

One Sunday in Picardy

Volume One, Creative Work

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Abstract

“One Sunday in Picardy” is a work of fiction set in northern France during The First World War. Jack, an Australian doctor, returns to see his young fiancée Georgette in a French village on his way to the second Battle of the Somme. After assisting the wounded at the front for two years, he is unable to remember events during one fierce battle for which he was decorated; his thoughts are plagued by images and sensations related to the battlefield. Georgette, now nearly eighteen, finds Jack changed and is uneasy as the likelihood grows of an enemy attack, threatening the *château* which is her family home. To keep up the battalion’s spirits, Solaine, the matriarch of the family, hosts a sports day in the grounds and a grand dinner in the evening for the officers. Jack’s batman Pat, a childhood friend who is interested in Georgette’s sister Élise, goes to check on his brother Tom in the woods near the front. At the same time the body of the ace pilot Manfred von Richthofen, shot down nearby, is secretly brought to the *château* to be washed. The stories of these characters unfold as the bombardment builds up around them.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide.

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One Sunday in Picardy

Part One

Sojourning through a southern realm in youth,

I came upon a house by happy chance

Where bode a marvellous Beauty. . . .

(Owen, "The Sleeping Beauty", lines 1-3)

Chapter 1

Sunday, 21 April 1918, 5 a.m. – somewhere near Amiens

The doctor, looking out into darkness, found comfort in the clang of wheels, metal on metal, the whoosh of pistons, sounding strong and purposeful. He liked certainty; the constant movement.

There was no doubt in his mind that the walking wounded station would be set up in time for the enemy attack. He knew what to order, what to write in reports in the neatest of scripts, and what not. The patients would be scrubbed clean of muck, stitched back in one piece. They'd have the best chance. He was good at it, the fieldwork; had become a major, surprising them all.

In the reflection of the window he admired the neatness of his moustache, cut off abruptly before it reached the ends of his lips. The fashion had taken on amongst the officers in the medical corps. It conveyed a certain dignity, important for the job at hand: to inspire the men's confidence, even if one didn't have much oneself. Flicking past the window, a shadowed movement outside caught his eye, a flash of an arm, a sleeve rolled up. A man ran beside the train. Jack turned to rouse his neighbour in the carriage but when he looked back the man had gone, swallowed up by the night. Had a soldier lost his way? But more likely it was a local lad, testing his strength and speed.

Jack rested his head to the side, eyelids heavy. The gentle sway of the train seemed to draw force until it was like the rolling of great waves upon which he had ridden in 1915, his stomach heaving.

That ship had been bound for Cairo and Jack's first post at the hospital.

At home in Adelaide, the roll of honour in *The Advertiser* had clinched it for him. The “died from wounds” list. A twist of fate, a benefactor who chose to educate *him* – not his brothers, already working hard in the mine – had given him a different prospect in life: not enlistment, but application for a commission; not fighting in the trenches, but treating the injured in Cairo. In the hospital at home the consultant, a youngish man who had just been promoted, patted him on the back. Good to have experience overseas, he said. That last morning, his sister Beryl’s sweet face was white and silent as she cleared the breakfast plates.

As the ship drew away from port, even the surface of the water glistened with excitement. A paper streamer thrown from the wharf clung like cobweb to Jack’s arm, and he brushed it off, wanting to be free of that last tie before the thick ropes were lifted and the ship, untethered, headed off to deeper waters. As the shoreline receded through the spattered porthole, he meticulously planned the work to be done. The men must be trained in basic first aid without duly alarming them – a precaution, of course, as on the battlefield medical help would be at hand for the wounded. His job for the moment was to reassure them of that. Still, everyone must learn how to stop bleeding, to apply a bandage themselves.

He himself would be far away, in the Egyptian hospital. Men recovering in pristine rows of beds. Doctors and nurses without much sleep, doing good work. He had met a few in the ship restaurant, pleasant enough, capable. They would make an excellent team, in fact. Copples, that red-headed fellow from Sydney, for example, seemed a good sort, cracking jokes to lighten the mood.

