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Pardonable Lies

Jacqueline Winspear

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Extract

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Truly, to tell lies is not honourable;
but when the truth entails tremendous ruin,
to speak dishonourably is pardonable.

– Sophocles (496–406 BC), *Creusa*

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.
Shovel them under and let me work –
I am the grass; I cover all.
And pile them high at Gettysburg
And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.
Shovel them under and let me work.
Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the
conductor:
What place is this?
Where are we now?

I am the grass.
Let me work.

– Carl Sandberg (1878–1967), *Grass*

PART ONE

London, September 1930

I

THE YOUNG policewoman stood in the corner of the room. Plain whitewashed walls, a heavy door, a wooden table with two chairs, and one small window with frosted glass rendered the room soulless. It was a cold afternoon and she'd been in the corner since coming on duty two hours ago, her only company the rumpled and bent girl sitting in the chair that faced the wall. Others had come into the room to sit in the second chair: first, Detective Inspector Richard Stratton, with Detective Sergeant Caldwell standing behind him; then Stratton standing while a doctor from the Maudsley Hospital sat before the girl, trying to get her to speak. The girl – no one knew her age or where she had come from because she hadn't spoken a word since she was brought in this morning, her blood-stained dress, hands and face showing a month's worth of dirt – was now waiting for another person who had been summoned to question her: a Miss Maisie Dobbs. The policewoman had heard of Maisie Dobbs, but from what she had seen today, she wasn't sure that anyone could get this young scrubber to talk.

The policewoman heard voices outside the door: Stratton and Caldwell and then another voice. A smooth voice. A voice that was neither loud nor soft, that did not need to be raised to be heard or, thought the policewoman, to get someone to listen.

The door opened and Stratton came in, followed by a woman she presumed to be Maisie Dobbs. The policewoman was surprised, for the woman was nothing like she had expected, but then she realized that the voice had revealed little about the speaker, except that it had depth without being deep.

Wearing a plain burgundy suit with black shoes and carrying a worn black leather document case, the visitor smiled at both the policewoman and Stratton in a way that almost startled the uniformed woman, as her eyes met the midnight-blue eyes of Maisie Dobbs, psychologist and investigator.

'Pleased to meet you, Miss Chalmers,' said Maisie, though they had not been introduced. The warm familiarity of the greeting took Chalmers aback. 'Brrr. It's cold in here,' added the investigator, turning to Stratton. 'Inspector, can we bring in an oil stove? Just to take the edge off?'

Stratton raised an eyebrow and inclined his head at the unusual nature of the request. Amused at seeing her superior caught off guard, Chalmers tried to hide a grin, and the seated girl looked up, just for a second, because the woman's voice compelled her to do so.

'Good. Thank you, Inspector. Oh – and perhaps a chair for Miss Chalmers.' Maisie Dobbs removed her gloves, placing them on top of the black bag, which she set on the floor, before pulling a chair around so that she was seated not opposite the girl, on the other side of the table, but close to her.

Strange, thought Chalmers, as the door opened and a constable brought in another chair, left the room, and returned with a small paraffin stove, which he placed by the wall. They exchanged quick glances and shrugged shoulders.

'Thank you,' said Maisie, smiling.

And they knew she had seen their furtive communication.

Now, sitting alongside the girl, Maisie said nothing. She said nothing for some time, so that after a while Chalmers wondered what in heaven's name she was there for. Then she realized that the Dobbs woman had closed her eyes and had changed her position slowly, and though she couldn't put her finger on it, it was as if she were talking to the girl without opening her mouth, so that the girl – as if she couldn't help herself – leaned toward Maisie Dobbs. *Blimey, she's going to talk.*

'I'm getting warmer now.' It was a rounded voice, a west-country voice. The girl spoke deliberately, with rolled *r*'s and a

nod when her sentence was finished. A farm girl. Yes, Chalmers would have pegged her for a farm girl.

