

# Birds of a Feather

Jacqueline Winspear

Published by John Murray

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.  
Please print off and read at your leisure.

---

# I

MAISIE DOBBS shuffled the papers on her desk into a neat pile and placed them in a plain manila folder. She took up a green marble-patterned W.H. Smith fountain pen and inscribed the cover with the name of her new clients: Mr and Mrs Herbert Johnson, who were concerned that their son's fiancée might have misled them regarding her past. It was the sort of case that was easily attended to, that would provide a useful reference, and that could be closed with presentation of a timely report and accompanying account for her services. But for Maisie the case notes would not be filed away until those whose lives were touched by her investigation had reached a certain peace with her findings, with themselves, and with one another – as far as that might be possible. As she wrote, a tendril of jet black hair tumbled down into her eyes. Sighing, she quickly pushed it back into the chignon at the nape of her neck. Suddenly, Maisie set her pen on the blotting pad, pulled the troublesome wisp of hair free so that it hung down again, and walked to the large mirror hanging on the wall above the fireplace. She unpinning her long hair and tucked it inside the collar of her white silk blouse, pulling out just an inch or so around her chin-line. Would shorter hair suit her?

“Perhaps Lady Rowan is right,” said Maisie to her reflection in the mirror. “Perhaps it *would* look better in a bob.”

She turned from side to side several times, and lifted her hair just slightly. Shorter hair might save a few minutes of precious time each morning, and it would no longer come free of the chignon and fall into her eyes. But one thing held her back. She lifted her hair and

turned her head. Was the scar visible? Would shorter hair fall in such a way as to reveal the purple weal that etched a line from her neck into the sensitive flesh of her scalp? If her hair were cut, would she lean forward over her notes one day and unwittingly allow a client to see the damage inflicted by the German shell that had ripped into the casualty clearing station where she was working, in France, in 1917?

Looking at the room reflected in the mirror, Maisie considered how far she had come – not only from the dark dingy office in Warren Street that was all she had been able to afford just over a year ago, but from that first meeting with Maurice Blanche, her mentor and teacher, when she had been a maid in the household of Lord Julian Compton and his wife, Lady Rowan. It was Maurice and Lady Rowan who had noted Maisie's intellect and ensured that she had every opportunity to pursue her hunger for education. They had made it possible for the former tweeny maid to gain admission to Girton College, Cambridge.

Maisie quickly pulled her hair into a neat chignon again, and as she pinned the twist into place, she glanced out of the floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked Fitzroy Square. Her assistant, Billy Beale, had just turned in to the square and was crossing the rain-damp grey flagstones toward the office. Her scar began to throb. As she watched Billy, Maisie began to assume his posture. She moved toward the window with shoulders dropped, hands thrust into imaginary pockets, and her gait mimicking the awkwardness caused by Billy's still-troublesome war wounds. Her disposition began to change, and she realized that the occasional malaise she had sensed several weeks ago was now a constant in Billy's life.

As she looked down at him from what had once been the drawing room window of the Georgian building, he stretched the cuff of his overcoat over the palm of his hand and polished the brass nameplate informing visitors that the office of M. Dobbs, Psychologist and Investigator, was situated within. Satisfied, Billy straightened, drew back his shoulders, stretched his spine, ran his fingers through his tousled shock of wheaten hair, and took out his

key to the main door. Maisie watched as he corrected his posture. *You can't fool me, Billy Beale*, she said to herself. The front door closed with a heavy thud, and the stairs creaked as Billy ascended to the office.

“Morning, Miss. I picked up the records you wanted.” Billy placed a plain brown envelope on Maisie’s desk. “Oh, and another thing, Miss, I bought a *Daily Express* for you to ‘ave a butcher’s at.” He took a newspaper from the inside pocket of his overcoat. “That woman what was found murdered in ‘er own ‘ome a week or two ago down in Surrey – you remember, in Coulsden – well, there’s more details ‘ere, of who she was, and the state she was in when she was found.”

“Thank you, Billy,” said Maisie, taking the newspaper.

“She was only your age, Miss. Terrible, innit?”

“It certainly is.”

“I wonder if our friend . . . well, your friend, really – Detective Inspector Stratton – is involved?”

“Most likely. Seeing as the murder took place outside London, it’s a Murder Squad case.”

Billy looked thoughtful. “Fancy ‘avin’ to say you work for the Murder Squad, eh, Miss? Don’t exactly warm folk to you, does it?”

Maisie scanned the article quickly. “Oh, that’s a newspaper invention to sell more papers. I think they started to use it when the Crippen case became big news. It used to be called the Reserve Squad, but that didn’t sound ominous enough. And Criminal Investigation Department *is* a bit of a mouthful.” Maisie looked up at Billy, “And by the way, Billy, what do you mean by my ‘friend,’ eh?”

“Aw, nuffin’ really, Miss. It’s just that –”

Billy was interrupted by the ringing of the black telephone on Maisie’s desk. He raised his eyebrows and reached for the receiver.

“Fitzroy five six double o. Good afternoon, Detective Inspector Stratton. Yes, she’s ‘ere. I’ll put her on.” He smiled broadly, covering the receiver with his palm as Maisie, blushing slightly, held out her hand to take it. “Now, Miss, what was it that Doctor Blanche

used to say about coincidence being a – what was it? Oh yes, a messenger of truth?”

“That’s enough, Billy.” Maisie took the receiver and waved him away. “Inspector Stratton, how very nice to hear from you. I expect you’re busy with the murder case in Coulsden.”

“And how did you know that, Miss Dobbs? No, don’t tell me. It’s probably best that I don’t know.”