But after weeks of the stew and potatoes boiled in grease, a sharp pain sprang up in Jack's side. He wrote to Beryl that he was missing her cooking and looked forward to the restaurants in Cairo. A few days later, as the vessel glided up the Suez Canal, the pain reappeared. He spent the night turning the diagnoses over in his head, his blood fiery and his sheets damp and bunched up. What a state to turn up in! He hoped the operating theatres in Egypt were clean. Reports from the Dardanelles worsened: aid posts were being swamped with casualties. Jack, clenched up in his cabin, prayed that they would arrive at the hospital soon. But when the calm waters of the narrow canal opened up at last, without warning the great vessel was diverted from its course to the left and pushed out to sea. Not Cairo, dear fellows, you're on your way to Turkey, they were told.

That grisly cove of water which shifted beneath them, washing away blood and young men. A trill of gunfire and cries rang out from crags, patches of dirtied sand. He remembered waiting in the ship's dining room to be briefed, the conversation dropping off, the doctors unsure of the processes to follow or what they would find on the line. Jack, too, was anxious. His right side ripped with shards of glass.

He could hear it now, the order called out, the clatter of men rushing about on deck in heavy boots to disembark.

"Captain!" The private stood at the cabin door, trying not to hold his nose, for the tiny room stank with vomit and it was all down Jack's front. The doctor's singlet was whipped off, his face wiped.

Sorry, Jack said.

The commanding officer stood above him, blocking the light from the porthole. He was to be pulled off the boat and sent to England, out of the way.

So the team would go ashore without him.

As the stretcher was lowered into the little boat which would take him to the island of Lemnos, he saw a lifeboat heading for the beach, a flash of red hair under a cap. Explosions of gunfire dotted the sharp cliffs above. The regret rose inside him, as piercing as the putrid gall bladder.

A bitter taste of bile had risen in his throat.

Strange to think of that now. The only doctor left with the division since its formation. The purple stripes dangling on his left breast.

Sometimes when he snatched a few hours he woke in a sweat, some poor fellow with half his face blown off leering before him. But all the men had a bad dream now and then, just kept it to themselves.

Outside the train, shapes had begun to emerge in the darkness, a dawn of sorts, dull and muted by fog. A circle of light glimmered through the branches of a solitary tree and was reflected in the water of the marshes. It looked like there were two suns and two trees meeting at their roots, one upright, the other a perfect image, upside down: two worlds, just as real, joined by the thinnest of threads.

From his breast pocket he slid a photograph, a figure with long plaits in a black smock and stockings, the clothes of mourning. Yet she wore a dark headband in the style he had seen in Paris, with fair curls escaping around sharp eyes.

He brushed a crease from the arm of his jacket.

When the train stopped the doors would open in Amiens, to the spring.

Chapter 2

The *château*, 21 April 1918, 6 a.m.

Through a window on the second floor of the *château*, the song of a cuckoo in the marshland rang out. Awake, awake. It's spring! It's the day!

Georgette sprang up, dragging the bedclothes with her.

"Gigi! Please."

"He's arriving!"

But her sister muttered something about work to do first and pulled the quilted cover back over them both, so that only her face peeked out. The dress!

On a hook on the door hung a long gown: not of new cloth, except for the tulle, but with simple lines, and decorated with glass beading from a broken lamp in the cellar and some sequins that Captain Fray had brought back from leave in Paris. Don't wash them, he teased; they are made of gelatine! One day Maman had returned from work at the journal with a copy of a fashion magazine from Paris, not the most recent but enough to see what was being worn. Since her husband died, her black dresses covered everything, but always included a brooch or trim of lace at the neck – to draw attention from the bust, she said, which seemed to have grown out of all proportion after suckling ten children. But regardless of the severity of her own garments, Maman insisted that her children look their best, in mourning or not. Georgette studied the pages of designs, searching for just the right gown for the grand dinner that would take place upon Jack's return, so he would never forget her moving elegantly across the room to take the seat beside him. She kept flicking back to the dress on page three, dreamed for three nights of how it would look on her, showing off her slim hips, the line of her neck, her fair hair loosely gathered at the back.

