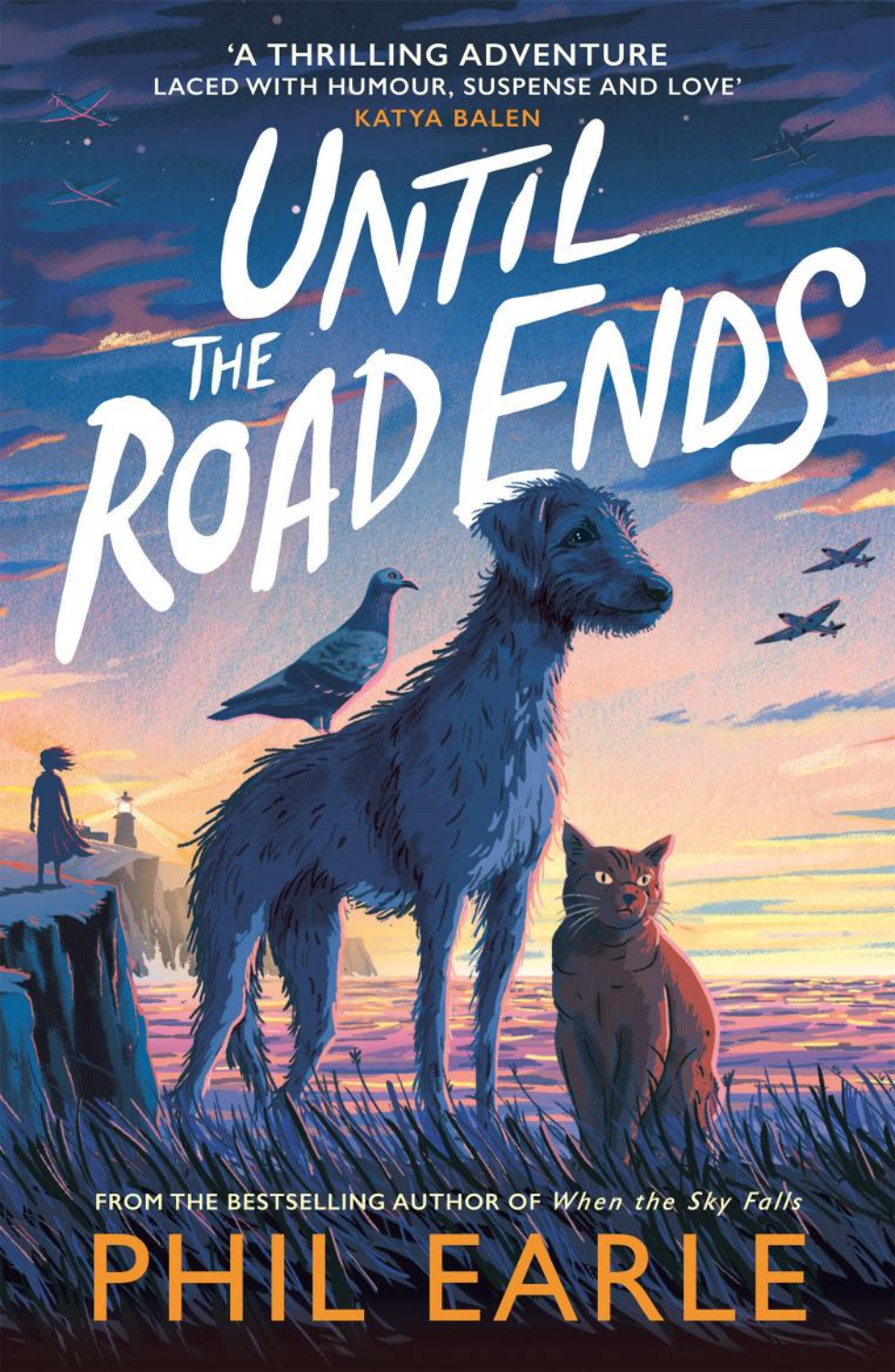


'A THRILLING ADVENTURE
LACED WITH HUMOUR, SUSPENSE AND LOVE'

KATYA BALEN

UNTIL THE ROAD ENDS



FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *When the Sky Falls*

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LISSA EVANS

UNTIL
THE
ROAD ENDS

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PHIL EARLE



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*For my true and generous friend,
Dr Andrew Beck*

1

It would be fair to say that Beau's life began one second before it almost ended.

He hadn't meant to stagger into the road, but he was hungry, starving in fact. The dustbins that lined Balham's alleyways had been mercilessly empty all week, leaving him light-headed and woozy, and his legs feeling like they were detached from the rest of his body.