Maisie laughed. “To what do I owe this call, Inspector?”

“Purely social, Miss Dobbs. I thought I’d ask if you might care to dine with me.”

Maisie hesitated, tapped the desk with her pen, and then replied, “Thank you for the invitation, Inspector Stratton. It really is most kind of you . . . but perhaps we can lunch together instead.”

There was a pause. “Certainly, Miss Dobbs. Will you be free on Friday?”

“Yes, Friday would be excellent.”

“Good. I’ll meet you at your office at noon, and we can go from there to Bertorelli’s.”

Maisie hesitated. “May I meet you *at* Bertorelli’s? At noon?”

Again the line was quiet. Why does this have to be so difficult? Maisie thought.

“Of course. Friday, noon at Bertorelli’s.”

“I’ll see you then. Good-bye.” She replaced the receiver thoughtfully.

“Aye–oop, ’ere’s a nice cuppa for you, Miss.” Billy placed the tea tray on his desk, poured milk and tea into a large enamel mug for Maisie, and placed it in front of her.

“Don’t mind me askin’, Miss – and I know it ain’t none of my business, like – but why don’t you take ’im up on the offer of a dinner? I mean, gettin’ the odd dinner fer nuffin’ ain’t such a bad thing.”

“Lunch and dinner are two entirely different things, and going out for luncheon with a gentleman is definitely not the same as going out to dine in the evening.”

“You get more grub at dinner, for a start –”

Billy was interrupted by the doorbell. As he moved to the window to see who might be calling, Maisie noticed him rub his thigh and wince. The war wound, suffered almost thirteen years before, during the Battle of Messines in 1917, was nipping at him again. Billy left to answer the doorbell, and as he did so, Maisie heard him negotiate the stairs with difficulty as he descended to the front door.

“Message for M. Dobbs. Urgent. Sign ’ere, please.”

“Thanks, mate.” As Billy signed for the envelope he reached into his pocket for some change to hand the messenger. He closed the door and sighed before mounting the stairs again. As he returned to the office he held out the envelope to Maisie.

“That leg giving you trouble?” she asked.

“Just a bit more than usual. Mind you, I’m not as young as I was.”

“Have you been back to the doctor?”

“Not lately. There ain’t much they can do, is there? I’m a lucky feller – got a nice job when there’s ’undreds and ’undreds of blokes linin’ up fer work. Can’t be feelin’ sorry for meself, can I?”

“We’re fortunate, Billy. There seems to be more business for us, what with people going missing after losing all their money, and others getting up to no good at all.” She turned the envelope in her hands. “Well, well, well . . .”

“What is it, Miss?”

“Did you notice the return address on the envelope? This letter’s from Joseph Waite.”

“You mean *the* Joseph Waite? Moneybags Joseph Waite? The one they call the Banker’s Butcher?”

“He’s requested that I come to his residence – ‘soonest,’ he says – to receive instructions for an investigation.”

“I suppose ’e’s used to orderin’ folk around and gettin’ ’is own way –” Billy was interrupted once more by the ringing telephone. “Gawd, Miss, there goes the dog-and-bone again!”

Maisie reached for the receiver.

“Fitzroy five six double o.”

“May I speak to Miss Maisie Dobbs, please?”

“Speaking. How may I help you?”

“This is Miss Arthur, secretary to Joseph Waite. Mr Waite is expecting you.”

“Good morning, Miss Arthur. I have only just received his letter by personal messenger.”

“Good. Can you come today at three? Mr Waite will see you then, for half an hour.”

The woman’s voice trembled slightly. Was Miss Arthur so much in awe of her employer?

“Right you are, Miss Arthur. My assistant and I will arrive at three. Now, may I have directions?”

“Yes, this is the address: do you know Dulwich?”



“Ready when you are, Miss.”

Maisie looked at the silver nurse’s watch pinned to her jacket as if it were a brooch. The watch had been a gift from Lady Rowan when Maisie took leave from Girton College and became a VAD at the London Hospital, a member of the wartime Voluntary Aid Detachment of nursing staff during the Great War. It had kept perfect time since the very first moment she pinned it to her uniform, serving her well while she tended injured men at a casualty clearing station in France, and again when she nursed shell-shocked patients upon her return. And since completing her studies at Girton the watch had been synchronized many times with the pocket watch belonging to Maurice Blanche, when she worked as his assistant. It would serve her for a few more years yet.

“Just time to complete one more small task, Billy; then we’ll be on our way. It’s the first week of the month, and I have some accounts to do.”

Maisie took a key from her purse, opened the middle drawer on the right-hand side of her large desk, and selected one small ledger from the six bound notebooks in the drawer. The ledger was labelled MOTOR CAR.

Maisie had been given use of the smart MG 14/40 sports road-

ster belonging to Lady Rowan the year before. Recurring hip pain suffered as the result of a hunting accident rendered driving difficult for Lady Rowan, and she insisted that Maisie borrow the motor car whenever she wanted. After using the vehicle constantly for some months, Maisie had offered to purchase the MG. Lady Rowan teased that it must have been the only transaction involving a motor car in which the buyer insisted upon paying more than the owner had stipulated. A small percentage for interest had been added at Maisie's insistence. Taking up her pen, Maisie pulled her cheque-book from the same drawer and wrote a cheque, payable to Lady Rowan Compton. The amount paid was entered in a ledger column and the new balance owed underlined in red.

"Right then, Billy, just about done. All secure?"

"Yes, Miss. Case maps are in my desk, and locked. Card file is locked. Tea is locked –"

"Billy!"