Her blue eyes. She fashioned her version of the gown from old dresses, pink satin for the long skirt, chiffon for the arms and bodice, and over it all went black tulle, which Maman had bought for them all after Papa died, protesting that they must not let themselves go! Georgette shaped the gown lovingly, an artist inspired by what the future would bring. When on, the layers of texture, the beading and sequins, moved with her in a most delightful way. She couldn't wait to put it on again!

She pulled in closer to her sister. Élise's arms were soft; her hair, a shade darker than Georgette's, fell in silky waves on the pillow. She smelled of fresh linen, even at this hour of the morning. Her lips, often closed and solemn, were parted in her drowsiness. How darling she looked! What a perfect day to find her a young man! But there were more urgent matters to discuss.

“Will he be the same, Liselle?”

“Of course,” her sister said, her grey eyes dewy with sleep, adding, just in case, “but a week is not long.”

The girl had thought of that first week over and over until there was nothing she hadn't remembered or invented about each moment with him. Maman had invited the officers to stay with them on their way to the fighting. This great big house, she said ... and no men, with Papa gone and the boys away. We will be safer with company. Georgette, with refreshments, had tripped on the rug at the doctor's door! But his hand had steadied the tray and not a drop of coffee spilled. He smiled beneath a clipped moustache. In the salon, he stared at her while Captain Fray, talking to Maman, circled one hand in the air before him and Élise, behind, pouted her lips. In the washhouse she scrubbed blood and mud stains from his shirt, ironing it crisp with a sprinkle of fresh lemon. Now, if she caught

her breath, she was leaning against the tall oak at the edge of the grand pasture, his dark eyes gleaming across at her in the moonlight, soft fingers pushing away her scarf. Lovely you, he had said.

A week could go on forever, like at the start of the war when the German soldier slept in her bed, and she with Tottie in the outhouse counting each night until Maman said the men had gone. The week Papa got sick.

“It is long enough,” said the girl, pushing the bedcover away.

Her sister knew that. Dear Gigi, thought Élise. The war made people think there was so little time left. Everything had to be done at once: the drawing up of wills, growing up. Falling in love.

“And I’ve seen Jack two times since then,” Georgette added, although it was not much in two years. The doctor was needed at the front. But she could not even leave the *château* grounds. When Papa was gone, she had accompanied Maman on the long road to the office of her father’s journal in Amiens. With the army trucks there was not room on the road for the carriage, so she and her mother walked. Ten miles was not far – and ten back – so good for the figure! Old Claude had resoled their boots so many times that he grumbled there’d be no leather left. When the soldiers stared as they passed on the road, her mother’s grip tightened on her arm. It was just harmless fun. She was betrothed to the doctor, if you please! Sometimes in town, with soldiers jostling, she might see one with a girl she knew, who would turn away, leaving a trace of cherries in the air. Oh, to promenade with Jack, her arm laced through his, the rough weave of his uniform against her fingertips! Only once had Solaine let them take a tour of the market gardens without a chaperone while she shopped by the river. Captain, you must see *les hortillonages*, her

mother had insisted. She and her daughter, who were to visit Amiens the next day, would accompany him. But in town Maman was detained at the last minute and sent Georgette to the floating gardens in her place. And that was the start of it all.

Now it was too dangerous for the girl to leave the *château*, said Maman, with the fighting so close and the road pocked with shellholes. Yet *she* still walked to town with a boy from the village.

If only Papa were here, fumbling with his braces in the room down the hall, complaining his trousers had shrunk. You do what you want, Gigi, he'd say. Like a boy.

