

PRAISE FOR *WHEN THE SKY FALLS*:

‘An **EXTRAORDINARY STORY** with historical and family truth at its heart, that tells us as much about the present as the past. Deeply felt, movingly written, a remarkable achievement’ MICHAEL MORPURGO

‘**COMPLEX, DARK, INTENSE AND MYSTERIOUS**, *When the Sky Falls* is an astounding work of fiction. The characters have the knotty awkwardness of real people, and the whole book has that unfakeable **FEELING OF TRUTH**. For years now Earle has been one of our **FINEST WRITERS** for young people and here he is at the height of his considerable powers’ ANTHONY MCGOWAN

‘*When the Sky Falls* is heart-racingly good. **POWERFUL, KIND AND THRILLING**. An urgent reminder that when we have the courage and compassion to stand up for others – animals as well as humans – they often save us right back’
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‘**A BOLD and BEAUTIFUL** story’ ABI ELPHINSTONE

‘Packed with **ADVENTURE, MYSTERY AND A WHOLE LOT OF HEART**, *When the Sky Falls* feels like an instant classic’
LISA WILLIAMSON

‘**A RAW AND BEAUTIFUL** story about the power of kindness and hope’ ANNA JAMES

‘**A POWERFUL, REMARKABLE** story. It is heart-soaringly wonderful’
JENNIFER BELL

‘**A RAW, TOUCHING TALE** of a boy in WWII Britain whose biggest war is with himself. Powerful, convincing, full of heart and love’
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‘Phil Earle writes from the heart: a story about **LOVE and FRIENDSHIP** and how animals can connect people in the darkest of times and allow them to heal’ GILL LEWIS

‘Enormously **POWERFUL AND VIVID** – a real heart-wrenching evocation of the Blitz’

LISSA EVANS

‘**BEAUTIFULLY WRITTEN**, heart-tugging and fierce.

I loved it’

JENNY DOWNHAM

‘A writer whose words hold a **CLARITY OF COMPASSION** and can carry any reader to a world that feels as real as one’s own’ NON PRATT

‘A lovingly crafted piece of work with a **POWERFUL EMOTIONAL ADVENTURE** at its heart – how to survive, how to love others, and how to let them love you. One of those books that makes you forget where you are when you’re reading it. Highly recommended’

MELVIN BURGESS

‘I was gripped by this **POWERFUL STORY OF FRIENDSHIP** set against the backdrop of the Blitz. I read it in one breathless sitting and felt like I was walking alongside Joseph every step of the way.

It’s **A RAW, BEAUTIFULLY TOLD STORY**. I loved it’

JENNY McLACHLAN

‘Kes meets *The Machine Gunners* in a story that **MADE ME THINK AND FEEL** and remember why we need to love and be loved’

TOM PALMER

‘Impressive depths and fathoms of emotion and **COMPASSION** run beneath a highly affecting story of lives and landscapes ravaged and torn apart by war.

Based around a true story, it will touch heart and mind alike’

JAKE HOPE, CHAIR OF YLG

‘I knew I was going to **LOVE** it from the opening lines’

MARCUS SEDGWICK

‘Absolutely wonderful. I literally couldn’t stop reading it. Continuously exciting, increasingly moving, and the whole effect is **AMAZINGLY POWERFUL**. A truly brilliant performance. It deserves accolades and prizes but, more profoundly, it’s a fabulous gift for readers who, I think, are going to **LOVE IT FIERCELY**’

SIMON MASON

WHEN
THE
SKY
FALLS

(OR A IS FOR ADONIS)

PHIL EARLE



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*For Pete, who planted the seed . . .
and for Louise, who brought it to life.*

*I look into your eyes, and I can see
Another life and a mind worth reading
When you look into mine,
I hope you see not a boy,
but the man you made me*

*When you were down the mine,
under the sea, You held a dream
that you passed onto me
You said, "You can be the man,
you want to be
Just keep in mind
what my own dad told me"*

*Because there will come a time
There will come a time
There will come a time
Oh, there will come a time
There will come a time
For people like me and you*

'Vane Tempest', The Lake Poets

1

The platform was a battlefield: seventy yards of carnage transplanted straight from the coasts of northern France.