"Just pullin' yer leg, Miss!" Billy opened the door for Maisie, and they left the office, making sure that the door was locked behind them.

Maisie looked up at the leaden sky. "Looks like rain again, doesn't it?"

"It does at that. Better get on our way and 'ope it blows over."

The MG was parked at the edge of Fitzroy Street, its shining paintwork a splash of claret against the grey April afternoon.

Billy held the door for her, then lifted the bonnet to turn on the fuel pump, closing it again with a clatter that made Maisie wince. As he leaned over the engine, Maisie observed the dark smudges below his eyes. Banter was Billy's way of denying pain. He gave the thumbs-up sign, and Maisie set the ignition, throttle, and choke before pressing the starter button on the floor. The engine burst into life. He opened the passenger door and took his seat beside her.

"Off we go, then. Sure of your way?"

"Yes, I know Dulwich. The journey shouldn't take more than an hour, depending upon the traffic." Maisie slipped the MG into gear and eased out into Warren Street.



“Let’s just go over what we already know about Waite. That Maurice had file cards on him is intriguing in itself.”

“Well, according to this first card, Dr Blanche went to ’im askin’ for money for a clinic. What’s that about?” Billy glanced at Maisie, then looked ahead at the road. “It’s starting to come down.”

“I know. English weather, so fabulously predictable you never know what might happen,” observed Maisie before answering Billy’s question. “Maurice was a doctor, Billy, you know that. Before he specialized in medical jurisprudence, his patients had a bit more life in them.”

“I should ’ope so.”

“Anyway, years ago, long before I went to work at Ebury Place, Maurice was involved in a case that took him to the East End. While he was there, examining a murder victim, a man came rushing in shouting for help. Maurice followed the man to a neighbouring house, where he found a woman in great difficulty in labour with her first child. The long and the short of it is that he saved her life and the life of the child, and came away determined to do something about the lack of medical care available to the poor in London, especially women and children. So for one or two days a week, he became a doctor for the living again, working with patients in the East End and then across the water, in Lambeth and Bermondsey.”

“Where does Waite come in?”

“Read the card and you’ll see. I think it was just before I came to Ebury Place, in 1910, that Maurice took Lady Rowan on one of his rounds. She was appalled and determined to help. She set about tapping all her wealthy friends for money so that Maurice might have a proper clinic.”

“I bet they gave her the money just to get her off their backs!”

“She has a reputation for getting what she wants and for not being afraid to ask. I think her example inspired Maurice. He probably met Waite socially and just asked. He knows immediately how to judge a person’s mood, and to use that – I suppose you’d call it energy – to his advantage.”

“Bit like you, Miss?”

Maisie did not reply but simply smiled. It had been her remarkable intuitive powers, along with a sharp intellect, that had led Maurice Blanche to accept her as his pupil and later as his assistant in the work he described as the forensic science of the whole person.

Billy continued. “Well, apparently old Dr Blanche tapped Waite for five ’undred quid.”

“Look again, and you’ll probably find that the five hundred was the first of several contributions.” Maisie used the back of her hand to wipe away condensation accumulating inside the windscreen.

“Oh ’ere’s another thing,” said Billy, suddenly leaning back with his eyes closed.

“What is it?” Maisie looked at her passenger, whose complexion was now rather green.

“I don’t know if I should read in the motor, Miss. Makes me go all queasy.”

Maisie pulled over to the side of the road and instructed Billy to open the passenger door, put his feet on the ground and his head between his knees. She took the cards and then summed up the notes on Joseph Waite. “Wealthy, self-made man. Started off as a butcher’s apprentice in Yorkshire – Harrogate – at age twelve. Quickly demonstrated a business mind. By the time he was twenty he’d bought his first shop. Cultivated the business, then outgrew it within two years. Started selling fruit and veg as well, dried goods and fancy foods, all high quality and good prices. Opened another shop, then another. Now has several Waite’s International Stores in every city, and smaller Waite’s Fancy Foods in regional towns. What they all have in common is first-class service, deliveries, good prices, and quality foods. Plus he pays a surprise visit to at least one store each day. He can turn up at any time.”

“I bet they love that, them as works for ’im.”

“Hmmm, you have a point. Miss Arthur sounded like a rabbit on the run when we spoke on the telephone this morning.” Maisie flicked over the card she was holding. “Now this is interesting . . .”

she continued. "He called upon Maurice – yes, I remember this – to consult him about ten years ago. Oh heavens. . ."

"What is it? What does it say?" asked Billy, wiping his brow with a handkerchief.

"This is not like Maurice. It says only, 'I could not comply with his request. Discontinued communication.'"

"Charmin'. So where does that put us today?"

"Well, he must still have a high opinion of Maurice to be asking for my help." Maisie looked at Billy to check his pallor. "Oh dear. Your nose is bleeding! Quickly, lean back and press down on the bridge of your nose with this handkerchief." Maisie pulled a clean embroidered handkerchief from her pocket, and placed it on Billy's nose.

"Oh my Gawd, I'm sorry. First I 'ave to lean forward, then back. I dunno . . . I'm getting right in the way today, aren't I?"

"Nonsense, you're a great help to me. How's that nose?"

Billy looked down into the handkerchief, and dabbed at his nose. "I think it's better."

"Now then, we'd better get going."



Maisie parked outside the main gates leading to a red-brick neo-Georgian mansion that stood majestically in the landscaped grounds beyond an ornate wrought iron gate.

"D'you reckon someone'll come to open the gate?" asked Billy.

