'd be when he took it all out again.

'They said only one case, so there's only room for one change of clothes. All the things you wanted, they're at the bottom. I'll send on the rest as soon as I know where you'll be.' She smoothed down his coat collar and brushed through his hair with her fingers. 'You'll do,' she said, smiling softly.

'Do I have to, Mum? Do I have to go?' Even as he asked he knew it was useless. Everyone was going

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from school – no one was staying behind. He was ashamed of himself now. He'd promised himself he'd be brave when he said goodbye. He clung to his mother, pressing his face into her coat, fighting his tears.

She crouched down in front of him, holding him by the the shoulders. 'You remember what I said, David, when I told you your father had been killed? Do you?' David nodded. 'I said you'd have to be the man in the house, remember?' He took the handkerchief she was offering. 'You never saw your father crying, did you?'

'No, Mum.'

'Men don't cry, see? Try to be a man, David, like your father was, eh?' She chucked him under the chin, and straightened the cap on to the front of his head. 'Come on now. We'll be late.'

It was still dark up in the street, and a fine drizzle sprayed their faces as they walked away from the house. David looked back over his shoulder as they came to the postbox at the corner and caught a last glimpse of the front steps. He felt his mother's hand on his elbow, and then they were round the corner.

Ahead of them there was a glow of fire in the sky. 'South of the river,' his mother said. 'Battersea, I



should say. Poor devils. At least you'll be away from all that, David, away from the bombs, away from the war. At least they won't get you as well.' He was surprised by the grim tone in her voice.

'Where will you go, Mum?'

'Wherever they send me. Probably to the coast – Kent or somewhere like that. Somewhere where there's anti-aircraft guns, that's all I know. Don't worry, I'll write.'

Their footsteps sounded hollow in the empty street. They had to step off the pavement to pick their way round the edge of a pile of rubble that was still scattered halfway across the street. That was where the Perkins family had lived. They had been bombed out only a week before; they were all killed. Special prayers were said at school assembly for Brian and Garry Perkins, but no one ever mentioned them after that. They were dead, after all.

In the gloom outside Highbury and Islington Underground Station there was already a crowd of people. Miss Evers' voice rang out above the hubbub and the crying. She was calling out names. His mother pulled at his hand and they ran the last few yards.

'Tony Tucker. Tony Tucker.' Miss Evers' voice rose

to a shriek. 'Where's Tucky. Has anyone seen Tucky?'

'He's coming, miss. I saw him.'

'And what about David Carey? Is he here yet?'

'Yes, miss. I'm here, miss.' David spoke out, pleased at the strength in his voice.

'Here's Tucky, miss. He's just coming.'

'Right then.' Miss Evers folded her piece of paper. 'We're all here, and it's time to go. Say goodbye as quick as ever you can. The train leaves Paddington at half past eight, and we have to be there at least an hour before. So hurry it up now – and don't forget your gas masks.'

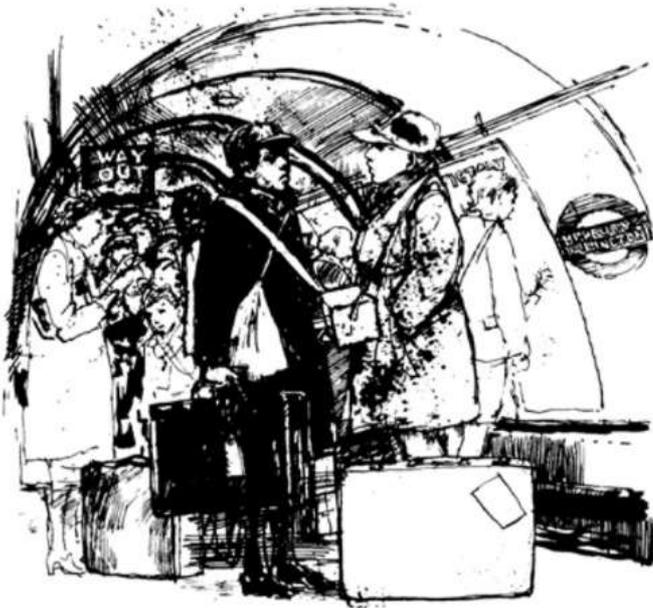
David felt the case being handed to him. 'Goodbye, David. And don't worry. It'll be all right. I'll send a letter as soon as I can. God bless.' She kissed him quickly on the cheek and turned away. He watched her until she disappeared at the end of the street. All around him there was crying: boys he'd never dreamt could cry, weeping openly, and mothers holding on to each other as they walked away. He was glad his mother hadn't cried, and it helped him to see so many of his friends as miserable as he felt himself. He blinked back the tears that had gathered in his eyes and wiped his face before

turning towards the station.

The warmth of the Underground came up to meet them as the school trooped down the silent, unmoving escalator. They followed Miss Evers along the tunnels, down the stairways and out on to the platform. Tucky came up alongside David and dropped his suitcase.

'H'lo, Davey.'

'H'lo, Tucky.' They were old friends and there was nothing more to be said.



They did not have long to wait. There was a distant rumble and then a rush of warm, oily wind that blew their eyes closed as it rushed into the platform. Miss Evers counted them as they pushed and jostled into the carriage, herding them in like sheep, so that every corner of the carriage was filled. The doors clicked and hissed shut, and the train jerked forward, throwing everyone against each other.

David watched the last Highbury and Islington sign as long as he could, craning his neck until the carriage plunged into the darkness of the tunnel and it was gone.

'That's that, then,' said Tucky next to him. David nodded and looked up at the parallel rows of handles that swung from the roof of the carriage, always out of reach. And he remembered his father lifting him up high above everyone, and how he'd hung on to the strap next to his father's looking down on a sea of upturned faces.

Miss Evers was shouting at them again. 'Boys, boys. Can you all hear me, boys? Sam, you're not listening. I can see you're not listening. You can't listen and talk at the same time - it's not possible. Now, we've been through all this many times