Smoke billowed; people clung to each other. There were cries of pain, howls of despair as loved ones were ripped apart. There were silent tears too, quiet reassurances whispered into ears: that this was temporary, that it changed nothing, *I am still your mother, your parent.*

Against the tide of devastation walked a boy: tutting and huffing at the tears and carrying-on. He looked just like any of the other evacuees in the station: regulation case, tag and gas mask box. But instead of being shoehorned onto a train, he was marching away from one, having just arrived.

He had no idea where he was heading, nor any real sense of who he was to look for, but he knew he wanted no part of the drama going on around him. He scoured the crowd, cursing at the smoke that bit his eyes. It didn't take much to light the end of his fuse, and the long journey down had been more than enough to start him smouldering.

He seethed under his breath, then over it, not caring who heard. He'd give it a minute; see if anyone presented themselves. And if they didn't? Well he'd just sneak onto a train and be pulled back north. He'd hide out in the guard's van, amongst

the musty sacks of letters from soldiers begging to come home. He knew how they felt. He wanted to go home too, despite everything. He certainly didn't want to be here.

It had been two months since his father had marched to war. Long months, both of them, and every day had hardened him, tightening the cog in his gut, winding up his anger, his fury.

He peered again at the faces by the barrier, not knowing who he was looking for, nor how he'd react if someone had the audacity to smile or beckon him forward.

He didn't know the woman he was meant to be meeting, nor did he want to, and now that she'd failed to present herself, he was not disappointed.

I'll go home, he said to himself. Didn't have to be to his grandmother. The cow. He'd not go anywhere he wasn't wanted. Not any more. He'd find an empty place. There were plenty of them around. He'd live off scraps, whatever he could find. He'd not let anyone stop him. No one would dare.

But as the boy spun to return north, he felt a hand on the strap of his box. Not a gentle hand. It clutched at him like a barn owl would a mouse.

'Joseph Palmer?' The boy recognised the tone, he'd heard it plenty of times before. A bobby, he was sure of it.

'Joseph? Is that who you are?'

A face craned over his shoulder and into view, too close to focus on. He couldn't see the chin strap of a policeman's helmet, just a shocking frizz of greying red hair that sprung in all directions.

‘I’m here to collect you, lad.’

A woman. A hard face – lived-in. And a deep, gravelly voice. The boy looked in her eyes and dared her to look back. She did, and seemed about as happy to be there as he was.

‘Don’t know what you’re talking about, Missus. I’m just leaving. Sending me to the country, they are, with the others.’

The woman gripped harder at the strap. ‘With an accent like that? I don’t think so, Joseph.’

The boy didn’t like the way she was holding him, or how she was challenging him, even if it were true. He shrugged his shoulder, then swung it, all the time eyeing her angrily, but her clasp didn’t give a bit.

‘Get your hands off me, will you? I don’t know you. Get your hands off me or I’ll make a right scene.’

The woman didn’t doubt it. She could feel the power in the boy, despite his meagre frame.

Much of her would have been only too happy to walk away, she neither needed nor wanted this, but there was a promise, wasn’t there? She might have made it a long while back, but it was still a promise, and she didn’t have it in her not to keep it. Or at the very least, to try.

‘Joseph,’ she sighed, ‘I know it’s you. So you can kick and scream and deny it as much as you want. I’ve grappled bigger beasts than you, my lad, and I’ve not lost yet.’

The woman turned on her heel, pulling Joseph with her,

despite his spirited struggles. But within ten yards she felt her progress thwarted. The boy had put the brakes on.

She turned, ready to bite. But as she made to speak, she saw it wasn't Joseph who'd stopped them, but a suited man who'd taken hold of Joseph's other arm, leaving Joseph stretched and angry in the middle.

'Are you this boy's grandmother?' He didn't look like he was about to congratulate her.

Joseph felt her bristle at the suggestion.

'I'm not, no.'

'But you are responsible for him?'

Joseph could tell she didn't particularly like that either, but the man had her there. The second she'd arrived at the station, she'd crossed that uncomfortable line, and she was now responsible for Joseph, whether either of them wanted it or not.

'I am.'

Joseph flinched at this, before bucking between them like an unbroken stallion.

'Well, he's stolen from me.'

The words stopped the boy's thrashing, just for a second, before he stepped up a gear, releasing himself from the man's grip, but not hers. She held on effortlessly.

