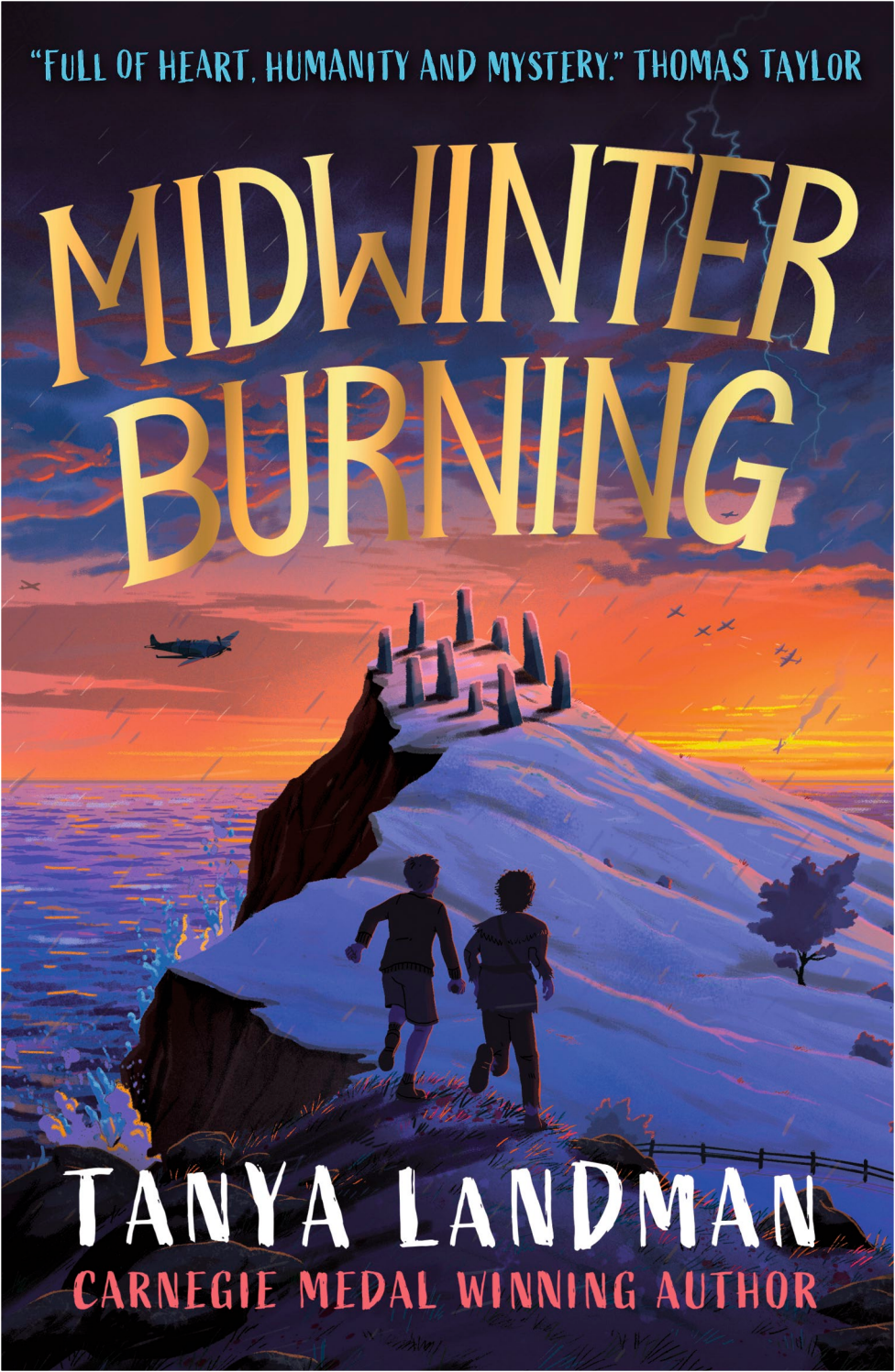


"FULL OF HEART, HUMANITY AND MYSTERY." THOMAS TAYLOR

MIDWINTER BURNING



TANYA LANDMAN
CARNEGIE MEDAL WINNING AUTHOR

MIDWINTER BURNING

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MIDWINTER BURNING

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WALKER
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For Raffy

PART I





The stone circle – temple of the Goddess, Mother Earth – was at last complete. It had taken many, many, moons but now the labour was done. The Seer stood at its sacred heart, the only member of the clan permitted to set foot on hallowed ground. Stretching out arms that were wrinkled and slack with age, she tipped her head back and uttered a prayer of thanks to Mother Earth.

The Goddess had been generous this past year. She had given freely and the whole clan had thrived. Even Smidge, the foundling, was content.