"Someone's coming now." Maisie pointed to a young man wearing plus fours, a tweed hacking jacket, wool shirt and spruce green tie. He hurriedly opened an umbrella as he ran toward the entrance, and nodded to Maisie as he unlatched the gates and opened them. Maisie drove forward, stopping alongside the man.

"You must be Miss Dobbs, to see Mr Waite at three o'clock."

"Yes, that's me."

"And this is . . .?" The man bent forward to look at Billy in the passenger seat.

"My assistant, Mr William Beale."

Billy was still dabbing his nose with Maisie's handkerchief.

"Right you are, Ma'am. Park in front of the main door please, and make sure you reverse into place, Ma'am, with the nose of your motor pointing toward the gate."

Maisie raised an eyebrow at the young man, who shrugged.

"It's how Mr Waite likes it done, Ma'am."

"Bit picky, if you ask me," said Billy as Maisie drove toward the house. "'Reverse in wiv the nose pointing out'. Perhaps that's 'ow I should walk in there, backwards, wiv me nose turned away! I wonder who 'e thinks 'e is?"

"One of the richest men in Britain, if not Europe." Maisie manoeuvred the car as instructed. "And as we know, he needs something from us, otherwise we wouldn't be here. Come on."

They strode quickly from the car toward the main door where a woman waited to greet them. She was about fifty-five, in Maisie's estimation, and wore a plain slate grey mid-calf length dress with white cuffs and a white Peter Pan collar. A cameo was pinned to the centre of her collar and her only other adornment was a silver wristwatch on a black leather strap. Her grey hair was drawn back so tightly that it pulled at her temples. Despite her austere appearance, when Maisie and Billy reached the top step she smiled warmly with a welcoming sparkle in her pale blue eyes.

"Come in quickly before you catch your death! What a morning! Mr Harris, the butler, has been taken poorly with a nasty cold. I'm Mrs Willis, the housekeeper. Let me take your coats." Mrs Willis took Maisie's mackintosh and Billy's overcoat, and passed them to a maid. "Hang them on the drier over the fireplace in the laundry room. Mr Waite's guests will be leaving in—" she looked at her watch "—approximately thirty-five minutes, so get the coats as dry as possible by then."

"Thank you very much, Mrs Willis," said Maisie.

"Mr Waite will join you in the library shortly."

Maisie sensed a mood of tension pervading the house. Mrs Willis's pace was hurried, urging them forward. At the library door she checked her watch as she reached for the brass door handle. A

door opened behind them and another woman hurried to join the trio.

“Mrs Willis! Mrs Willis, I will take over from here and show Mr Waite’s guests in to the library,” she panted.

Mrs Willis relinquished them, frowning with annoyance, “Certainly, Miss Arthur. Please continue.” She turned to Maisie and Billy. “Good morning,” she said as she stepped away without looking at Miss Arthur again. Unfortunately she was prevented from making a dignified exit as the door opened once more and a rotund man strode towards them, consulting his watch as he approached.

“Right then, it’s three o’clock. We’d better get on with it.” Barely looking at Maisie and Billy, he strode into the library.

Billy leaned towards Maisie and whispered, “It’s like a three-ring-circus in ’ere!”

She responded with a brief nod.

“Sit down, sit down,” Joseph Waite pointed to two chairs on the long side of a rectangular polished mahogany table and immediately seated himself in a larger chair at its head. His girth made him seem short, though he was almost six feet tall and moved deceptively quickly. According to Maurice’s notes, Waite had been born in 1865, which meant he was now sixty-five. His navy blue pinstripe suit was doubtless constructed at great expense by a Savile Row tailor. It was complemented by a white shirt, light grey silk tie, highly polished black shoes, and light grey silk socks that Maisie could just see as she glanced down at the floor. Expensive, very expensive, but then Joseph Waite reeked of new money and of the large Havana cigar that he moved from his right hand to his left in order to reach out first to Maisie, then to Billy.

“Joseph Waite.”

Maisie took a breath and opened her mouth to reply but was prevented from doing so.

“I’ll get directly to the point, Miss Dobbs. My daughter, Charlotte, is missing from home. I’m a busy man, so I will tell you straight, I do not want to involve the police because I don’t for one

minute think that this is a police matter. And I don't want them turning this place upside down while they waste time speculating about this and that, and drawing every bored press man to my gates while they're about it."

Maisie once again drew breath and opened her mouth to speak, but Waite held his hand up, his palm facing her. She noticed a large gold ring on his little finger, and as he replaced his hand on the table, she saw that it was encrusted with diamonds. She stole a sideways look at Billy, who raised an eyebrow.

"It's not a police matter because this is not the first time she's left my house. You are to find her, Miss Dobbs, and bring her back before word gets out. A man in my position can't have a daughter running around and turning up in the newspapers. I don't 'ave to tell you that these are difficult times for a man of commerce, but Waite's is trimming its sails accordingly and doing very nicely, thank you. It's got to stay that way. Now then." Waite consulted his watch yet again. "You've got twenty minutes of my time, so ask any questions you want. I won't 'old back."

Maisie perceived that although Waite had worked hard to eliminate a strong Yorkshire accent, the occasional revealing long vowel and the odd Northern dropped *h* broke through.

"I'd like some details about your daughter." Maisie reached for the blank index cards that Billy handed her. "First of all, how old is Charlotte?"

"Thirty-two. About your age."

"Quite."

"And with about half the gumption!"

"I beg your pardon, Mr Waite?"

"I'll make no bones about it; Charlotte is her mother's daughter. A wilting lily, I call 'er. A good day's work wouldn't do her any harm at all, but of course the daughter of a man in my position has no need. More's the pity."