'Is this true?' she asked Joseph, ending his thrashing with one firm tug, though she saw a wildness shoot into his eyes.

'He's lying,' he spat. 'Idiot's got nowt I'd want. *Nowt.*'

Her eyes moved from the boy to the man.

‘He says he’s taken nothing,’ she said, as if the man couldn’t translate Joseph’s unruly northern twang.

This did nothing to appease the gent. ‘Then he’ll not mind opening his case.’ He ripped Joseph’s luggage from his hand and took a step back as the boy aimed a kick at his shins.

‘I’d suggest you keep the child under control,’ he said, and struggled with the case’s clasp, before realising there was only a loop of twine holding it shut.

It surrendered quickly to his demands, and the case fell open.

The woman leaned in, wincing at the god-awful smell rising from inside.

‘If there’s anything in there belonging to you,’ she told the man, while recoiling from the cloying stench, ‘why on earth would you want it back?’

But the man was not to be deterred, his hands flinging aside socks and underpants that looked like they had reluctantly survived the trenches some twenty-five years earlier.

‘Aha,’ he cried, as he came upon two large wedges, wrapped in brown paper. ‘Care to explain this?’

Joseph didn’t flinch as he gathered his shabby clothes back into the case. ‘Sandwiches.’ He shrugged. ‘Mother made me them for the journey down.’

The woman sagged visibly and at that moment Joseph knew he had given himself away, to her at least. He had no idea why this woman had volunteered to take him in, or of the link that existed between them, but she clearly knew he

had no mother: he saw it in her eyes. And her knowledge bothered him.

‘Nonsense,’ yelled the man. ‘You are a thief, and I’ll prove it.’ With a grandstanding flourish, he ripped the paper from one parcel to reveal a block of cheese so substantial it could wedge open a stable door. As if that wasn’t enough, he then revealed enough sliced bacon to feed a sizeable platoon in the other.

Both were responsible for the smell. Both had been out of a cool pantry for too long.

‘You see?’ he spat as he wrapped them back up. ‘The boy is a liar, and a thief. He took these from my bag while I slept. I want an apology from you, Sunshine, and I want it now.’

But he would not get one. He had lit the boy’s fuse, and Joseph now lurched forward, fists raised, forcing the woman to pull him back by the scruff of his neck.

‘Enough!’ the man shouted, pointing over to the ticket booth. ‘There’s a policeman over there. Two, in fact. One word from me, my boy, and you will find yourself in real bother. As will you, my dear,’ he added, pointing disdainfully at the woman. ‘You should be ashamed, with everything going on, to let your boy run wild like this, taking whatever he likes.’

It seemed to Joseph that while the woman could accept the man’s words about him, something had snapped when his attention turned to her. A snap that propelled her towards the man, then beyond him, ripping the parcels from his grasp as she passed.

‘What on earth do you think you’re doing?’ he said.

‘Exactly what you asked,’ she replied without looking back, making the man scamper to catch up. ‘If it’s the law you’re after, then let’s get it over with. They’ll be surprised to see one man in possession of such large rations, though. But I’m sure there must be a legitimate reason for it, what with you being so morally upstanding and all.’

The man’s face flushed. ‘Madam, wait . . .’ he blustered, though the woman, if anything, accelerated.

‘I won’t!’ she insisted. ‘This is an awful, squalid business, and if there has been a theft of *any* kind, then we need to have done with it. Immediately.’

‘Well, perhaps . . . I was a little . . . rash. I mean, it’s clear the boy is troubled. I could see that from his demeanor on the journey from Yorkshire. Perhaps it would be best . . . for him . . . if we were to forget it ever happened.’ He made to wrestle the parcels from the woman’s grasp, but found no give in her whatsoever.

‘Now that would never do, would it?’ she said, deadpan. ‘I can’t, with good conscience, allow for *any* crime to take place, and for the guilty party to go unpunished. As you said, these are difficult times. We need to be standing together, not stealing from each other.’

The policemen were mere strides away now, and the woman began to wave the parcels in their direction. Joseph reckoned the bobbies could probably *smell* them, and half expected them to bolt in the other direction in revulsion.