This was why he tottered from the kerb onto the busy high street: why he found himself staring at the approaching lorry, hypnotised by the eyes of a huge metal monster, which roared and howled as it bore down on him.

He should have moved, he knew that. He'd survived on the streets for years so was adept at darting suddenly from danger, but this time, he didn't. Or couldn't.

The monster's lights held him, trance-like, drawing him deeper into their blinding depths. It blared a warning: a long, tuneless growl, but instead of galvanising Beau, it paralysed him.

He didn't want it to end like this. Of course he didn't. He wasn't old, or bitter. He didn't hate the world or the people who lived in it. But he *was* tired. Dog-tired. And his legs simply didn't understand either the gravity of the situation, or the simplicity of the order being sent by his brain.

So he continued to sit, glowing brighter with every passing moment. Neither cowering nor whimpering. He just watched as the lights enveloped him in an angelic hue, forcing his eyes to narrow and close.

But as he shut out the world one final time, he felt it shift, and then capsize, as two hands gripped his belly, wrenching him sideways, pulling the air clean out of him as the lorry roared one final disdainful roar.

Beau rolled, pulled tight into his saviour, and saw the landscape pirouette as they both dived for the safety of the gutter while the lorry tore by. What had just happened, he wondered, and whose hands were they, gripping him tightly still?

The dog tensed, trying to see who was holding him, but was clutched so closely to their chest that he could see nothing at all. He panicked. He didn't trust humans; he wanted to, but after all that had happened to him, he couldn't take the risk.

His entire body went rigid, but those hands held on. He bucked and writhed, expecting the human to become angry quickly, like they always had in the past. He waited for the hands to strike him, or the voice to shout, but neither came. Instead, his head was pulled into the nape of the human's neck, and a single finger gently scratched at a spot that had been troubling him for days.

If that wasn't enough to allow his tension to subside, there came a voice, not one of a grown human (who were always the worst, in his experience) but of a child.

‘Steady on,’ said the girl. ‘Nuffin’ to be scared of, is there? I got you, Beautiful. Just in time too, by the looks of it.’

Beau’s legs stopped resisting all together, as the single finger became two, three then four, finding every itch and dry spot on his wiry back. Heaven.

The voice continued, singing softly in his ear. ‘It’s all right, Beautiful,’ it repeated, ‘it’s all right.’ And it was such a simple, heartfelt lullaby, that the dog relented, all fear and distrust forgotten. Within seconds, he was sound asleep.

2

The dog awoke in a living room. Modest. With a glowing fire, empty vases and an under-stuffed settee. There was an armchair with a thin man perched on it. Everything about the man was angular. His legs ran like drainpipes inside a pair of immaculately pressed trousers, his fingers sat like drumsticks, tapping anxiously on the arms of his seat. But as the dog's eyes opened, the man's face broke into a relieved smile so wide that it made him cough violently, and he was forced to push his thin, wire-rimmed glasses back up his narrow nose.

'Looks like someone is finally awake,' he declared, coughing again.

Instantly, four more pairs of eyes fell on the dog. The first belonged to a woman, as curvy as the man was thin, though the same kindness shone out of her. Her hair fell past her shoulders with a bounce, hiding the top of her flour-coated pinny. Judging by the smell wafting from the next room, she had been cooking some sort of pie and the smell alone rumbled the dog's starving belly.

The second pair of eyes belonged to a boy. He had volcano-red hair, plastered into a severe side parting, though three tufts stuck up at precise regular intervals, as if rusted stiff in an act of disobedience. He was slower to lean forward

than the adults, but that may have been due to what was sitting on his lap: a cat; its build could only be described as hulking. The dog had met many such a tyrant, so wasn't surprised to see it wearing a scowl that declared, *You, Dog, are bad news.*

The starving mutt looked away, prompting the cat to hiss, which made its boy stroke it even more lovingly. The dog thought little of it, concentrating instead on the pleasure *he* was now feeling.

The fingers were on his back again. The same ones that had lulled him to sleep. They felt so good that he allowed himself to roll over, the owner of the fingers coming into view for the first time. All the dog could see at first was a smile. A smile that radiated the same warmth and delight as the thin man's.

'Ah, there you are, Beautiful,' the owner of the smile said.

