

# THE DEAD OF WINTER

A JOHN MADDEN MYSTERY

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# 1

*London, November 1944*

HANDS IN POCKETS, Bert huddled deeper in the doorway. Crikey, it was cold!

The wind that had got up earlier was still blowing, but not in gusts like before; now it was steady. It had force, and the power of it cut clean through his coat and overalls, and the jersey he was wearing underneath that, and went straight to his bones. And though his tin helmet, with the W for air-raid warden painted on the front, was safely settled on his head and hardly likely to fly away, even in the gale that was blowing, he clutched at it automatically.

‘You’ll catch your death, Bert Cotter, going out on a night like this,’ Vi had warned him earlier when he’d been preparing to set off from the small flat in St Pancras where they lived. She’d insisted he put on an extra vest. ‘And what’s the use anyway? It’s no good telling people to put their lights out. It don’t make no difference to a buzz bomb.’

The advice was wasted on Bert. Hadn’t he been saying the same thing himself for weeks? There hadn’t been a proper raid on London since the summer. The Luftwaffe – the bloomin’ Luftwaffe to Vi – had finally shot its bolt, or so they were assured. Now there were only the flying bombs to worry about. Those and these new V-2 rockets, which the government had finally admitted were falling on the city,

though most people had already guessed it. After all, how many times could mysterious explosions be put down to gas leaks before people started asking questions?

‘What do they take us for?’ Vi had enquired of him in all seriousness. As though she thought he might actually know the answer. ‘Bloomin’ idiots?’

Fishing out a packet of fags from his coat pocket, Bert chuckled. She was right about the blackout, though. The whole of London could be lit up and it wouldn’t change a thing. The bombs and rockets fell where they fell, and all you could hope was it wasn’t your head they came down on.

He lit his cigarette and then used the flickering flame of the match to check his wristwatch. He was close to the end of his three-hour tour of duty and anxious to get home. Too old to enlist – he’d done his bit in France in the last shindig – Bert had opted to serve part time in civil defence, and since he worked in the area, being employed as a carpenter and general handyman at the British Museum, he’d joined a squad of wardens assigned to the Bloomsbury district. There’d been a time, back in ’40, during the Blitz, when Jerry bombers had come over night after night, turning whole areas of the city into cauldrons of fire, when the job had been one to be proud of.

But now Bert wasn’t so sure. The excitement he’d felt at the start of the conflict had long since faded. Truth to tell he was sick of patrolling the night-time streets, fed up with blowing his whistle and bawling up at people to ‘put that bloody light out’. It was a feeling shared by many, and not least by his fellow wardens, if that evening’s performance was anything to go by. When Bert had turned up at their rendezvous point a little earlier – it was a pub in the Tottenham Court Road – he’d discovered that no fewer than four of the dozen-strong squad had rung in to excuse themselves. Two

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had bad colds (they said), one had twisted his ankle (a likely story) and the fourth had referred to some unspecified family crisis that prevented him from leaving home. Vi was right. Only a muggins like yours truly would venture out on a night like this.

His thoughts were interrupted by the wail of a siren. It sounded close by, coming from the area of Covent Garden, he guessed, and instinctively he glanced upwards, searching for the telltale finger of flame that would signal the approach of a flying bomb. During the summer they arrived day and night from across the Channel, and Londoners had learned to recognize the sinister drone of their engines and to dread the moment when the noise ceased and the craft, loaded with explosives, plunged to earth. Fewer fell now, it was true: the advance of the Allied armies in France and Holland had forced the Jerries to move their launching sites. But the threat was far from over. Only a few weeks before, returning home from work, crossing Tavistock Square, Bert had seen one pass overhead and heard its engine cut out. The tremendous explosion that followed had made the windows in the square rattle, and seconds later a huge buff plume of smoke had risen from the vicinity of King's Cross like a pillar into the grey October sky. Ears pricked, he waited now, but after a minute or so the noise stopped and the silence of the night was restored. A false alarm.

Bert put out his cigarette. It was time to get moving. The doorway where he'd taken refuge was in Little Russell Street, near the corner of Museum Street, and he needed only to walk over to Tottenham Court Road to reach the boundary of his allotted territory, a patchwork of narrow roads bounded to the north by Great Russell Street and to the south by Bloomsbury Way. The wardens usually patrolled in pairs, but because of the absentees that evening he was on his

own and had already decided to shorten his route. Not two minutes from where he stood now, at the top of Museum Street, his place of employment loomed large and lightless, and although it seemed deserted he knew very well that the museum's doors would be unlocked and a squad of volunteer firemen would be on duty inside. (They'd been posted there as a precaution ever since a night back in 1941 when dozens of incendiary bombs had come through the roof during a Jerry raid and several of the rooms had been burned out.) What he planned to do was pop in there for a cup of tea, get the cold out of his bones, and then leg it home to St Pancras. (And two nights from now when he was next on duty he might just come down with a cold himself.)