Gunfire, this early – blasted noise! She was used to it, though; the birds, too, with that cuckoo still carrying on. But the bedcovers were thinner, she thought, cuddling into her sister's back. Less ducks, less feathers. Less freedom. She plucked a feather that had half escaped through the linen, twisting it between her fingers so it shimmered, brilliant green.

The war had brought her Jack.

Élise gave her arm a squeeze. "*Petite chérie ...*"

"You're as bad as Maman," the girl said, loosening her grasp, though she knew they were only trying to protect her. *Un amour de guerre*. What did that mean: that you shouldn't fall in love in a war? That the tightening in her chest as she waited for his letters would end with the fighting? He had a reason for not writing: his work had become unspeakable. But didn't he trust her with it? Did he think her too weak?

An explosion sounded from across the river, then another. Boom, boom! Louder than ever! They'd heard talk of an attack. Jack's division would protect them. *Les australiens!* But things could change quickly and within a few days a German could be

sleeping in this very bed, with her and her sisters tucked away in the outhouse. Ugh! And what of Jack? He could be a prisoner, treating some dirty *Boche* ... or dead.

Jack said he would always keep himself safe – *for my darling* – and that, when the war was over, he would return for her. Then someone else could take Maman on her errands.

When he talked of Australia, she saw a place of sunshine. Without war.

The black gown rustled in a draught from the open window. I'm ready, it whispered. Tonight she and Jack would dance slowly, to an old song. This evening would be marvellous. She would make it so.

Her sister rolled over and placed a hand on the girl's, not wanting to leave it like that.

"He loves me," said Georgette, her face still, and her sister nodded.

Chapter 3

Amiens Station, 21 April 1918, 8 a.m.

The train pulled in at last. Men woke and gathered their gear. Jack released his grip on the photo, the tips of his fingers fluttering like falling snow.

He glanced down the platform at the throng of soldiers and businessmen, here and there a woman clasping a child tightly by the hand. Voices all around him, the clanging of packs.

“Sir.” A private, his arm raised in a strong salute, stood firm in the crowd which bustled around him. Clean-cut, on time – an excellent batman. Pat never missed a thing, adding with a cheeky grin, “Just me, I’m afraid, Sir. The ladies are preparing afternoon tea ...”

Jack had forgotten about the sports meeting. He was relieved, as it would take the attention from him. While they were busy in the kitchen, he might slip into the *château* and rest before he saw her.

“... and the dinner. Should be quite a night.”

White lace tablecloths, serviettes rolled in silver etched with a single initial in elaborate script. A platter of perch sizzling in garlic, held for him to spoon, dripping, onto his china plate. At home Beryl had been particular about manners, but here ... He remembered black dresses with just the right button, a pretty bit of frill. Her, smiling down the table at him. But he’d been away so long. Too much had happened. Would he remember how to hold a silver fork, a crystal wineglass to his lips?

His batman broke in, “Don’t worry, Sir. I’ll have your uniform spotless by then.”

They were both from the same town, he and Pat. But the batman wasn't sent to be educated in the city. He stayed to work in the mines, enlisted, got through Gallipoli and ended up training in the desert, same as Jack. When a horse trod on his foot in the camp, his father, a farrier, wrote that he should never have let a nag get the better of him. So Jack took on Pat as batman. He was good with his hands; practical. Hardly a limp. Good decision to take the man on: he'd turned out a treat. The doctor attended to the medical matters, the organisation of the team. Pat looked after everything else.

The batman led the doctor out into the square, past boys with cigarettes and outstretched arms, cheap scent. The grins of men on leave. So many soldiers, thought Jack. Some from the train pushed him aside without looking, then saluted. Trucks were lined up to take them away. And behind the shuffle of boots on the cobbles and the clanging of packs, in the wind came the shots and explosions, a crack like lightning nearby. A man running in the dark. The enemy, closer.