But Maisie Dobbs said nothing, just opened her eyes and smiled, but not with her mouth. No, it was her eyes that smiled. Then she touched the girl's hand, taking it in her own. The girl began to cry and, very strange again, thought Chalmers, the Dobbs woman didn't reach out to put an arm around her shoulder, or try to stop her or use the moment as Stratton and Caldwell might have. No, she just sat and nodded, as if she had all the time in the world. Then she surprised the policewoman once more.

'Miss Chalmers. Would you be so kind as to poke your head around the door and ask for a bowl of hot water, some soap, two flannels, and a towel, please.'

Chalmers gave a single nod and moved toward the door. *Oh, this would surely give the girls something to chew over later. They'd all have a giggle about this little pantomime.*

A bowl of hot water was brought to the room by the police constable, along with the flannels, soap, and towel. Maisie removed her jacket, placed it over the back of the chair, and rolled up the sleeves of her cream silk blouse. Reaching into the bowl, she rubbed some soap on a wet flannel and squeezed out the excess water. Then she lifted the girl's chin, smiled into her reddened and blood-shot eyes, and began to wash her face, rinsing the flannel and going back again, dabbing the hot cloth on the girl's temples and across her forehead. She washed her arms, holding first her left hand in the hot flannel and working the cloth up to her elbow, then reaching for the girl's right hand. The girl flinched, but Maisie showed no sign of noticing the movement, instead massaging her right hand with the cloth, gently working it along her arm to the elbow, and then rinsing again.

It was as she knelt on the floor, taking one filthy bare foot after the other and washing the dirt and grime away with the second flannel, that the policewoman realized she had become mesmerized by the scene unfolding before her. *It's like being in church.*

The girl spoke again. 'You've got right soft 'ands, miss.'

Maisie Dobbs smiled. 'Thank you. I used to be a nurse, years ago, in the war. That's what the soldiers used to say: that my hands were soft.'

The girl nodded.

'What's your name?'

Chalmers stared as the girl – who had been sitting in that room without so much as a cup of tea since she was brought in twelve hours ago – replied immediately.

'Avril Jarvis, miss.'

'Where are you from?'

'Taunton, miss.' She began to sob.

Maisie Dobbs reached into the black bag and brought out a clean linen handkerchief, which she placed on the table in front of the girl. Chalmers waited for Maisie to take out a sheet of paper to write notes, but she didn't; instead she simply continued with her questions as she finished drying the girl's feet.

'How old are you, Avril?'

'Fourteen next April, I reckon.'

Maisie smiled. 'Tell me, why are you in London and not Taunton?'

Avril Jarvis sobbed continuously as Maisie folded the towel and sat next to her again. But she did answer the question, along with every other question put to her over the next hour, at which point Maisie said that was enough for now; she would be taken care of and they would speak again tomorrow – only Detective Inspector Stratton would have to hear her story too. Then, adding fuel to the tale that Chalmers would tell the other policewomen lodging in rooms upstairs at Vine Street, the Jarvis girl nodded and said, 'All right, then. Just so long as you'll be with me, miss.'

'Yes. I'll be here. Don't worry. You can rest now, Avril.'

2

FOLLOWING A debriefing with Stratton and Caldwell, Maisie was taken back to her office in Fitzroy Square by Stratton's driver, who would collect her again tomorrow morning for another interview with Avril Jarvis. Maisie knew that much rested on the outcome of this second interview. Depending upon what was revealed and what could be corroborated, Avril Jarvis might well spend the rest of her life behind bars.

'You've been gone a long time, Miss,' said Billy Beale, her assistant, running his fingers back through his sun-burnished hair. He came to Maisie's side, took her coat and placed it on the hook behind the door.

'Yes, it was a long one, Billy. Poor little mite didn't stand a chance. Mind you, I'm not sure how deeply the police are looking into her background at this point, and I would like to have some closer-to-the-bone impressions and information. If I'm required to give evidence under oath, I want to be better prepared.' Maisie took off her hat, placed it on the corner of her desk, and slipped her gloves into the top drawer. 'I'm wondering, Billy. Would you and Doreen fancy a trip down to Taunton for the weekend, with everything paid for?'