The dog drank in the adulation. To a creature like him it felt alien, but wonderful. He looked beyond the smile to everything else around it: a befreckled nose and cheeks, dark brown eyes and matching hair pulled into loose, tired-looking pigtails. There appeared to be a dot of food stuck to her bottom lip, which the dog sought to tidy up with his tongue, making her giggle.

'You really shouldn't be calling it Beautiful, you know,' the boy said.

The dog's ear seemed to sag. Why? What had he done to the boy since waking up?

The girl, frowning, asked the boy the same thing.

‘Well,’ he replied, ‘the dog’s not yours, for starters, so it’s not your place to be giving it a name like *Beautiful*. Plus, it’s a boy . . .’

‘How do you know?’

‘Er . . .’ the boy pointed between the dog’s back legs. ‘It’s obvious, isn’t it?’

It appeared that he was right.

‘So,’ he continued, ‘Beautiful is a completely silly name. Especially when you see how ugly he is!’

That did not land well with the girl, who gasped and pulled the bedraggled dog into her arms again, as if shielding his ears from the insult.

‘He is *not* ugly, Wilf,’ she spat back. ‘He’s just clearly had a hard life. With a bath and a few good dinners, he’ll be a champion. The best in show.’

The boy and perhaps the cat both chuckled at that.

‘Unlikely,’ the boy replied. ‘But anyway, he’s still not yours. And he’ll always fall a long way short of being beautiful.’

The girl stroked the dog even more tenderly, fussing its ears in a way that left it totally disarmed.

‘*You* might think so, but that’s what I’m calling him, whether he’s mine or not.’ She stopped, and thought deeply before looking pleadingly at her parents with wide eyes. ‘*Beau*. I’ll call him Beau. BECAUSE he is *literally* a long way short of *beautiful*. I think it suits him. Don’t you, boy?’

Beau woofed twice. Once in agreement, and secondly at

the boy and his cat. The cat hissed back. The boy looked like he might do the same.

‘Peggy,’ her father said, his smile now tinged with concern. ‘I’m not sure making the family any bigger at the moment is a good idea, are you?’ He lifted the rolled-up newspaper from the seat beside him and Peggy knew exactly what he was referring to. The words *Hitler* and *Nazis* were written large everywhere.

‘But Wilf has Mabel. What about *me*?’

It was a fair enough question. Anyone could see that Mabel was Wilf’s cat.

Her mother and father shared a glance, and Peggy was unable to read its meaning; yet like most children in that situation, she knew that if she wanted her way, she would need to work harder for it.

‘I mean, it really doesn’t look like he has an owner, does it? He’s got no collar, and *look* at him. If he does belong to someone, then they don’t deserve to have him back. Not when they’ve treated him like this.’

Beau licked the girl’s hand in appreciation. ‘But if you want,’ Peggy went on, ‘I’ll put up some posters. Tell people I’ve found him. That way, if they *are* sad about losing him, then they can do something about it.’ She said it confidently, because to her mind there was no way anyone was coming for the dog. He’d clearly been living on the streets for too long for that to be a possibility.

The adults looked at each other again, then at the dog lying

on their daughter and the obvious, instant adoration flowing between them. Her mother sighed in defeat.

‘Sounds fair,’ her father said. ‘But if anyone *does* come forward, then Beau has to go. Agreed?’

‘And if he doesn’t remain the angel he is now, he goes then too,’ her mother added.

‘Of course!’ Peggy said, her heart pounding with joy.

‘Then we’ll take it from there. First thing tomorrow, posters. Do you hear?’

Peggy nodded.

‘Right. Supper. Leave Beau by the fire. Come on, Wilf.’

The family moved as one, Peggy closing the door after a final stroke of the dog’s head.

Beau stretched out on the rug, closer to the fire. It didn’t feel normal to him to be on the receiving end of such love, but it definitely felt good. Were these finally humans he could trust?

His eyes sagged, the flames warming him, inside and out. Sleep pulled at his edges and he began to surrender, until . . .

‘Don’t be making yourself too comfortable,’ said a voice. ‘And don’t be getting any ideas, either. There’s only one top dog around here. And that’s me.’

3

Beau lifted his head, startled. His senses felt rather scrambled, pulled as he was from the verge of a safe, peaceful sleep.

His eyes moved quickly around the room, looking for the hound who had made the claim. He was most confused. There had been a lot to take in in the short time since arriving here, but he'd been certain there was no other dog lurking. At the same time, he knew what he'd heard, and so he clambered to his feet, nose pressed to the rug. If he couldn't see the intruder, he would definitely be able to sniff them out.