In the car, Pat took the front seat to direct the driver, leaving Jack to look out on the changed city. Over rooftops the grey turrets of the cathedral loomed through the mist, but now the gothic peaks rose up like an echidna's spines, protecting the city. Sandbagged halfway up those beautiful doors, Pat said. Fritz has a gun that can reach all the way to Amiens! They passed a blackened shell where a building had stood; another with a part missing, shirts and socks still hanging from a window. The boulevard which had been so majestic was now filled with soldiers.

The Germans wanted this place. The railway lines radiated out like spokes from the station. Troops could go anywhere – Paris in hours. But the new offensive would be like any other attack or counterattack, raid, every last piece of aggression from either side – it

wouldn't get anywhere. A patch of ground taken one day was lost the next. An endless cycle, like the wounded men he patched up and sent back to the line, the faces he saw again and again, withdrawing like clams. What would be left of them for the boat home if they survived? Of him? But he was alright. He didn't have to fight or to kill a man ... though he had killed some, the ones he left aside because there wasn't time for the worst of them. It did no good to think about it. He got through each day; had done for years. There was nothing wrong with him.

On the bridge across the river, which led to the road out of town, a carriage in front of them lost its wheel and their car stalled. Some hardy folk were heading to and from the docks, where a few market stalls had been set up. A scarfed woman passed by so close that Jack leaned out to catch her scent, but when the woman turned her hair was pure white and a whiff of fresh fish rose from her wicker basket. In her other hand she held a single lettuce, a lovely one with leaves plump and inviting. From the gardens in the marshes nearby, said Pat. Jack remembered the rivulets like Venetian canals; the narrow barque laden with bold heads of cauliflowers; a pale white hand resting on her knee, palm upturned until his glided over and touched the centre like a sea anemone; the smile of the river guide. Back in 1916, when the town was intact, almost pristine.

And she a girl of sixteen. What would she look like now?

The wheel of the car in front was still off. He saw soldiers hanging around the river banks, smoking, bartering with a fisherman, swaying back to lodgings for a kip after a long night. Short leave, poor buggers, with the attack looming, or perhaps they had done their stint. Just whiling away the time. Except for the ruined houses on the waterfront, it could have been Harefield on a Saturday afternoon at the beginning of the war.

Yet Amiens had become a different place, its streets filled with soldiers and skeletons of houses, and the threat of a shell coming your way.

England, quiet and cared for, so far from the front, now seemed almost like home.

Chapter 4

Harefield, England, December 1915

The Harefield Common, as green and flat as the ovals at Jack's school, took pride of place at the centre of the village. One side was flanked with rather quaint houses. In the corner was a pond, nestled in reeds. From time to time two white swans would appear, their necks long and regal, the ducks circling around them like orderlies. On the crossroads side of the park, near the centre of commerce, the Australian soldiers lounged in wheelchairs, on crutches, or just flat on the grass. When a patch of sun broke through, some rolled up their sleeves, dreaming of a hot spell at home. Local lads in caps hovered around, curious, while men in bowler hats hurried on to their business. Overlooking them all was the Kings Arms, friendly and open for business.

"A pint, Sir?" a fellow might call from the doorway as one walked by, but it was too crowded for Jack. He preferred a stroll in the woodlands around the hospital.

The old manor house was plain but for dark ivy overrunning the stuccoed walls, with cream sash-windows peeking out and tall red chimney tops reaching up to the sky. At sunset, if you stood at the far point of the lake, a pair of white swans, perhaps the same ones, drifted over the water, and the leaf-covered dwelling seemed to disappear in the landscape like an overgrown ruin.

Sometimes, when the swans had tucked their heads under their wings for the night, the scream of a patient rang out across the lake. With the silence broken, a ring of shrieks might be set off and rustle the leaves, the house and all within. Later, when the nurses had administered the drugs and the moment of disquiet had passed, the wind in the trees,

unsettled still, would whisper to the old building and the weakened men inside, come back, come back to us.

A home away from home for the lads, Jack reckoned. After Gallipoli.