Smidge... Why did he come to mind now, when the Seer was at prayer? Such a lonely little lad! So different from the rest of the clan, with his flame-red hair and green eyes. And such a dreamer! She had found him on the beach ten summers before, a baby, bound into a floating basket, and assumed he was the child of traders from across the sea.

Abandoned?

Perhaps.

Or the sole survivor of a shipwreck, saved from the storm by the hand of the Goddess? That was possible too.

The questions that had arisen when she'd first laid eyes on the baby were still unanswered.

Was he a blessing or a curse?

A gift from the Goddess?

Or a trick, played by a demon?

The clan had debated long and hard about whether they should keep him or kill him. Kindness had prevailed in the end, but in truth Starver still doubted the wisdom of that decision. And there were many who agreed with him.

Yet for now there were more important things for the Seer to think about. Mother Earth's divine generosity did not come without a price.

At Midwinter, at the turning of the year, there would be a feast. And there would be a sacrifice. She would know the victim soon enough. The Goddess would send a vision. A sign. Whatever She required would be done. Come what may, Mother Earth must be repaid for Her generosity.

With blood.

1939

FRIDAY 1 SEPTEMBER

LEAVING LONDON

He was Mum's little accident. Spilled milk, she called him. Not worth crying over.

So she didn't. Other mothers were clinging to their offspring as they assembled in the playground at six o'clock that morning. Children stood dazed, still half asleep, luggage labels tied to their buttonholes, gas masks dangling around their necks, bulging rucksacks fixed on their backs. Some were so weighty they looked as though they might pull their owners over.

Alfie hovered uncertainly at the edge of the crowd as he always did. Mum, who liked to be at the heart of things, frowned at him in irritation.

They didn't have a rucksack at home, so Alfie carried a cardboard suitcase that was almost as

big as he was. All it contained were spare socks and an extra set of underclothes, a pair of pyjamas, a toothbrush, a torn piece of towel that would serve as a flannel, and a jam sandwich for the journey. The children were allowed to take just one toy with them. Some clutched dolls or teddy bears tightly to their chests. Alfie's most precious possession was a magnifying glass that had long ago lost both frame and handle. The chipped, circular slab of domed glass was tucked safely into the pocket of his shorts, the weight of it strangely reassuring. He'd outgrown his coat, and Mum hadn't yet bought him a replacement so she tied his label around his neck on a long length of string. It flapped in his face, teasing him just like Billy Figgs and his gang.

Alfie Wright! Alfie Right? Alfie Wrong, more like!

The kids on his street jeered whenever they saw him coming. And yet, to begin with, the only real difference between Alfie and Billy and the others was that they had fathers who'd married their mothers. Even if some of those dads hadn't stayed around to see their children growing up, they still had names and faces and histories that their offspring could boast about. All Alfie had was a big, empty space. His mother wouldn't or couldn't say who his father was, and that had been enough to mark him out. But Alfie

was also a dreamer and a loner, who liked his own company. Harmless enough differences, to be sure, but on Alfie's street being different – for whatever reason – was never good.

Go away! Get lost! You ain't wanted 'ere!

It was true. Nobody *did* want him. Not even his mum. He'd told her about their teasing – just once – and she'd sighed wearily and said, "You've got to fight your own battles, Alfie. I can't do it for you."

And now Germany had invaded Poland. Alfie suspected that the war, which everyone said would start any day now, was a welcome relief to his mother. The evacuation was a convenient excuse. She could do what she'd always wanted and pack him off like a parcel, send him away to strangers. As soon as he was out of sight, she'd forget about him. With Alfie gone, she'd be able to go dancing with "the girls" – women who worked in the same factory as her – whenever she fancied. She could stay out all night if she wanted to. Her foot was already tapping out a rhythm on the ground.

"Off you go, Alf," she said, nodding towards the other children. A polished fingernail stabbed him in the back. He turned, half hoping to see tears trickling over her cheeks, but her cold, grey eyes slid down his face like rainwater off a lump of lard.

"You be a good boy now. Don't go giving no one no trouble, you hear me?"

She didn't even wait to watch the assembled children leave. There was no tear-stained handkerchief bravely raised in the air as they set off for the station. By the time they reached the end of the street and Alfie looked back over his shoulder, Mum had gone.



GOODBYE, MR MOORE

Mr Moore was standing on his one leg at the corner of the street, wobbling a little unsteadily on his crutches. As the line of children progressed along the pavement towards him, Alfie saw that two steady streams of tears were running down the old man's face, cutting a line of white across his grubby cheeks.

According to Mum, Mr Moore had lost half his left leg and all of his mind in the last war. The things he'd seen in the trenches had turned his brain inside out, she said. He was haunted by ghosts. That was why he was always having conversations with people that weren't there.

"Best to keep away from him, Alf," Mum had told him. "A man like that? You never know what he might do."