"Indeed. Perhaps you could tell us something about what happened on the day Charlotte disappeared. When was she last seen?"

"Two days ago. Saturday. Morning. At breakfast. I was down in

the dining room, and Charlotte came in, full of the joys of spring, and sat down at the other end of the table. One minute she seemed as right as rain, eating a bit of toast, drinking a cup of tea, then all of a sudden she starts with the tears, sobs a bit, and runs from the room.”

“Did you go after her?”

The man sighed and reached for an ashtray, into which he tapped the smouldering end of his cigar, leaving a circle of pungent ash. He drew deeply on the cigar again and exhaled.

“No, I didn’t. I finished my breakfast. Charlotte is a bit of a Sarah Bernhardt, Miss Dobbs. An actress – should’ve been on the stage, like her mother. Nothing is ever good enough for her. I thought she’d’ve made a suitable marriage by now, but no, in fact – you should write it down there –” He waved his cigar toward Maisie’s index card. “She was jilted by her fiancé a couple of months ago. Even with my money she can’t get a husband!”

“Mr Waite, the behaviour you describe suggests that your daughter may have been in a state of despair.”

“Despair? *Despair?* She’s always had fine food in her belly, clothes – and very good clothes, I might add – on her back. I’ve given her a good education, in Switzerland, if you please. And she had a proper coming out ball. You could’ve fed a family for a year with what I spent on the frock alone. That girl’s had the very best, so don’t tell me about despair, Miss Dobbs. That girl’s got no right to despair.”

Maisie met his gaze firmly. *Here it comes*, she thought, *now he’s going to tell me about his hard life.*

“Despair, Miss Dobbs, is when your father dies in a pit accident when you’re ten years old and you’re the eldest of six. That’s what despair is. Despair is what gives you a right good kick in the rump and sets you off to provide for your family when you’re nobbut a child.”

Waite, who had slipped into broad Yorkshire, went on. “Despair, Miss Dobbs, is when you lose your mother and her youngest to consumption when you’re fourteen. That, Miss Dobbs, is despair.

Despair is just when you think you've got everyone taken care of, because you're working night and day to make something of yourself, and you lose another brother down the same pit that killed your father, because he took any job he could get to help out. That, Miss Dobbs, is despair. But you know about that yourself, don't you?" Waite leaned forward and ground his cigar into the ashtray.

Maisie realized that somewhere in his office Joseph Waite had a dossier on her that held as much information as she had acquired about him, if not more.

"Mr Waite, I am well aware of life's challenges, but if I am to take on this case – and the choice is mine – I have a responsibility for the welfare of all parties. If this type of departure is something of a habit for your daughter and discord in the house is at the heart of her unsettled disposition, then clearly something must be done to alleviate the, let us say, *pressure* on all parties. I must have your commitment to further conversation with respect to the problem when we have found Charlotte."

Joseph Waite's lips became taut. He was not a man used to being challenged. Yet, as Maisie now knew, it was the similarity in their backgrounds that had led him to choose her for this task, and he would not draw back. He was a very intelligent as well as belligerent man and would appreciate that not a moment more could be lost.

"Mr Waite, even if Charlotte has disappeared of her own volition, news of her disappearance will soon attract the attention of the press, just as you fear. Given your financial situation and these difficult times, there is a risk that you may be subjected to attempts at extortion. And though you seem sure that Charlotte is safe and merely hiding from you, of that we cannot be certain until she is found. You speak of prior disappearances. May I have the details?"

Waite leaned back in his chair shaking his head. "She runs away, to my mind, anytime she can't get what she wants. The first time was after I refused to allow her a motor car." He looked across the lawns and waved the cigar in the direction of what Maisie expected were the garages. "She can be chauffeured anywhere she wants. I don't hold with women driving."



Maisie exchanged glances with Billy.

“So she ran to her mother’s house, no doubt to complain about her terrible father. I tell you, where I come from, there’s women who’d give their eye teeth to have someone to drive them instead of walking five miles to the shops pushing a pram with a baby inside, a couple of nippers on top, and the shopping bags hanging off the handle!”

“And the second time?”

“Oh, she was engaged to be married and wanted to get out of it. The one before this last one. Just upped and moved into the Ritz, if you please. Nice home here, and she wants to live at the Ritz. I went and got her back myself.”

“I see.” Maisie imagined the embarrassment of a woman being frog-marched out of the Ritz by her angry father. “So in your opinion Charlotte has a tendency to run away when she is faced with a confrontation.”

“Aye, that’s about the measure of it,” replied Waite. “So what do you think now about your little ‘further conversation’ when Charlotte returns, eh, Miss Dobbs, considering the girl can’t even look her own father in the eye?”

Maisie was quick to respond. “My terms remain, sir. Part of my work in bringing Charlotte home will be to listen to her and to *hear* what she has to say.”

Waite scraped back his chair, pushed his hands into his trouser pockets, and walked to the window. He looked up at the sky for just a moment and took out a pocket-watch. “I agree to your terms. Send your contract to me by nine tomorrow morning. Miss Arthur will take care of any deposit required, and will settle your account and expenses upon receipt. If you need me to answer more questions, Miss Arthur will schedule an appointment. Otherwise I expect your progress report by Friday. In person and at this same time – that is, should you fail to have found her by then. I’m a busy man, as I’ve said, Miss Dobbs.” He turned to leave.

“Mr Waite?”

“Yes?”

“May we see Charlotte’s rooms, please?”

“Miss Arthur will call Mrs Willis to show you the rooms. Good afternoon.”