To pass the time of day while he recovered from his operation, he watched the men play cricket on the lawns. Those who could stand on their own two feet, or even on one, would have a go. He was afraid of bursting the stitches in his side, so he stood on the sidelines, keeping score a few times. It was like school, the boys hauled off on swaying shoulders while he, clutching a handful of books, wandered off to the homework room.

As it grew colder, a thin layer of snow covered the pitch and the games stopped. The lake froze over and the swans departed. Pairs of skates arrived for the men and with the help of a wooden chair they learned to move around without falling too often. Even the blinded men, with a mate at their side.

The manor was surrounded by woods and paths where he walked a bit further each day to gain his strength. Through the trees he heard the men swear as they fell on the ice. Like miners back from a shift. One day someone shouted “Fuck!” from the skating rink. The doctor’s laugh scared a squirrel up an elm and it vanished in a knot of bark. He repeated the word alone in the forest and it stuck in his throat like a chunk of apple.

New patients poured in from the Dardenelles and some told stories of mates, the pranks to keep things normal, Sir, but nothing about the fighting. He wanted to know what he had missed and asked a patient how it was in the cove, but the man shrugged it off as if he didn’t know himself. One afternoon, however, when the doctor was passing the makeshift huts built on the croquet lawns, through a window he saw some lads huddled around a pot-belly stove talking in low voices, their brows scrunched up. A man who had

told a bawdy joke just the day before stared ahead, eyes glistening, although it was hard from that distance to be sure. But when one of the group spotted the doctor, they fell silent and the man turned away.

Further on, the frozen lake was deserted. His boots crunched the fresh snow covering the path; the trail of prints reminded him of early morning swims and runs on the beach. He pulled up the collar of his jacket. From deep in the woods came the song of a nightingale, calling for its mate. Jack thought of the men sitting around the fire and broke into a jog, the path twisting and turning beneath him, a crooked stump leaping out so he toppled to one side, almost landing in the snow. But his balance was regained, like a beacon rights itself in a shaky sea.

In the dining room that evening, an Australian newspaper, months old, had been left on a table open at the casualty list, which spread across several pages. Jack spotted a name he knew, a soldier with flushed cheeks he had met on the ship to Cairo. The lad had been homesick, had talked of his mother packing his bag, of finding the little blanket she had knitted for him as a child.

“You won’t tell the others, will you, Sir?” The poor boy had looked so wretched, as if he had revealed the darkest of secrets.

“No,” Jack had muttered, with a lump in his throat and a memory of a child returning to a house, still and cold, with his mother dead in the living room.

The pair had stood on the back deck, watching the water pass under them, black and mottled.

He was dead now, that boy. Should he write to the mother?

After dinner, Jack announced to the major, sitting alone by the window, that he had recovered and was quite well enough to get back to his battalion.

But that hadn't been the end of it, remembered Jack, stuck in the car on the bridge in Amiens while French curses – which he had not been taught at school – flew back and forth over the vehicle about the finding of a suitable wheel, for the other had cracked through. Someone brought the wrong wheel and a boy was sent scuttling off through the crowd for another.

Why drag up this old stuff about Harefield, when he was on his way to see her? But his thoughts, determined to flip back, returned to the old manor house.

He had had to convince the head of the hospital that he was ready to work.

The morning after he had asked to return to the battalion, Jack was walking past the door to the ballroom just as the commanding officer and the major were leaving it. The room, with high panelled walls in deep maroon, was called the billiard room now; a giant felt table stood at the centre.

The commander was a large Englishman with a moustache that reminded Jack of a sea lion he'd once seen basking on a rock. He leaned down to the young doctor as if addressing a small boy.

“Captain,” he said, his eyebrows a peak of grey, “I hear you're in a hurry to work again. Don't you like it here?” He waved one arm back with a flourish to the elegant room behind him, with the sunlight streaming in through the tall arched windows. Jack imagined himself leaning on the felt edge, cue in hand, considering the angle for his next shot. What would his benefactor think to see him here, or Beryl? His father would want him to be out

on the battlefields; they all would, really, except for his sister, who hoped he would stay as far from the fighting as possible.