Instead, they stepped forward, towards the woman, which was enough to see a river of sweat break across the man's brow. With a desperate lunge, he ripped one of the parcels from the woman's hand, and ploughed back into the crowd, out of sight.

With a movement equally deft, the woman grabbed Joseph by the hand and changed direction, making it appear she was waving at someone near the exit and not at the police at all. The officers stood down, and the pair weaved through the scrum towards the street.

Joseph allowed it all to sink in. He had no desire to be in this place, with this woman, and after what he'd just seen, he didn't like his chances of getting a single thing over on her, either. Not that it would stop him trying.

'Cheese for supper then,' he said. 'Call it a gift from me, Missus.'

The woman didn't break pace. Nor did she look in his direction. Instead, she let the parcel fall from her hand into the next passing bin. Joseph's face fell a mile.

'Eat that and you'd be glued to the lav for a month,' she said. 'That might suit *you*, but some of us have better things to be doing. So, let's get two things straight. I'll not tolerate thieving. Steal as much as a glance in the future and I'll turn you in myself. And secondly, I'll thank you not to call me Missus neither. My name is Margaret Farrelly. My friends call me Mags. So to you, I'm Mrs F. You hear me?'

The boy said nothing and showed nothing, either, his emotions securely locked down. For now.

‘We must dash, so no dallying. If that siren sounds, we don’t want to be anywhere near here, believe me.’

The boy followed her without changing his stride.

He did look skywards, but could see nothing. No sun, no bomber, and most importantly, no hope.

2

Joseph had no idea how far from the station the woman's home was, but he was starting to wonder whether they would reach it before the war ended.

The bus crawled through the streets, feeling every bump and hole with a shudder that travelled through its wheels and up into the bodies of its passengers.

Joseph fizzed and bubbled, his turned head resting on the window, adding to the vibrations.

He'd never seen anything like it: never been in the city before, *any* city, but in his head, it had never looked like this. He'd expected tall buildings, stretching into the sky, all brick and stone and permanent, not rubble and smoke and carnage.

His eyes fell on the first floor of one building, the front wall obliterated, fragments of chairs and tables scattered: a single framed picture somehow clinging stoically to a nail. It was a painting of a tropical beach: paradise, smack-bang in the middle of hell.

The house next to it was equally shambolic, and no less surreal. Again, the front wall had surrendered, but there was no furniture to be seen, only a capsized wooden box, from which poured Christmas decorations. Baubles sat wedged beside fallen timbers: stray pieces of tinsel blinked and shone.

Ten minutes later and only a few yards on, he saw a boy, little older than himself, perched on a crate in front of a bookshop. The door and windows lay scattered at his feet, beside a very tidy pile of books. The boy was flicking his way through a large volume. When he reached the end, he pulled himself up, clambered through the rubble, and returned the book to a shelf.

Joseph found his top lip curling in disgust. Why the boy didn't shove the books under his coat and make off with them, he had no idea, but more fool him.

There had been little in the way of conversation between Joseph and Mrs F since they'd left the station. She had tried, but there had been no conviction in her efforts, and as Joseph merely offered monosyllabic grunts in reply, the pair were left to listen to the voices of other passengers, not a happy sound to be heard amongst them.

'Found him on the corner of Lunham Road, they did. Some of him anyway, his left leg and wallet were seventy yards on. Not that there was anything in it . . . his wallet, that is.'

'We've not seen the end yet, you know . . . ?'

'There'll be sirens again tonight, you mark my words. The phony war wasn't as bad as we thought, eh?'

The voices became noise to Joseph, static, the kind that used to crackle out of Dad's wireless, no matter how hard he tried to tune it in.

He exhaled, hard, though it did nothing to dispel the frustration buzzing in him. The bus had stopped again and

was showing no sign of moving, clouds belching from its back end in protest.

‘Enough,’ tutted Mrs F, pulling her bag from the floor but leaving Joseph’s where they were. ‘We’ll do the rest on foot. Come on, before they enlist us to clear the rubble.’

Joseph struggled behind her, not caring when his luggage clouted each and every passenger unfortunate enough to have an aisle seat. He clattered down the rear stairs too, and through the open exit at the back of the bus.

It made him wonder if anything in this city had a door any more.

‘Keep up. I don’t have the time or inclination to be searching for you between now and home. Today’s been long enough as it is.’ She forged a path past the bus and the toppled building blocking its path, and beyond a group of kids playing a macabre game of Finders Keepers in the rubble.