Mrs Willis was instructed to show Maisie and Billy to Charlotte’s suite. They were escorted up the wide staircase to the second floor, where they turned right along a spacious landing. Mrs Willis lifted her hand to knock at the door and then, remembering that there was no need, took a bunch of keys from her pocket, selected one, and unlocked the door to reveal a large sitting room with additional doors on either side that Maisie thought would lead to a bathroom and bedroom respectively. The sash windows were open to a broad view of the perfect lawns at the front of the house, with stripes of light and dark green where gardeners had worked with mowers and rollers to give an immaculate finish.

Mrs Willis beckoned them into the rooms, which were aired by a light breeze that seemed to dance with the cabbage-rose-printed curtains, flicking them back and forth. Though appointed with the most expensive furniture and linens, the rooms felt cold and spartan to Maisie. There was none of the ornamentation she had expected: no photographs in frames, no mementos, no books on the bedside table, no exotic perfume bottles set on top of the dressing table. Maisie walked through into the bedroom, and back into the sitting room. Like the Queen Anne chairs beside the fireplace, the rose-printed curtains were traditional, but the dressing table and wardrobe were modern, constructed of solid dark wood with geometric lines. The dressing table mirrors were triangular, a jagged icy triptych that unsettled Maisie. Her skin prickled as if pierced by tiny needles. The design of the dressing table itself was matched by that of the wardrobe, with its centre mirror set into the wood. It seemed to Maisie that no rest was to be had in this room, unless one stared out of the window or at the curtains.

“Lovely rooms, aren’t they? We only changed the curtains last week – she has pale green velvets in winter. Lined with a special

combed cotton, they are, to keep the rooms warmer. The dressing table suite was made 'specially to Mr Waite's specifications."

Maisie smiled and nodded. "Thank you, Mrs Willis. We may need to ask you some more questions in a while. At the moment we just need to look around."

Mrs Willis pursed her lips, hesitating. "Of course. I'll come back in about twenty minutes, but if you need me in the meantime, just press this button." She indicated one of three brass buttons on a panel beside the door.

Sensing that Waite had given instructions that they were to be escorted at all times, Maisie smiled and nodded. She suspected that Mrs Willis had enough on her plate to worry about in the house without chaperoning private investigators.

As the door closed, Billy turned to Maisie. "It looks as if nobody ever set foot in these rooms, dunnit?"

Maisie made no reply, but set her document case down on a chair with a cover that matched the curtains and, in the bedroom, even the counterpane on Charlotte's bed. Maisie's work with Maurice Blanche had taught her that a person speaks not only with the voice but with those objects she chooses to surround herself. That photographs tell a story is well accepted, but the way furniture is positioned in a room tells something about its occupant; the contents of a larder reveal desire and restraint, as most surely does the level of liquid in a decanter.

"What are we lookin' for, Miss?"

"I don't know, Billy, but I will when we find it."

They worked together, carefully and systematically searching through drawers, in the wardrobe, and in every nook and cranny of the room. Maisie asked Billy to search carefully under the bed and behind furniture, to pull out cushions from the chair, and to list all items in the medicine cabinet in the white-tiled bathroom. She, in turn, would investigate the contents of the dressing table, wardrobe and writing desk.

Though she was troubled by the design of the furniture, Maisie was even more intrigued by Charlotte's clothing. Instead of suits,

dresses and gowns from the houses of Worth, Schiaparelli or Molyneux, as would befit a woman of Charlotte's station, there were just a few plain grey and brown skirts and jackets bought from Debenham & Freebody. A long black gown protected by a sheet of fine muslin was Charlotte's one concession to evening wear, and there was also a black afternoon dress in a style fashionable several years earlier, with a low waistband and below-the-knee hemline. Charlotte's blouses were equally plain and it seemed as if she had bought several of similar design at the same time. Had she taken more colourful and frivolous clothing with her, leaving behind a life that lacked colour in search of something more vibrant?

It was in the writing desk, to the right of the window, that Maisie found an address book. At first, she thought that she would find no other personal papers, no letters, nothing that gave away anything of Charlotte Waite's character or hinted at the cause of her distress, but as she opened the second drawer, underneath a collection of pens and stationery, Maisie found a prayer book along with a copy of *The Monastic Rule of Saint Benedict*, and several pamphlets on the life of a contemplative. Taking up the books, Maisie walked again to the wardrobe and touched the dark, drab fabrics of the clothes Charlotte had left behind.

"Miss, look what I've found." Billy came towards Maisie with a piece of paper in his hand.

"What is it, Billy?"

"Found it shoved down the side of that chair cushion. Could've been put there deliberately or fallen out of a pocket." Billy handed Maisie the small slip of paper.

"Looks like someone's jotted down train departures. See here —" Maisie pointed to the letters and read: "'Ch. X to App. Chg Ash'. Then there's a list of times. Hmm. I'll keep it with these other things for now and we'll look at them later." She folded the paper and placed it inside the prayer book, then turned to Billy.

"Billy, I'd like to spend some time in here alone."

He was now used to Maisie's way of working and showed no

surprise at her request. "Right you are, Miss. Shall I interview Mrs Willis?"

"Yes, do that. Here's what we need to know: first, Charlotte – her behaviour over the past two or three months. Was there any change in her manner or appearance? Ask about even the slightest change in habits of dress, diet, recreation." Maisie looked around the room. "She doesn't have her own telephone, so find out who has called; the staff always know when a new name comes along. Speak to Miss Arthur about her allowance; how much, when it's paid and how it's paid. Does she have her own accounts – heaven knows, I hope the poor woman has some privacy – and are statements kept by Miss Arthur?"