“Yes, Sir, but...”

The commander’s brow softened. “Good. Two o’clock round this afternoon.”

It was decided. The Dardanelles was over anyway and Jack’s battalion was training in the Middle East for the next round, wherever that would be. He’d be with them. In the meantime, a comfortable bed wouldn’t hurt. And he could learn billiards.

At last he would see a real patient, not just watch a soldier with one leg playing cricket.

In the first weeks, Jack noticed that many of the men had been treated already, on Lemnos Island, the hospital ship or, like him, in London. They were in Harefield to recuperate, to let the wounds heal or learn how to cope with crutches. The cases didn’t seem too awful, apart from the blindness, but he suspected that the worst had died already. The hospital nurses were efficient and cheerful; sometimes a sister might ask him to join them for tea in the nurses’ sitting room. But most of the time he kept to himself. In a break he would wander in the woods, imagine he was back at home strolling under the fig trees in the botanical park, warm as toast. In the new year, the hospital at Harefield became swamped with more severe cases and the walks dropped off.

The first amputation was bad – a country boy from the west. The major did his best but the leg was too far gone. Perhaps in the field they held off because he was a farm boy. After the operation at Harefield, infection took over, even in those sterile rooms. What chance did they have in the camps?

As the new wheel was wrestled onto the hub on the bridge in Amiens, Jack remembered the boy's funeral, the men in uniform following the horse and carriage as it wound through the elms to the little churchyard. The villagers turned up in hats and flowers, as if the young man had been one of their own, and perhaps he would be now. A tall man rushed out from a group of children with something in his arms – a Union Jack, which was solemnly draped over the coffin and so large that it covered every last bit of it. As the crowd reached the hole which had been hastily dug among the crumbling tombstones, the wind picked up and the trees began to whistle, our hearts, in our hearts, and all who saw him descend into the ground felt regret for what had passed.

After that the shell shock cases starting coming through, men without a scratch but in a state. Jack assisted in the treatment room, which was scrubbed and sterile. It smelled of tin and shiny things, the electrical wires and generator looming over the bed.

Private Haddon, a thickset man with an overhanging brow, was jittery and could hardly sit, so he mostly lay on the narrow bed, strapped in. He lost control of himself at night. He couldn't talk. "Saw a mate go up in a cloud of smoke on the ridge," said a soldier with a broken arm on the next bed.

The English major had decided on electrotherapy, telling Jack that the man couldn't go back to the field, or home, like this.

But when Jack asked him how it worked, the major shrugged his shoulders, saying it was a treatment which had met with some success.

So the patient was wheeled into the spotless room and wired up, and the electricity applied. The movements of the man continued. The major leaned over the patient to check

his pulse, blocking the young doctor's view. Jack turned his face away, praying, may it help this poor fellow and not make things worse.

Then the movements stopped and the major sighed, "It's done."

When the wires had been removed, the man was wheeled back to a tiny room away from the ward. That night, Jack returned to sit beside him. While the man slept, Jack talked softly, first of healing and how Haddon would be improved, then of home, and Beryl cooking a roast and a trip to the beach on Sunday afternoon.

Before retiring at midnight, the major called in to see how the man was, but when he saw the young doctor there he just stood at the door.

"There'll be more of these," he said.

Within a few days Jack's transfer back to his battalion had been arranged.

Later, when he'd been in France a few months, he received a letter of thanks from Haddon, who had returned to his brigade with a batch of fresh young men. All the man remembered of his treatment at Harefield was a quiet voice in the darkness.

Just as well, thought Jack, staring at his own trembling hands in the midst of the bustle of Amiens. To forget things.

Chapter 5

Amiens, 21 April 1918, 9 a.m.