There was no end of sights and sounds for Joseph to drink in: houses without roofs, roofs without walls, newspaper men and bible-clutchers both shouting about the end of the world. But if any of it did impress or bewitch him, he refused to show it on his face, and followed Mrs F sullenly, leaving enough of a gap so it didn’t look like he was obeying her.

‘Almost there,’ she barked, which was a relief. His hands were turning blue. Early February was no time to be out without gloves, and his hands burned with cold as they clung stiffly to his baggage.

Finally, she turned left onto a street called Calmly View,

which looked identical to every other they'd seen so far, in that only half of it seemed to be left standing.

'Right, this is us,' she said, pushing at a gate that was as reluctant as the boy behind her. The front door opened more easily, revealing a hallway darker than the street.

'Shoes off at the door. Outside stays outside.' Though she made no effort to remove the boots from her own feet.

'Sitting room is on the right. Sundays only. Leave your shoes by the front door and pile your luggage neatly by the stairs. You can move it shortly. Follow me.'

Joseph wondered what was behind the door in front of them. A flick of a switch revealed a starkly lit room that seemed to match the woman's personality: cold and lifeless. Barring a tin bath tacked to the wall and a series of austere family photographs, there was little else. The stove was unlit, much like her heart, Joseph thought to himself. From the tiny amount of wood and coal piled next to it, it didn't look like it would be warming any time soon either.

'Cold in here,' he said.

'Yes, well, best get used to it. That's the last of the coke, and we've not had a delivery in weeks. Not since the last of the lads from the coal yard was conscripted.

'Lavvie is through the back door and on the left. Don't be wasting paper in there. And don't be flushing unnecessarily. Same's to be said of electricity. No reading in bed, unless it's by candlelight. In fact, scratch that. Can't say I like the idea of you and a flame alone together.'

Her words bounced off him. There was little chance of *him* bothering a book at any time.

‘Look.’ She was staring at him now, her gaze heavy and uncomfortable. ‘I know you don’t want to be here. And you aren’t daft, you can see I’m hardly thrilled myself, but here we are. Your gran, she’s a good woman. Loyal. And I owe her a real debt.’

Joseph felt himself bristle. He didn’t share her opinion of his gran.

‘She helped me, see. Many years ago now, but that’s irrelevant.’ Joseph saw Mrs F’s expression change, like she’d gone momentarily back to that time, but didn’t like what she saw.

‘Why? What did she do?’ His gran had done little for him. It had felt like she couldn’t wait to pack him off soon as the march of Dad’s shiny boots had stopped echoing in their ears.

‘That’s between me and her,’ Mrs F said uncomfortably. ‘And it’s certainly not something to be discussed this evening. Your gran wrote to me. Told me she was struggling to handle you, your behaviour. Your . . . moods.’

Joseph’s fists clenched at his sides. But Mrs F did not notice.

‘She asked me to have you for a spell. Just while your father is away.’

The anger in him grew. He didn’t like her mentioning his dad. And besides, she didn’t know anything. Doubted very much his gran had shared the important stuff with her.

‘Well, I don’t need you. I can look after myself.’ He had half a mind to collect his case and walk straight back to the station.

‘Not according to your gran, you can’t. According to her, you’re argumentative, aggressive and surly. You’ve been in more scrapes than she can keep up with, and she’s scared. Both for you and for her. That’s why she wanted me to help.’

Joseph thought about arguing with her, but realised she’d just see that as proving her point.

‘I made a promise to your gran,’ she went on, ‘that I’d keep you safe, as much as I can here anyway, and when I make a promise, I like to keep it. So my advice to you is, keep off my toes and I’ll keep off yours. We don’t have to like each other, we don’t even have to pretend, but until your dad comes home, I’m the best you’re going to get. Now, your room is at the top of the stairs on the right and your bed is made. That’s the last time I’ll do that for you, so make the most of it. Do you want anything to eat? I’ll be needing your ration book and identity card, though Lord knows if they’ll accept it down here. You’ll be registered to a shop up at home. Well? Do you have it?’ Her hand went out, awaiting payment.