'You mean like an 'oliday, Miss?'

Maisie inclined her head. 'Well, it won't be quite like being on holiday. I want you to find out more about Avril Jarvis, the girl I interviewed this morning. She said she's from Taunton and I have no reason to disbelieve her. Find out where she lived, who her family are, whether she went to school there, if she worked,

and when she left for London. I want to know why she came to London – I doubt if she knew it was for a life on the streets – and what she was like as a child.' She shook her head. 'Heavens, she's only thirteen now – all but a child. It's wretched.'

'She in trouble, Miss?'

'Oh, yes. Very big trouble. She is about to be charged with murder.'

'Gawd – and she's only thirteen?'

'Yes. Now then, can you go to Taunton?'

Billy pressed his lips together. 'Well, it's not as if me and Doreen have had much of an 'oliday together, ever, really. She don't like to leave the nippers, but you know, I suppose me mum can look after 'em while we're away.'

Maisie nodded and took out a new manila folder, which she inscribed AVRIL JARVIS and passed to Billy, along with a collection of index cards upon which she had scribbled notes while waiting for her debriefing with Stratton and Caldwell. 'Good. Let me know as soon as possible if and when you can go. I'll advance you funds for the train, a guesthouse, and incidentals. Now then, let's get on as I've to leave early this evening.'

Billy took the folder and sat down at his desk. 'Oh, yeah, you're seein' that old friend of yours, Mrs Partridge.'

Maisie turned her attention to a ledger before her. She did not look up. 'Yes, Priscilla Patridge – Evernden, as she was when we were at Girton together. After two terms she joined the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry in 1915 and drove an ambulance in France.' Maisie sighed and looked up. 'She couldn't bear to stay in England after the Armistice. She'd lost all three brothers to the war, and her parents to the flu, so she went to live on the Atlantic coast of France. That's where she met Douglas Partridge.'

'I reckon I've 'eard that name before.' Billy tapped the side of his head with a pencil.

'Douglas is a famous author and poet. He was badly wounded in the war, lost an arm. His poetry about the war was very controversial when it was first published here, but he's managed to

continue with his work – though it's very dark, if you know what I mean.'

'Not really, Miss. I'd 'eard of 'im, but, y'know, poetry's not up my alley, to tell you the truth.'

Maisie smiled and continued. 'Priscilla has three boys. She calls them "the toads" and says they are just like her brothers, always up to something. She's back in London to look at schools for them for next year. She and Douglas have decided that the boys are growing up and need to have a British education.'

Billy shook his head. 'Don't think I could part with my nippers – oh, sorry, Miss.' He pressed his hand to his mouth, remembering that Frankie Dobbs had sent Maisie to work as a maid in the home of Lord Julian Compton and his wife, Lady Rowan, when her mother died. At the time, Maisie was barely thirteen years old.

Maisie shrugged. 'That's all right, Billy. It's well past now. My father was doing what he thought best for me, and no doubt that's what Priscilla is doing. Each to their own – we've all got to part one day, haven't we?' Maisie shrugged. 'Let's just get these bills finished and go home.'

For the past year, Maisie had lived at Lord and Lady Compton's Belgravia home. The accommodation had been offered to Maisie in the context of a favour to Lady Rowan, who wanted someone she trusted living 'upstairs' during her absence – Maisie was now an independent woman with her own business, since her mentor and former employer, Maurice Blanche, had retired. So instead of a lowly bed in the servants' quarters at the top of the mansion – her first experience of life in the household – Maisie occupied elegant rooms on the second floor. The Comptons were spending more time at Chelstone, their country home in Kent, where Maisie's father was the groom. It was generally thought that the Belgravia property was now retained only to pass on to James, the Comptons' son who managed the family's business affairs in Canada.