Beau's sense of smell was one of the main reasons he was still alive. He was quick too, certainly, and whip smart (you had to be to survive on the city's streets), but his nose had been his salvation on innumerable occasions. He could sniff out a meal in a bin from a hundred and fifty paces, and not just rotting slop that gave out an ungodly pong. He was talking about fine dining: a shard of pork crackling, a scrap from a shoulder of lamb, there was nothing his nostrils couldn't detect.

At that moment though, unusually, his mind wasn't on food. He felt confident after what he'd just witnessed that he

would soon be fed, and fed well. Instead, he was in survival mode. If there was danger lurking somewhere behind the sofa, then he would soon sniff it out.

But Beau didn't find a thing. Well, that's not true, he smelled many things. Furniture wax and Brylcreem, daisy pollen and fountain pen ink, but no dog. He was certain of it.

'You really aren't the sharpest tool in the box, are you?' said the voice again, making Beau spin around to put whoever it was straight. But as he faced the armchair by the fire, there was no other dog, just the cat, Mabel, scowling disdainfully.

'Oh for pity's sake,' she said. 'Do pull yourself together. You *must* have known it was me warning you. No dog is *that* dense, surely?'

Beau didn't know how to respond. Not immediately. He knew of course that cats *spoke*. But he also knew that cats didn't speak to *dogs* unless they absolutely had to. To do so would be to lower themselves to the dog's level, and in cats' eyes, that would never, ever do. It was acceptable to tut or sigh when the idiotic mutts begged for a treat or rolled over for a belly rub, but *speak*?

'Sorry . . . was that . . . you?' Beau didn't want to sound like a dunce, but he had to be sure.

'Talking *at* you, yes,' the cat replied, with heavy emphasis on the second word. 'Don't think for one second I was talking *to* you. *That* would be a very different thing. And not something I'd countenance without an awful lot of forethought.'

Beau wasn't sure where this was going, or what it really meant, but didn't have to worry for long as Mabel went on.

'So I'll make this brief.' She spoke matter of factly and without once making eye contact, such was her arrogance. 'This is *my* house and *my* family. They may allow you to stay, of course, more fool them, but if they do, then none of those facts will change. I will put up with you, but will not fraternise with you. If they try to sit us together, by the fire or anywhere else, you will move. Not me. *You*. We are not friends. We aren't even acquaintances, so I'd suggest you accept that quickly. If you don't, then this cushy life that you think you've wormed your way into will be anything but. It will make the dustbin you previously lived in seem like the Ritz.'

Now Beau was used to meeting territorial animals. It was an everyday occurrence when you eked out an existence on the streets. But his experience was of sharp teeth rather than words, so this left him rather disarmed. So instead of heeding the feline words, he walked over to the sofa to try and thrash out some sort of peace, or at least a compromise.

It turned out, though, that Mabel was true to her word as, instead of continuing to lash out verbally, she now used her claws, swiping at Beau's muzzle, knocking him off balance, leaving him too close to the fire.

His blood boiled, not due to the flames, but at the indignity, and he curled his top lip in disgust, yellowed teeth bared for the first time. Mabel replied in turn, back arched, fur along her

spine spiked like a porcupine, but as each of them prepared themselves for battle, the living room door eased open, and the boy, Wilf, strode in.

His cat, his innocent, saintly pet, was hidden by the back of the sofa, so all he could see was the rabid snarl of the dog on the hearth rug, and of course, he took great delight in loudly telling everyone exactly what he'd found.

'Mum! Dad!' he boomed over his shoulder. 'This stray . . . he's threatening Mabel! Come here, quickly.'

There was a clatter of feet, then a rasping cough as the mother and father arrived in the doorway, followed by Peggy, bursting in between them.

But what they found wasn't what Wilf or Mabel intended. Because if the cat thought she could outsmart Beau, then she was sadly mistaken. It didn't take a genius to realise that once the boy shouted, the others would come running. It didn't take a genius to realise either that if they found Beau with hackles raised, he would quickly find himself back on the street.

So by the time the family entered the living room, all they found was a dirty, straggly dog, blissfully asleep on the rug. In fact, if they listened carefully, they could hear the poor thing snoring.

'Wilfred,' his father exclaimed, after another phlegm-drenched cough. 'I don't know what your game is, sunshine, but we ain't falling for it. Any more lies about Beau and it will be *your* place in this house that's at risk, not his. Understand?'

The boy looked shamefaced, his cheeks flushing the same red as his hair. Mabel didn't look pleased either, and sulked against the sofa cushion. And Beau? He allowed himself a wry smile. The battlelines had been drawn, but he'd proved himself the cat's equal. And that deserved a long, warm and peaceful sleep.