He reached into his pocket for his crumpled book as she ranted on, not pausing to breathe, ‘If you are hungry, it’ll have to be something small, mind. I’ve not much in.’

The boy shook his head. The fire in his gut would only incinerate any food he swallowed anyway.

‘Then take yourself off to bed. We’ve work to do tomorrow.
Me *and* you.

‘Oh, and if the siren sounds, get yourself dressed and down here quickly. No dallying, you don’t need to be presentable if Hitler knocks, just prompt.’

And without so much as a goodnight, she unlocked the back door and barrelled through it, leaving Joseph to stand there alone.

3

Joseph prowled his room.

In the hours he had spent up there, he hadn't bothered to try and sleep. There was no point. It was too cold, for starters.

The room was nothing but a small box, with an iron bedstead and an upturned orange box for a bedside table. To Joseph it felt like a coffin with the lid nailed down.

He didn't want to be here: in this room, this house, this city, but like everything in life, it seemed he had no choice in how it played out. At the same time, deep in his gut, he knew he was to blame.

He did not like this woman. How dare she suggest Gran was decent or caring? She was neither of those things. If she were decent, he'd not be here. He'd still be at home, left to do as he pleased. It had suited him fine, the way things were, and if it bothered her? Well, it just showed her weakness. He paced harder, and heavier, the room shrinking with every step until he felt he could touch each wall merely by stretching out his arms.

He made for the window and wrenched open the curtains, hopeful that the sight of outside (as alien a landscape as it was), might make him feel less trapped. But there was nothing to see, quite literally, as every inch of the glass had been covered in blackout paint.

His shaking hands reached into his pockets and removed his penknife, but no matter how hard he scratched with the blunt blade, he couldn't remove the daubed paint. It was sticky and thick, most likely a tar mixture rather than paint itself. All Joseph wanted was to carve a bullet hole into it, to prove there was life outside this prison and his own head, but even that wasn't possible, and he felt himself beginning to lose control again.

He grabbed the bedside lamp, turning it, club-like, in his hand, throwing the shade to the floor. He didn't feel the plug rip from the wall, the only thing he felt was the window yield to the club, shattering around it, then an overwhelming feeling of disappointment, when the street outside offered neither light nor any respite to his anxiety. The only things it did prompt were an icy blast of wind, the bark of a dog, and an angry voice telling him to *Keep it down, there's a war on out here!*

Suddenly his bedroom door flew open, revealing the silhouette of Mrs F.

'For the love of God,' she spat in shock and disappointment, wrapping her dressing gown tightly round her to keep out the cold, before turning to walk down the stairs.

Joseph didn't move.

Two minutes later she thundered back in, clutching a dustpan, brush, and piece of jagged plywood that she threw onto his bed.

'You don't honestly think I can get that replaced do you? I

don't have the money, for starters. And I doubt very much that I could find any glass that hasn't already been broken by the Jerries. Anyway, you'll pay for that to be replaced when the time comes,' she said, pulling a hammer and nails from her dressing gown pocket, 'but for now, you can fix it yourself.'

And that was that. No lecture, barely a tone to her voice. Instead, she backed out of the room without bothering to slam the door, leaving Joseph to pick up the hammer from the bed.

He looked at the window, had no desire to fix it just because she had told him to, but at the same time, he didn't fancy dying of hypothermia. Besides, he could see it was an easy job. He knew how to work with tools, and the hammer felt good: heavy in his hand.

Minutes later, the plywood was tacked crudely to the window frame, much to the delight of the already irate neighbour.

And when he was done? Well, Joseph didn't know what to do with himself, so he prowled some more, stewed some more, and cursed his luck repeatedly, until finally, his energy ran out. He sat on the floor, pulling the blanket on top of him, so he could ignore the bed Mrs F had made in one final, wilful protest.

His eyes opened to the most grotesque of sights: Mrs F, standing above him, arms folded, nostrils flared.

'You've made a real pig's ear of repairing that window,' she sighed. 'And as I said last night, you'll be paying for

it yourself. That, and any others you decide to break, so think on.’

Joseph didn’t move. It couldn’t possibly be morning. He’d only just closed his eyes, for Pete’s sake.

‘And what are you doing down there? Your rent doesn’t go up if you sleep in the bed, you know.’