For most of the time, Maisie was alone in the house but for

a small complement of servants; then at the end of summer, Lady Rowan would sweep into town to take up her position as one of London's leading hostesses. However, extravagance had been curtailed since last year when Lady Rowan, with a compassion uncommon among the aristocracy, declared, 'I simply cannot indulge in such goings-on when half the country hasn't enough food in its belly! No, we will draw in our horns and instead see what we can do to get the country out of this wretched mess!'

Upon arriving at Ebury Place that evening, Maisie brought her MG into the mews behind the house and noticed immediately that Lord Compton's Rolls-Royce was parked alongside the old Lanchester and that George, his chauffeur, was in conversation with Eric, a footman who took charge of the motor cars when George was in Kent.

George touched his forehead and opened Maisie's door for her. 'Evening, M'um. Very nice to see you.'

'George! What are you doing here? Is Lady Rowan in London?'

'No, M'um, only His Lordship. But he's not staying. Just a business meeting and then to his club.'

'Oh. A meeting at the house?'

'Yes, M'um. And if you don't mind, he's said that as soon as you returned he'd like you to join him in the library.'

'Me?' Maisie was surprised. She sometimes thought that Lord Compton had merely indulged his wife's wish to support Maisie in the early years of her education, though he had always been nothing less than cordial in his communications with her.

'Yes, M'um. He knows you're going out later, but he said to say it wouldn't take long.'

Maisie nodded to George and thanked Eric, who stepped forward with a cloth to attend to the already shining MG. Instead of entering through the kitchen door, an informality that had become her custom, she walked quickly to the front entrance, where the door was immediately opened by Sandra, the most senior 'below stairs' employee in the absence of the butler, Carter, who was at Chelstone.

'Evening, M'um.' Sandra gave only a short curtsy, knowing that Maisie hated such formalities. 'His Lordship –'

'Yes, George just told me.' She passed her hat and coat to Sandra but kept hold of her document case. She checked the silver nurse's watch that was pinned to her lapel, a gift from Lady Rowan when she was sent to France in 1916. The watch had been her talisman ever since. 'Thank you, Sandra. Look, could you run me a bath, please? I have to meet Mrs Partridge at the Strand Palace by seven, and I really don't want to be late.'

'Right you are, M'um. Pity she couldn't have stayed here. It's not as if we don't have the room.'

Maisie patted her thick black hair and replied as she sped toward the sweeping staircase. 'Oh, she said she wanted to be waited on hand and foot in a lavish hotel now that she has a few days' respite from her boys.'

Outside the library door, Maisie composed herself before knocking. The men's voices carried; Lord Compton's was sharp and decisive. The second voice seemed deep and resolute, and as Maisie listened she closed her eyes and began to mouth the overheard words, automatically moving her body to assume a posture suggested by the voice. Yes, this was a man of decision, a man of bearing, with weight upon his shoulders. She thought he might be a solicitor, though one thing sparked her interest in the seconds before she knocked on the door and walked into the library: the man's voice, as Maisie interpreted it, held more than a hint of fear.

'Maisie, good of you to spare us a few moments of your precious time.' Julian Compton held out his hand to Maisie to draw her into the room. He was a tall, thin man, with grey hair swept back and a debonair ease of movement that suggested wealth, confidence, and success.

'It's a pleasure to see you, Lord Julian. How is Lady Rowan?'

'Apart from that wretched hip, there's no stopping her! Of course, her new mare has a foal on the way now – perhaps another

Derby promise in a couple of years!' Lord Compton turned to the man standing with his back to the fireplace. 'Allow me to introduce a very good friend of mine, Sir Cecil Lawton, QC.'

Maisie approached the man and shook hands. 'Good evening, Sir Cecil.' She noticed the man's discomfort, the way his eyes did not quite meet her own, focusing instead on a place over her shoulder before looking down at his feet, then back to Lord Julian. *I can almost smell the fear*, thought Maisie.