4

Beau's life soon became as attractive as his name.

The family, the Alford's, loved him almost immediately. Well, most of them, barring the two obvious exceptions.

He didn't have to work hard to make Peggy and her parents feel that way. He didn't have to put on an act or trick them either; why would he, when warmth radiated out of them? Despite the rightful mistrust he felt for humans, he soon felt his guard being gently eased down.

These were good people. They didn't have a lot of everything, but what they had was shared, and appreciated. The house was warm, being mid-terrace, but it wasn't just about the heat coming out of the stove; it was the way they spoke and treated each other.

Beau had never heard so much laughter in his life, and not just polite chortles either. Big belly laughs caused by something on the wireless, or a joke the father had heard down the factory. Some were so riotous that the four of them would end up doubled over, roaring in delight. Beau joined in with his loudest, cheerful bark, even if he hadn't a clue why the punchline was funny. This only made them laugh even harder.

'I told you Beau was meant to be with us!' Peggy would roar. 'He has *exactly* the same funny bone.'

The only thing that ever seemed to stop them was when the laughter got too much for Mr Alford's brittle chest, and there would follow a hacking, endless cough echoing round the room.

'I'll get you some water,' Peggy would say as she dashed for the kitchen, leaving the man to try and smile from behind his handkerchief, his Brylcreemed hair collapsing in long strands across his face.

It would often take minutes for the coughing to end, though to Beau it seemed that the cure wasn't the water, but the love the girl showed. She'd stand at her father's shoulder, hand resting gently on him.

'It's all right, Dad,' she'd whisper. 'It will pass.'

The man would nod and reach into his lungs for air that wasn't there at first. But as she persisted and the man followed suit, he soon found small pockets that didn't have him rasping. Then, and only then, would Peggy move beside him, holding his hand gently, sweeping his hair back into place, until he looked smart enough to be photographed.

'There you go,' she'd say. 'Told you it would pass, didn't I?' And when it truly had, she'd perch gently on his lap, though it was hard to work out just who was consoling who.

From his spot by the fire, Beau would watch, taking it all in.

The girl was extraordinary. There seemed to be limitless amounts of compassion in her: Beau had found that on their first meeting. Yes, she had wrenched him from the road to save

him from the lorry, but she'd done it with such care that he hadn't felt a thing.

But what he also learned quickly was that surrounding her soft centre was a tough exterior, one that stood her in excellent stead for the rigours of everyday life on their street.

When she wasn't at school or sleeping (Beau much preferred the latter: he quickly missed her whilst she was at her studies), Peggy spent her time playing outside, along with what felt like most of the children in the entire world. There were swathes of them, filing ant-like from every doorway, some of them clean and tidy, others looking as dishevelled as he had the day he'd arrived at the Alford's.

The children filled every inch of the road and pavement, their voices shrieking and laughing simultaneously. It was chaos, pure and simple, and in the middle of it stood Peggy, playing every game on offer, like hopscotch and skipping with the girls, but never shying away from the boys' games of chase that often deteriorated into a lawless variant of rugby. It didn't matter how rough or ungainly the scrummaging became, Peggy would never stand down, even if she skinned a knee or took a rogue blow from an elbow. That didn't stop Beau sticking up for her, though, telling any young ruffian, regardless of his size, that he didn't like his girl being manhandled.

This always earned him an ear-ruffling from her that had him panting in joy, or even better, a scrap of food secreted into his mouth when he hid under the table at supper time. She certainly knew how to reward him.

He soon learned to play her games too. Standing guard was all well and good, but it all looked like so much fun. He tried his luck at skipping, and although nine times out of ten one of his legs became tangled in the rope, it was worth it for the delight the children expressed when he finally cleared it and sped to safety.

Hopscotch was less successful (one-legged balancing was beyond him no matter how hard he tried), but he truly found his sport with Hide and Seek.

He wasn't the largest hound, so hiding in original places was never a problem. The issue was that the children never thought to look for him. He was a dog, after all. No, where he excelled, every time, was in helping Peggy to hunt the others down when *she* was seeking.

He didn't cheat. When Peggy turned her back and started to count, so did he. He didn't need to sneak a peek as to where the others were hiding, because he could smell them. Every one of them, individually. Sometimes it was the suds used to scrub their clothes that he detected, other times, the blood on their grazed knees or the milk on their breath. He couldn't explain how he knew, he just . . . *knew*, and while he never jumped the gun in tipping Peggy off (she had quite a nose herself), he took great delight in lingering near the hiding places of the most irritating boys who had claimed they would never *be* found by a mere girl.