Joseph pulled the scratchy woollen blanket right up to his chin, exposing his toes to the cold. He didn’t want her looking at him in his vest and pants.

The woman, annoyingly, seemed to read his mind.

‘I’d cover myself up too, if my underwear were the colour of yours. I suggest you bring your clothes down with you. If we get them scrubbed now and hung over the stove, they’ll be dry by the time we get home.’

‘Where are we going?’ Joseph mumbled.

‘I told you last night. Work. Paying for that mess.’ She pointed at the window. ‘Now, be down in five minutes. And don’t forget your laundry, otherwise you’ll be wearing out my stair carpet unnecessarily.’

Joseph dressed slowly. Not because there was anything better to do, just because he was damned if he was going to do what she told him.

He bundled up the rest of his clothes and carried them downstairs to the backroom, which smelled strongly of porridge. It was the first pleasant smell to invade Joseph’s nostrils since he’d arrived, waking his stomach with an impatient growl.

‘About time,’ Mrs F offered in way of a greeting. ‘You were lucky there was no air raid last night, or you really would be tired.’

Joseph had never experienced an air raid, but he’d heard reports about them on the wireless. About the mess and the smell and people sleeping in church halls because there was nothing left of their house. He’d heard about kids his age who thought it was all the most exciting adventure, roaming the streets trying to find shrapnel and bullets and helmets afterwards. Pathetic, he’d scoffed. Though there was one report on the news about a group of kids finding their own machine gun, sawing it clean off a crashed German bomber, and hiding it. That sort of adventure, he wouldn’t mind. *Imagine that*, he thought, *having your own machine gun?*

‘Come on, your porridge is on the table,’ Mrs F barked, without turning from the meagerly-lit stove. ‘There’s already a pinch of sugar in it so don’t be looking for any more. I suggest you fill your boots now, as there’ll be precious little else until supper.’

He had no interest in conversation. He was hungry. So he dropped his laundry at his feet and looked at the table. There were two steaming bowls on it, but one serving was much smaller than the other. Guessing this was his, he sat before it, only for Mrs F to switch the bowls round.

‘No, this one’s yours,’ she said, a slight flush to her face.

Joseph didn’t care. He pounced on it, almost forgetting to use the spoon at all.

Three mouthfuls in, he felt her eyes on him, frowning, of course. Was her face permanently fixed in that position, or was she saving it just for him?

‘What?’ he said.

‘When was the last time you ate?’

He shrugged. ‘Yesterday probably.’ Though he knew exactly when and what it was: an apple stolen off a stall before he got on the train. His grandmother had made him a sandwich, but he’d dumped it in the bin without her seeing. He didn’t want anything she’d made.

Anyway, he thought, he had porridge now. And although it didn’t have enough milk or sweetness to it, he didn’t care, and he fell on it again, ramming it into his mouth until his pupils dilated. He was careful not to let her see though – after all, the woman didn’t care about him. She was on his gran’s side. She’d made that only too clear.

‘You might as well have mine too,’ she said, spooning her porridge into his bowl.

‘What’s wrong with it?’ he spat through a full mouth.

‘Nothing. Not hungry, that’s all. When you’ve finished, you can get your hands in that bucket. There’s suds already in there, and a brush. Your clothes will think it’s their birthday.’

But Joseph had no idea how to go about getting clothes clean. And even when he tried (just to get her to leave him alone) she found fault in his every move.

‘Don’t be wringing it out like that, not till you’ve soaked it properly . . .

‘Keep the water in the bowl, not on my rug . . .

‘Can you not see that stain ther—’

‘*If* I’m doing such a lousy job,’ he finally snapped, sluicing water all over the floor, ‘wouldn’t it just be easier for you to do it yourself?’

But the woman didn’t step forward or change her expression. ‘No, it wouldn’t. It’d be a lot easier if you learned quickly how to listen and take orders. Now, once you’ve wrung them out properly, lay them flat on the rail by the stove. If they’re all bunched up, it’ll be Christmas before they’re ready to wear. And dry that floor up, too. We leave in fifteen minutes, so be ready. And be prepared to graft. We’ve a long day ahead.’

Joseph swore under his breath as she blustered from the room and up the stairs. Probably in search of her witch’s broomstick, he didn’t wonder.

He had no idea where they were going, but he knew one thing. The day had to get better, surely.