Cecil Lawton was only an inch or two taller than Maisie. He had dark-grey wavy hair that parted in the centre and swept to the sides. He wore half-moon spectacles, and his bulbous nose seemed to sit uncomfortably above a waxed moustache. His clothes were expensive, though not new. Maisie had met many such men in the course of her work, barristers and judges who had once invested heavily in making an impression but, having reached the pinnacle of success in the legal profession, did not regard Savile Row with the reverence of their younger days.

'I'm delighted to see you, Miss Dobbs; you may remember that we have met before. It was when you gave evidence for the defence in the Tadworth case. The man might have been on his way to Wormwood Scrubs, had it not been for your acute observations.'

'Thank you, Sir Cecil.' Maisie was now anxious to know the reason for her being introduced to Lawton, not least to allow her time to get ready for supper with Priscilla. She turned to Lord Julian. 'I understand that you wanted to see me, Lord Julian. Is there a matter I might assist you with?'

Lord Julian looked at Lawton briefly. 'Let's sit down. Maisie, Sir Cecil requires confirmation of information received some years ago, during the war. He came to me, and I immediately suggested that you might be able to help.' Lord Julian glanced at Lawton, then brought his attention back to Maisie. 'I think it best if Sir Cecil explains the situation to you in private, without any commentary from me. I know you would prefer to hear the details in his words, and any questions you put to him can be answered

in absolute confidence. I should add, Maisie' – Lord Julian smiled at his friend – 'I have informed my good friend here that your fees are not insignificant and you are worth every penny!'

Maisie smiled and inclined her head. 'Thank you, Lord Julian.'

'Very well. Good. I'm off to my lair for ten minutes or so. I'll be back shortly.'

Sir Cecil Lawton fidgeted in his seat, then stood again with his back to the fire. Maisie leaned back slightly in her chair, a move that caused Lawton to clear his throat and begin speaking.

'This is most unusual, Miss Dobbs. I had not imagined that I might one day be seeking assistance in this matter . . .' Lawton shook his head, his eyes closed, then looked up and continued. 'My only son, Ralph, was killed in the war.'

'I'm sorry, Sir Cecil.' Maisie issued her regret softly. Sensing that Lawton had a burden to shed, she leaned forward to indicate that she was listening closely. He had pronounced his son's name *Rafe* in the old-fashioned manner.

'I was in a position to ask questions, so there was – is – no doubt in my mind that Ralph was lost. He was in the Flying Corps. Those chaps were lucky if they were still alive three weeks after arriving in France.'

Maisie nodded but said nothing.

Lawton cleared his throat, held his fist against his mouth for a second, folded his arms, and continued. 'My wife, however, always maintained that Ralph was alive. She became very – very *unstable*, I think you would say, after we received the news. She believed that one day he would come back again. She said a mother knew such things. Agnes suffered a nervous collapse a year after the war. She had become involved with spiritualists, mediums, and all sorts of quackery, all in an attempt to prove that Ralph was still alive.'

'There were many who consulted such people, Sir Cecil. Your wife was not alone in that respect.'

Lawton nodded and pressed on with his story. 'One of them

even said that a spirit guide –' He shook his head and once again took a seat opposite Maisie. 'I'm sorry, Miss Dobbs. The mere thought of it all makes my blood boil. The fact that one person can wield such power over another is abhorrent. Is it not enough for a family to endure loss, without having a witch –' Lawton appeared to falter, then regained his composure. 'Anyway, my wife was told that a spirit guide had passed on a message from the other side that Ralph was not dead, but very much alive.'

'How difficult for you.' Maisie was careful to maintain a middle ground as she listened to the story. There was something in Lawton's manner as he spoke of his son that made her feel uneasy. Her skin prickled slightly at the nape of her neck, where the scar left by an exploding shell was etched into her scalp. *His regard for his son was compromised.*

'My wife spent the final two years of her life in an asylum, Miss Dobbs, a private institution in the country. I could not afford rumours that might jeopardize my position. She was cared for in very comfortable circumstances.'