Together, Beau and Peggy were quite a team. They were separated only during school hours, when Beau would wait

impatiently on the front step until he smelled her imminent return. Then, and only then, would he dash the length of Boundaries Road, yipping at such a decibel you would think he had spotted a rabbit. Bounding into her arms, his delight was only matched by hers, and on the short walk home, Peggy would tell Beau about her day in such glorious detail that he felt as though he'd shared it with her.

5

Although Beau and Peggy's love for each other was clear and undiluted, there was also a shadow looming: not just over them, but the whole of Europe too.

This shadow was marching angrily and noisily, as the world watched, towards Poland. Reports had people glued nervously to their wirelesses: some sighed in resignation, others bit at their nails as they remembered the last time war had come knocking. Children were often sent to their rooms to do something more productive while the adults listened to updates and reports of the advancing Nazi army. In the Alford house though, the only thing stopping the children hearing the truth was the contents of their father's lungs, but Peggy knew he wasn't coughing on purpose. Long days in the factory, where smoke belched and swirled, did little to ease his asthma, and even after he'd spent twenty minutes under a tea towel, breathing in a menthol balm, he still spent most evenings barking far more than Beau.

'I'm trying to listen, Dad!' Wilf protested, a tin soldier in each hand, momentarily separated from their regiment, who stood to attention on the rug.

'Be quiet, Wilf,' snapped Peggy, batting at him with a firm hand. 'You know he can't help it.' The same hand generously

passed Dad his cup of tea, though his shaking fingers threatened to spill it before it reached his mouth. 'Besides, nothing's changed since yesterday, has it? Hitler's still potty, in't he? You don't need to hear the wireless to know that.'

Wilf started to protest by pointing at his toys, moaning something about not being able to fight his own war if he didn't know the latest movements elsewhere.

To Beau, it didn't make sense. Hitler was a new name to him, there were no wirelesses in the alleyways of Balham and Tooting, but at the same time he knew the man was trouble. He could smell it in the room whenever his name was mentioned, see the creases set into Mr Alford's brow well after his coughing fit ended.

'It's a worry, of course it is,' he told the children, as Mrs Alford squeezed his shoulder gently. 'Hitler is not a nice man, and he's a persuasive one too. Those rallies he held: huge, they were, by all accounts. Filled entire city centres, and he's used films and songs to brainwash people.'

Wilf's eyes opened wide as his grip on his soldiers seemed to falter.

'But for every bad man like Hitler, well, there are a dozen men, twenty even, ready to stand up to him. He can make all the noise he wants, and march as far as he wants. But he won't get his way, not in the end. Not if everyone stands together.'

Mrs Alford smiled, but had clearly had her fill of war talk.

'And not if everyone's eaten their supper either. Hitler's

got no answer to the hidden powers of green cabbage, everyone knows that. So come on, into the kitchen, the lot of you.'

They did as they were told, Beau too (though Mabel remained on the windowsill, pretending to sleep). With the customary scraping of chairs on the tiled floor, the family sat, with Beau taking prime place beneath the table, knowing if he hid there long enough, he'd be fed scraps, whether it was intentionally (courtesy of Peggy's generosity) or otherwise (Wilf's lack of forkmanship).

He thought his masterplan was faultless, until Mrs Alford ferreted him out.

'Come on, you cheeky blighter,' she chided, shooing him towards the back door. 'I ain't daft. You'll be fed once we're done. Not before. Now get in that yard and wait your turn.'

She didn't mean it harshly, Beau knew that. Knew also that his bowl would be filled before the washing up was finished. There'd be scraps, and the inevitable slop of overcooked cabbage, but inside, there'd be hidden gems of beef or a sliver of ham. Worth waiting for.

Obediently, he padded into the backyard, hearing the door swing closed behind him.

It was a warm evening, clear and bright, which allowed the cries of street games to drift effortlessly. There was something strangely calming, almost percussive about it, and finding the last, shrinking spot of sunlight against the back wall, Beau lay down, contemplating a nap.

How lucky am I? he thought to himself. *How much and how quickly things can change.*

He'd never really known what true rest was when he lived amongst the bins of South London. If he could've slept with one eye open, he would have. But here? There was no need. His girl was a mere door away, her family too: even the cat wasn't a threat, not right now. So after one long and deeply satisfying stretch, Beau invited sleep in, ignoring a new sound that fluttered at the edge of his consciousness. It sounded like the *whup* of air being beaten incredibly quickly, but as it offered no obvious threat, Beau ignored it, keeping his eyes closed.