Maisie paced back and forth, as Billy licked his pencil, ready to continue taking notes.

"Most important: find out about Charlotte's former fiancé, his name, profession – if he has one – and where he works. I'll need to see him. Speak to the chauffeur, Billy, and find out where she goes, whom she sees. You know the ropes. Oh, and a recent photograph, one that really looks like Charlotte; ask different staff if it's a good resemblance. See what you can get hold of. I want about fifteen minutes here, then I'd like to speak to Charlotte Waite's personal maid. Find out who she is and have her come up to this room."

"Awright, Miss, consider it all done."

"Oh, and Billy, tread very carefully on this one. We don't know where loyalties lie yet, though I must say, I can feel a certain chill when there's any mention of Charlotte."

"You know, I reckon I felt that meself."

"Well, keep it in mind. Leave no stone unturned."

Billy quietly shut the door behind him. Maisie sat in Charlotte's chair and closed her eyes. She took four deep breaths through her nose, as she had been taught so many years ago by Khan, the blind Ceylonese mystic to whom Maurice had introduced her, to learn that seeing is not necessarily a function of the eyes alone. From her days of sitting with Khan, and her instruction in deep meditation, Maisie was attuned to the risks inherent in using such a tool in her

work, and knew that even her strong spirit was vulnerable to the auras of the troubled soul. Maisie concentrated on her breathing, stilling both her body and her mind, and she began to feel the strength of emotion that resided in the room. This was Charlotte's refuge while in the house and had become a receptacle for her every thought, feeling, inspiration, reflection and wish. And as she sat in meditation, Maisie felt that Charlotte had been deeply troubled and that her departure had had little to do with a broken engagement. Charlotte Waite had run away, but what was she running from? Or to? What had caused such an intense ache in her heart that even now in her room, Maisie felt Charlotte's lingering sorrow?

Maisie opened her eyes and continued to sit in silence for some moments. Then she began to inspect the books and pamphlets that Charlotte had collected. *The Monastic Rule of Saint Benedict* opened immediately at the place marked with a haphazardly torn envelope fragment. She inspected the scrap of vellum closely, for it seemed heavy, then turned it over. On the reverse side was a thick smudge of red sealing wax, about three-quarters of an inch in diameter, pressed into a rose-shaped seal with a cross in the centre. Maisie squinted to see the words etched into the seal above and below the cross. She shook her head, reached down into her document case and took out what initially looked like a powder compact but that, when opened, revealed a magnifying glass. Maisie leaned closer to the seal and, using the glass, read the words "Camden Abbey." *Camden Abbey*. The name sounded familiar.

There was a knock at the door. Maisie quickly placed the books, pamphlets and other items in her case, ensured they were secure, then rose, breathed deeply again, and opened the door. A young woman of about nineteen bobbed a half-curtsey in front of her. Her black dress was shorter than the one Maisie had worn when she was a servant at the home of Lord and Lady Compton; a small bibbed apron to protect her dress and a delicate white lace band on top of her tightly curled hair completed the maid's uniform.

"Miss Dobbs? I was told you wanted to see me, Ma'am. I'm Perkins, Miss Waite's personal maid."

“Oh, come in, Miss Perkins.” Maisie stood to one side to allow the woman to enter the room.

“Would you like to sit down?”

The maid shook her head. “No, Ma’am.”

“Well then, let’s stand by the window. It’s a blustery day now, but I do like to look out upon garden.” Maisie knew that an enclosed area encouraged an enclosed mind. Maurice had taught her: always take the person to be questioned to a place where there’s space, or where they can see few boundaries. Space broadens the mind and gives the voice room to be heard.

Maisie sat on the low, wide windowsill, the toe of one shoe touching the floor for balance. Perkins stood at the opposite end of the windowsill, facing Maisie.

“Tell me, Miss Perkins, how long have you worked for Miss Waite?”

“Mr Waite. I work for Mr Waite. Mr Waite pays my wages, so it’s him I work for. Looking after Miss Waite is what I do in his house, and I’ve been her maid for a year.”

“I see.” Maisie noticed the speed with which she had been corrected, and thought that with just one question, she had discovered where Perkins’ loyalties lay.

“And who was Miss Waite’s maid before you?”

“Well, there were lots of them, Ma’am. Isabel Wright left last year, then six months before her there was Ethel Day – I remember them because I’ve worked for Mr Waite since I was twelve, Ma’am.”

“And do you like working here, Miss Perkins?”

“I like working for Mr Waite. He’s very good to us here, Ma’am.”

Maisie nodded, and looked out of the window. She was aware that the maid had leaned forward to see the gardens.

“I’ll bet you are too busy to look out of the windows, aren’t you?”

“Oh yes, ’specially with the way Miss Waite keeps me running . . . Oh, begging your pardon, Ma’am.”

Maisie smiled, encouraging Perkins into her confidence. “Tell me – what is it like working for Miss Waite? And I should add that

everything you tell me will remain between the two of us.” She leaned forward, and though the maid did not consciously discern any alteration in Maisie’s speech, she had allowed her accent to change slightly so that she sounded just a little like the young woman in front of her. “I need to ask questions to get a sense of what has been happening in Miss Waite’s life in the past two or three months, and especially in more recent weeks.”

The young woman gazed into the distance again, chewed her inner lip, then moved closer to Maisie. She began to speak, at first tentatively, then with greater strength. “To tell you the truth, she’s not the easiest person to work for. She’d have me running up and downstairs all day. Wash this, press that, cup of tea, not too hot, not too cold, lemon – oh no, changed my mind, cream instead. First she’s going out, then she’s staying in; then suddenly, just as I’m laying my head on the pillow, the bell rings, and I have to go down and dress her for a late dinner. No thank-you’s or anything, no little something extra left on the sideboard for me, and I’m the one that has to clean up when she has a tantrum!”