That was easier said than done. One day last summer, Alfie had come home from school to find Mr Moore sitting on their front doorstep like an empty milk bottle. Alfie couldn't get past him, so, instead, he'd sat down next to the muttering old man and waited for Mum to finish her shift. Alfie hadn't much minded. The day was warm and he'd done what he always did when there was nothing else to do. Pulling the magnifying glass from his pocket, and shutting his right eye, he held it up so close to his left that Mr Moore, the whole street and everything in it blurred and smudged out of focus. With his magnifying glass, Alfie could make the rest of the world simply go away for a while. He'd fall into a sort of daydream, watching vague, fuzzy scenes playing out in front of him as if he was in his own, private cinema.

As Mr Moore talked to his imaginary friends, Alfie could see them taking shape. Indistinct, insubstantial shadows, like reflections in a shop window, of two young men dressed in uniform, standing either side of Mr Moore, chatting with him.

"It will all be over by Christmas, they said. They were having a laugh, weren't they, Eric?" said the first with a grin.

"The joke was on us right enough, Bob," agreed the second.

"Come on, lads. Be fair," said Mr Moore with a wink. "They never said *which* Christmas, did they?"

All three of them erupted into laughter, the two young men's hearty chuckles followed by Mr Moore's soft, wheezy splutter that ended in a cough.

They were nice company, Alfie thought. He had been perfectly content sitting in the sunshine with Mr Moore and his friends until Billy Figgs had come along.

How long the older boy had been standing there watching them Alfie couldn't be sure. He felt a sudden kick in his side, so hard and sharp he dropped his magnifying glass. He hurtled back into the real world with such speed that, for a moment, he felt breathless and dizzy. The two young men had vanished. There was just him and Mr Moore, who was mumbling to himself like a madman.

"Don't they make a lovely couple?" mocked Billy. He was looking at Alfie and Mr Moore but he was talking to Ned Smith and Stan Murphy, who were in the same class as Alfie at school. Violet Davies and the other kids stood behind them, and they all cackled with laughter.

Mr Moore pulled himself upright and lurched off down the road, still mumbling. Billy headed after him with a grin, mimicking the old man's uneven gait and

wild, staring eyes. "Who are you talking to, Mr Moore? You know there ain't no one there, don't you?"

The other children followed as if Billy Figgs was a kind of modern-day Pied Piper. Now able to get to the front door, Alfie stood up and went inside. So he didn't see Violet glancing back at him with a faintly guilty, apologetic expression on her face.

It wasn't just Billy who was unkind to Mr Moore. Grown-ups looked at the old man as if he didn't belong. Not belonging was so familiar to Alfie that he always felt a kind of kinship with the former soldier. Mum said that now another war was about to start, Mr Moore's last remaining shreds of sanity had been blown to the wind. He should be locked up, she said. Alfie had heard her and the neighbours muttering together. "He isn't safe," they told each other. "He should be put in the loony bin. For his sake and for everyone else's."

And now, as the children trooped along the street towards the railway station in the dawn light, they all gave Mr Moore a wide berth as if he was a human bomb that might explode in their faces.

Alfie didn't move out of the way. Nearing the old man, he could hear him softly pleading, protesting to an invisible person standing somewhere to the left

of him. "They're children. They're younger than we were! They can't take the children away. Where are they going? It's ain't right!"

"Goodbye, Mr Moore," Alfie said, stopping for a moment in front of the old man. "Don't worry about us."

Mr Moore ignored him and carried on with his conversation. "They can't send children to fight. They mustn't go."

"It's all right, Mr Moore. We ain't fighting or nothing. They're sending us off to the countryside. To keep us safe."

That one word seemed to penetrate Mr Moore's fog. "Safe?" he echoed. It was as if he didn't know the meaning of the word.

"Safe," Alfie repeated. "Don't worry. We'll be safe."

"Nowhere's safe!" Mr Moore told the invisible person beside him. "It's lies. All lies."

Alfie put his hand on the old man's arm, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "They said it will be like a holiday. They're evacuating us. We'll be all right."

It took Mr Moore some time but at last he focussed on the living, breathing boy standing in front of him. He looked down at the fingers squeezing his arm, then reached out his own hand and touched Alfie on the cheek.

"You won't be," he said.

Alfie didn't know how to reply. And, in any case, there was no time to say more. The line of children was rapidly disappearing down the road and Alfie had to run to catch up with them, which was no mean feat with the gas mask banging against his chest and the suitcase bashing into his legs. He heard Mr Moore calling after him, "You won't be safe!"

Alfie felt a prickle of alarm but told himself sternly that Mr Moore wasn't right in the head. The old man might be haunted by ghosts of the past, but he couldn't possibly see into the future.

Could he?