'Sleeping on the job, are we?' a voice cooed.

Beau opened one eye suspiciously, wondering if the interruption was the start of a dream.

'Up here,' the voice said, unhelpfully. 'Next door.'

Beau lifted his chin to the yard on his left, where he spotted a pigeon, strutting the length of its coop's roof. It may have been the early evening light, but there seemed to be a glow enveloping the bird, giving it an almost angelic quality. That could have been something to do with the energy of its movements, the lightness of its pacing, the way its chest puffed proudly in front of it.

'I didn't mean to wake you,' it said, without breaking stride. 'Though from the look on your face I clearly did. Sorry about that.'

'Not to worry,' Beau replied. It was hard not to be impressed by the bird, such was its verve.

‘Family not need guarding tonight?’ the pigeon went on.

‘Having their tea. Don’t think there’s anything too dangerous in the stew. Just beef, though her cabbage *can* be deadly, the length of time she cooks it for.’

‘Well, I’m sure it’ll be in your bowl in no time. Though eating too much meat makes you sluggish. Slows you down.’

‘Well, it’s clear you don’t eat a lot of it.’ The pigeon was still sashaying the length of the roof, with no evidence whatsoever of tiring. ‘I’m Beau,’ he added.

‘Bomber,’ the pigeon replied. ‘Not my idea. I fancied being called Spitfire myself, what with it being the king of the skies, but my brothers wouldn’t have that, would they? Said it would give me a big head, a name like that.’

Beau nodded contemplatively. He could see what they meant, though the bird clearly wasn’t lacking confidence anyway.

‘So why Bomber?’

Bomber stopped parading for the first time. Didn’t look sure he wanted to divulge the truth.

‘I mean,’ Beau went on. ‘It’s not a bad name, is it? Bombers are fast, stealthy, deadly!’

That seemed to make Bomber feel more at ease, his chest puffing out to an almost unnatural angle.

‘Yep, you’re right. Reckon I’m the same. I could give this Hitler fella a run for his money. Or so my brothers reckon. Depends what I’ve eaten. Though I have upset a good few pedestrians in my time. I don’t mean to land it on them. But,

you know, when you've got to go, you've got to go! Bomber by name, bomber by nature.'

Beau didn't really want to think about that and so he changed the subject.

'What do you know about this Hitler? I hear his name all the time from my girl Peggy's folks.'

'I know he's trouble,' Bomber replied. 'Whipping up a lot of people in his country into a frenzy. Filling up their heads about what's rightfully theirs, places they should take back, spreading hate. Won't be happy till he's running the entire world, that one.'

'Do you think he's coming over here?' Beau couldn't help but look at the sky.

'If he gets his way,' Bomber replied. 'Him indoors is always talking to us about it. Telling us our time is coming again.'

Beau was confused. 'What d'you mean?'

'Don't you know nothing about us pigeons? About what we did in the last war?'

'Er . . . should I?'

'Played a *massive* part, we did, practically turned the tide when things were looking grim. Delivered messages all over Europe. Vital ones, written in code. Without us, we'd be living in a very different world.'

'Would we really?'

'Too right, we would. That's why him indoors has us in training. Says it won't be long till the Ministry of Defence is knocking on his door, asking for his best birds with the

strongest engines.’ Again, the chest puffed out like an opera singer.

‘Blimey,’ replied Beau. ‘And you’re ready, are you?’

‘I was born ready,’ Bomber replied. ‘But it never does any harm to look after yourself, does it? Take today, released us down in Brighton, he did, and we had to find our way back. Not far really, fifty miles, give or take.’

‘How many?!’ Beau replied, stunned.

‘That’s nothing. Did it without breaking sweat. Could’ve done it ten times over and, as you can see, I’m the first back. As always. So when the government do call, well, I’ll be at the front of the queue, won’t I? I’ll be a soldier. Just like them before me.’

This was all news to Beau, but it was hard not to be impressed. Impressed and also a little scared, because if Bomber was to be believed, then the skies were about to become very busy, and very dangerous indeed.

6

As the weeks passed, it became more and more likely that Bomber was going to have his wish fulfilled. War with Germany seemed almost inevitable. Peggy and Beau saw it and heard it wherever they went: fear and anger, and sights that chilled them deeply.