“Oh dear.”

“It’s like being outside, you know: no climate but all weather. Hot and cold she is, never seems to know her own mind. One minute she’s all happy, the next, you’d’ve thought the moon had crashed into the stars and set light to the sky outside her window.” Perkins shrugged. “Well, that’s what Miss Harding, the cook, says.”

“And what about the past few weeks or so? More of the same behaviour?”

Perkins watched the clouds for a moment before answering. “I’d say she was quieter. More . . . more *distant*, I think you’d say. I mean, she always went through times like that. Miss Harding said she ought to be taken to see somebody about her moods. But this was different. It sort of went on and on, and she didn’t go out much. Didn’t seem to dress up as much either. In fact, she got rid of some lovely clothes, you know, from Paris and Bond Street. Very strange for a lady, to want to walk around in them drab clothes all day, and only have one evening dress, ’specially as she used to go to the



collections, you know, and have mannequins walk up and down the room for her to pick and choose what she wanted. You should have seen it in here when the boxes arrived!”

“Have you any idea what might have caused her to withdraw?”

“Not really. None of my business. I was just glad there were no bells ringing at midnight.”

“Do you think Mr Waite noticed?”

“Mr Waite works hard. We all know that. Far as I know, they don’t see much of each other.”

“Are you aware of discord between Miss Waite and her father?”

Perkins looked at her shoes and stepped away from the window just a little. Maisie noticed immediately. *She’s closing her mind. Deliberately.*

“Not my business to pry, Ma’am. I just do my job. What they think of each other upstairs isn’t any of my concern.”

“Hmmm. Yes. Your work is demanding enough, Miss Perkins. No reason for you to keep tabs on people. One more question, though: do you know whom Miss Waite saw, or where she went, in the weeks preceding her departure from this house? Did you notice anything out of the ordinary?”

The maid sighed in a way that indicated that she had said all she wanted to say, but that she would try to answer the question. “She did go up to Town a few times. I’m not sure where she went, but she mainly sees a woman called Lydia Fisher, I think. She lives in Chelsea, somewhere around there. And I reckon she was going somewhere else as well, because she took a pair of walking shoes with her on a couple of occasions. But a lot of her time was spent just sitting up here.”

“Doing what?”

“Not sure I know, Miss. Sort of in a daydream, looking out of the window.”

“I see.” The younger woman began to fidget with her hair, her lace headband, her apron, indicating to Maisie that no more valuable information would be forthcoming. As they moved toward the door, Maisie reached into her bag and took out a calling card.

“Miss Perkins, I am familiar with the workings of a house of this size, and also appreciate that the staff are usually the first to know when something is amiss. Please feel free to telephone me if you think of anything that might be useful. It’s clear that you have had some difficulties with Miss Waite, but despite everything, her father – your employer – wants her home.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Perkins took the card, placed it in her pinafore pocket, bobbed another half curtsy, and left the room.

Maisie watched the maid walk along the landing, stopping briefly to curtsy as Billy approached in the company of Mrs Willis, who was looking at her watch. It was time for them to leave.

“Have you got everything, Billy?”

“Yes, Miss. In fact, Mrs Willis knew where to find a recent photograph of Miss Waite. ’Ere.” Billy opened his notebook and took out the photograph, which he handed to Maisie.

Charlotte was sitting on a white filigree cast-iron chair set in front of a rose garden, which Maisie suspected was at the rear of the house. She seemed to be what the gentlemen of the press might have termed a “flapper.” Her hair, which framed her face, was waved and drawn back into a low chignon at the nape of her neck. She wore a knee-length dress that appeared rather flimsy; a breeze had caught the hem the moment before the shutter snapped. Charlotte had made no move to press the garment down, and laughed into the camera. Maisie held the photo closer to scrutinize the face. If eyes were windows to the soul, then Charlotte was indeed troubled, for the eyes that looked at the camera seemed to be filled not with joy or amusement as the pose suggested, but with sorrow.

Maisie looked up. “Thank you, Mrs Willis.” She turned to Billy. “If you’ve completed everything, we can talk back at the office. I’m sure Mrs Willis has a lot to do.”

Mrs Willis escorted them to the front door, where a maid waited with Maisie’s mackintosh and Billy’s overcoat. They were about to step outside when Maisie paused. “A quick question for you, Mrs Willis. I have a sense that Miss Waite commands little respect in the household. Why is that?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean, Ma’am,” said Mrs Willis, who now seemed anxious to see Maisie and Billy inside their motor car, driving away.

“Mrs Willis, in confidence. Tell me what you think.” Maisie inclined her head conspiratorially toward Mrs Willis.

“Mr Waite is respected by everyone who works for him. He gives back as much as he asks of those in his employ, and sometimes more. His loyalty to his staff earns loyalty in return. And that’s all I can say.”

Maisie and Billy thanked Mrs Willis, left the house, and climbed into the motor car.

“Didn’t say much, did she?” said Billy, waving at the gatekeeper as they left.

“On the contrary, she told me a lot. It was an impertinent question, and, within the confines of what she *could* say, Mrs Willis was quite forthcoming.”

Billy opened his notebook and began to speak, but Maisie silenced him with a hand gently placed on his arm and a finger to her lips. “No, not now. Allow the information we’ve gathered to sit and stew for a while. Just tell me one thing – the name and profession of the former fiancé.”