Maisie looked at the grandfather clock in the corner of the room. She needed to move on. 'Tell me, Sir Cecil, how may I be of service to you?'

Lawton cleared his throat and began to speak. 'Agnes, my wife, passed away three months ago. There was only a small funeral and the usual notice of her passing in *The Times*. However, on her deathbed, she begged me to promise that I would find Ralph.'

'Oh.' Maisie placed her hands together and brought them to her lips, as if in prayer.

'Yes. I promised to find someone who is dead.' He turned to face Maisie directly for the first time. 'I am duty bound to search for him. That's why I have come to you – at Julian's suggestion.'

'Lord Julian was at the War Office during the war. I am sure he has access to records.'

'Of course, and the search only revealed what we already know: Captain Ralph Lawton, RFC, died in France in August 1917.'

'What do you want me to do, Sir Cecil?'

'I want you to prove my son dead, once and for all.'

'I'm sorry, but I must ask. What about his grave?'

'Ah, yes, the grave. My son died in an inferno when his aeroplane came down. There was little left of the craft, let alone my son. His remains are buried in France.'

'I see.'

'I am taking this step to keep a promise to my wife.'

Maisie frowned. 'But such a search could go on indefinitely, and be difficult to bear, if I may say so, Sir Cecil.'

'Yes, yes, quite, I understand. However, I have decided that there must be a time limit set for such a task.'

Maisie sighed deeply. 'Sir Cecil, as you no doubt understand, in my work I am familiar with unusual requests and have taken on assignments that others have refused or abused. In a case such as this, my responsibility must extend to your well-being – if I may speak frankly.'

'I'm perfectly all right, you know. I –'

Standing, Maisie walked to the window, glanced at her watch, and turned to face Lawton. 'Brutal honesty is often a requirement of my work, and I must – as I said – be frank. You are recently bereaved, and your wife has burdened you with a terrible promise: to find a son who, to all intents and purposes, is dead. It would seem that, since you received word of his death, you have not been able to seal his passing with the rituals that we must all go through to release those who are lost to the past.'

Maisie paused for a moment, looked back at Lawton, and continued. 'It is only through such a pilgrimage of mourning that we are free to remember the dead with fullness of heart. In taking on this case, your passage through grief and remembrance will be of paramount consideration. You see, Sir Cecil, I am not yet sure how I might proceed with such work, but I know only too well how difficult it will be for you to relive your loss as I go about my inquiry. And of course I would be investigating those your wife consulted in her search for confirmation of her sense that he was alive.'

'I see. At least I think I see. I thought you could just search records, go over to France, and . . .' Lawton's words stalled. It was clear he had no idea what Maisie might do in France.

'Allow me to make a suggestion, if I may, Sir Cecil. Consider all I have said, and the implications of my investigation. Then please telephone me at my office, and we will proceed as from that day if you still wish me to search for the truth regarding Ralph's death.' Maisie reached into her document case and pulled out a calling card that she passed to Lawton. It was inscribed with her name, followed by *Psychologist and Investigator* and her telephone number.

Lawton studied the card for a moment before pushing it into the pocket of his waistcoat. 'Yes, quite. I'll consider the breadth of my request.'

'Good. Now, if you will excuse me, Sir Cecil, I really must hurry. I have a supper engagement.'

A single knock at the door heralded the perfectly timed entrance of Lord Julian Compton.

'I thought you'd be just about finished by now.'

'Yes, Julian. Miss Dobbs has been most helpful.' Sir Cecil held out his hand to Maisie.

'I look forward to hearing from you in due course, Sir Cecil.' Maisie shook the proffered hand and turned to leave. 'One more thing regarding your wife's assertion, Sir Cecil. Should you choose to commence with the investigation, I will be curious to know if your wife ever attributed a reason for Ralph's not returning home – if she thought him alive.'