Clusters of barrage balloons appeared in the skies, tethered to lorries by thick wires. At first, Beau feared they were German bombers, only feeling marginally safer when he heard Mr Alford putting Peggy and Wilf at ease.

‘Clever beggars, our RAF. They know, you see, that a lot of the Luftwaffe planes have to dive before they can let their bombs go.’ He pointed to the sky with a wry smile. ‘Try and do that in the dark, then they won’t see the wires. Let’s see how well their planes fly when their wings have been sliced off.’

This may have brought a grin to Wilf’s face, but not to Peggy’s or Beau’s. Without wings, without the ability to fly, those planes would fall as quickly from the sky as the bombs themselves. And they had to land somewhere, doing who-knew-what kind of damage. It wasn’t something either of them wanted to contemplate.

Changes happened for the children too. Gas masks were

handed out at school, each one stored in its own small box, which Peggy and Wilf carried round their necks. Whilst Beau wasn't easily spooked (hardened as he was by his early years), he took great fright when his girl first appeared in the kitchen, face obscured by a mask that seemed to have a snout where her nose and mouth should sit. It took several minutes of calm voices and a good few treats to tempt poor Beau out from the pantry.

Time spent sitting round the wireless became more challenging too. *Children's Hour* was a blessed relief from the news bulletins that talked endlessly of advancing German troops and heightening tensions. Sometimes the news was difficult to understand, but both Peggy and Beau could tell that none of it was good, and they huddled together on the rug, glad of the warmth they offered each other.

It was in the yard, as the family sat inside eating, that Beau learned even more about the changes that war would bring. Bomber made sure of it.

'Gas masks won't be the last of it for the children, you do know that, don't you?' he said, strutting after another long flight home, from Eastbourne this time.

'Why?' replied Beau. 'What have you heard?'

'You wouldn't believe half the things I pick up as I fly home, so I'll just tell you the stuff that will affect you and your girl. All I'll say is, make the most of her while you can.'

'What does that mean?' Beau didn't like the sound of it one bit.

Evacuation. Government thinks that as soon as war's declared, London's going to become a prime bombing target. So the little ones are going to be shipped off to the countryside to keep them safe.'

'But how will they do that? There must be millions of children they'll have to pack off.'

'No idea,' said Bomber, bristling slightly. 'I only hear these things when I stop for a rest. Sit on the right windowsills and you can learn what you need pretty quickly. So, take it from me, a couple of weeks from now, there will be hardly any children left round here.'

'I don't think it will apply to Peggy and Wilf. Their family's so close. They won't agree to be separated.'

'The government can be pretty persuasive when they want to be. And besides, try and put yourself in the parents' shoes: would *you* want your children here if bombs are going to be raining down every night?'

Beau knew the answer to that, of course he did, but at the same time, he didn't want to be anywhere but by Peggy's side. She'd saved him, gifted him this new, wonderful life. It was his duty now to keep her safe, but how could he do that if she was hundreds of miles away?

'Maybe they'll send animals with them?' Beau said, hopefully. 'I mean, if it's not safe for children, then it's not safe for us either, is it?'

Bomber didn't have time to reply however, as a new voice entered the conversation.

‘Your naivety is laughable, dog.’

Beau turned to see Mabel stalking along the wall, the usual smirk on her face.

But if Beau was irritated by her presence, Bomber was downright scared, taking to the skies with a nervousness that he’d never previously shown. It wasn’t until he was nestled in a suitably high branch that he looked or felt safe.

‘Who asked your opinion?’ Beau sighed, though he knew this wouldn’t be enough to silence the cat.

‘Well, honestly, listening to you two talk so naively, it’s hilarious, it really is. You,’ she spat at Beau, ‘are as bright as *he* is brave. Do you honestly think anyone will really care what happens to us?’

‘Peggy and Wilf will.’

‘But they’re children, you fool. And who listens to children? Not the government, that’s for sure.’

‘Their parents, then.’

‘Have you listened to what is coming out of your mouth? Hitler is coming. Even if it’s not in person, his planes are coming, and they will keep coming, and coming, until there’s very little of any of this place left. The children’s parents, and any other parents for that matter, are going to be thinking about one thing – survival. Their own. Not ours.’

‘Then we’ll run away, follow the children wherever they send them.’

‘And who’ll feed us? And keep us warm? Have you thought about that, genius?’

Beau hadn't. Of course he hadn't. All he knew was that the thought of being separated from Peggy made his heart hurt. If he was going to come up with a solution to the problem, then he was going to need time. Time, though, as it turned out, was one thing he did not have.