As Bert slipped out of the doorway he heard footsteps, and next moment a dark figure came swinging round the corner from Museum Street.

'Whoops . . . ! Sorry, miss.'

If it hadn't been for the cry the figure let out as they collided Bert might not have known it was a young woman. She was wearing a coat which had a hood attached to it and was walking with her head down.

'It's this blinkin' blackout.' Seeing her shrink back, he tried to reassure her. 'You never see anything until it's too late.'

'I am sorry. It was my fault.' Breathless from haste, she spoke with a foreign accent. 'I should have looked where I was going.'

The face beneath the hood was a white blur. Bert noticed she had a bag in each hand.

'Bitter night,' he remarked, drawing his own coat closer about him, resettling the helmet on his head.

'Yes, isn't it?' The relief in her voice made him wonder if she'd felt nervous walking through the blackout on her own.

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She'd put down one of her bags for a moment, and he saw now that in fact it was a basket, heavily laden, its contents covered by a cloth. He tested its weight and then held it ready for her while she wiggled her fingers to get the circulation back.

'Thank you so much.' She took the basket from him.

'I hope you haven't far to go with those.' He nodded at her burdens.

'No, it's only a short walk.'

'I'll give you a hand if you like.'

She looked over her shoulder. 'No, really. It's not necessary.' He caught a glimpse of her smile in the shadow cast by the hood. 'Goodnight, and thank you for your help.'

She plodded on, and as he watched her figure disappearing into the darkness Bert wondered if he shouldn't have insisted. She seemed like a nice girl. But his bones ached from the cold and whatever faint impulse he felt to follow her faded at the thought of the hot cup of tea awaiting him.

She would manage, he told himself as her figure grew faint and then vanished in the darkness.

She hadn't far to go.

Feeling a lot better after his break – the firemen were a friendly lot – Bert hurried down the museum steps into the buffeting wind and then tacked his way across the great forecourt like a ship under sail. The sirens he'd heard earlier hadn't sounded again. He was ready to call it a night. But while sitting in the warmth inside he'd felt the prick of conscience, and instead of going home directly as he'd planned he'd decided to return to where he'd interrupted his round earlier and make a final inspection of his area.

Pausing only to adjust his shoulder bag, he set off briskly

down Museum Street, using the road itself, rather than the pavement. Although the blackout restrictions had been relaxed in recent weeks – in some districts of the capital, street lamps were now permitted to show a glimmer of light, creating what was called a moonlight effect – inky darkness continued to prevail in many areas, and if you wanted to avoid barking your shins on unseen obstacles, or, even worse, collecting a black eye from walking into a lamp-post, it was best to keep to the middle of the street.

Bert had barely turned the corner and started down Little Russell Street, however, when he heard the sound of a car behind him. Looking back he saw its reduced headlights approaching, and moved off the roadway to give it passage. It went by slowly, the driver steering his vehicle carefully down the dark canyon created by the buildings on either side of the narrow street. Bert continued to walk along the pavement. He was keeping an eye on the car, ready to move back on to the road at the first opportunity, but before he had a chance to do so his foot caught on something and he tripped and fell headlong.

‘Bloody ’ell!’ Half-winded by the fall, he lay where he was for a moment, collecting his wits. ‘What in the name of . . . ?’

Lifting himself up on one elbow he peered behind him. The darkness seemed impenetrable. But there was something there all right. He could feel it when he pushed his foot back; an obstruction of some kind. Bert levered himself into a sitting position. His shoulder bag had come off, but he quickly located it by feeling around in the dark, and having got the straps unbuckled his questing fingers found the torch which he carried inside it. He switched on the light.

‘Christ Almighty!’

The whispered exclamation was involuntary. Revealed by the wavering beam, a pair of legs was protruding on to the

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pavement. They belonged to a woman, there was no doubt of that. Bert could see a knee-length skirt beneath the coat which the sprawled figure was wearing. He shifted the light. His hand was shaking.

‘Ah, no . . . !’

He recognized the figure: it was the young girl he’d bumped into earlier. Her pale face was clearly visible now that the hood she’d been wearing had been dragged clear of her head. Bert could see the basket she’d been carrying lying beside her. It had tipped over and he caught a glimpse of some strewn apples and the remains of what looked like broken eggs. Although he knew instinctively that she was dead, he stirred himself to scramble to his knees and reach for her wrist, which lay close to him, the hand beneath it clenched. He found no pulse.

‘Poor lass . . .’

Fumbling in the pocket of his overalls, Bert got hold of his police whistle, and as the wind gathered in strength, ascending to a high keening note not unlike a howl of grief, he blew a long blast on it. Then another . . . and another, piercing the enveloping blackness around him with its urgent summons.