Finally the new wheel was secured and, to jeers and tooting of horns, the procession continued over the bridge. The road out of town at last! A line of army trucks, however, held up by the fog and the unsealed surface, kept progress slow. The car dropped in and out of holes, tossing the passenger about on the back seat. The doctor took a deep breath – it was just another bad road in France. With each jolt his head tapped against the car roof. Might he be left with a headache or ricked neck? Each inch they travelled drew him closer to her and the moment he had dreamed of so many times in those dreadful dugouts. She would stand before him, a halo of golden curls piled high; he would draw the pins out one by one until it unravelled over her shoulders in thick and silken waves.

Her kiss, suddenly, the soft flesh on his tongue. He could hardly remember it.

He hadn't seen her since before Bullecourt, when she had promised to follow him to the end of the earth. The purple stripes glittered and he wanted to pull them off, to open the window and fling them away into the scarred landscape. But they, she, would think him mad.

The fields of yellow and green calmed him a little, but the nearer they got to the front, the worse the roads became and the bumpier the ride. As they passed villages, he saw tiny dwellings crammed by the roadside which were blackened or razed to the ground. He looked away from the damage, nauseous. Pat told him the *château* was so far untouched, apart from a stray bit of shell which had broken a window, but rumours were flying that the enemy would attack soon, before the Americans arrived. Jack's whole division had been

brought back in. Solaine had said she would not be pushed out of their home again. Would her daughters stay too?

As the car neared their village, it was directed to a standstill while trucks and wagons turned into an area set aside for vehicles parked in a line. So many of them! To the right tents were being hastily erected, the largest one with a huge red cross on the side.

“Not sure that sign’s big enough, Sir,” said Pat, which made the doctor laugh, though he knew that if the enemy wanted to bomb the hospital, they would.

Further on was the station for the walking wounded. More tents, a flimsy building. His new post. Jack lifted his hand to ask the driver to stop, but the man ignored him, his eyes glued to the road.

“You’re expected at the *château*,” Pat said. “Tomorrow morning you’ll be back here good as new.”

The batman got a bit above his station sometimes, Jack thought. He sank back. Would the girl turn off him, seeing him arrive in this dishevelled state? A line of men shuffled past the car, eyes bandaged, each with an arm on the shoulder of the next. Some of the injured men wore brassards. All those gas drills for nothing.

Pat said, as if to make excuses for them, “Those eye pieces are duds at night-time, Sir. Can’t do your work.”

But for Jack it was a waste of men, who couldn’t be replaced before the next enemy attack, which might be in days ...

More soldiers would come eventually, and bearers too; they’d arrive on the boats like Jack’s battalion had. Young men, boys – they’d know what they were in for by now.

Not us, thought Jack. That last morning in Cairo, most of us had no idea of what war could do to a man.

The summer of 1916.

The *Royal George* finally loaded and the anchor pulled from the Alexandrian water, a cheer rising up and much slapping of backs. Men glad to leave the dusty camps behind, their adventure ahead in France; quiet ones, who had already fought. Jack, standing on the covered deck, had looked out to the calm blue sea, forgetting for a moment the men around him and where they were headed.

The first few days, he had helped clean up the ship hospital, which had been left in a filthy state. No time to think about the sly smiles at the parade at Cairo, when a private had to grab the bridle of Jack's restless horse which had lunged forward out of line. So undignified! If he ever had a son, he would make sure that the child learned how to ride. Onboard, as the doctor debated what could be salvaged from the linen and what thrown, his sense of order – of himself – was gradually restored.

They travelled due west across the glittering water, past ancient islands that Jack had read about at school. There were rumours of underwater craft, an enemy below. He peered at the surface. The sea looked more leaden than before and the sky more covered in cloud.

Due west they travelled, an escort leading the way through the treacherous waters. Other ships joined them. Someone said they had seen a small and silent vessel in the middle of nowhere: a minesweeper. The coastline of Malta appeared on the starboard side

and through the porthole he saw ships pull in at the port, though the *Royal George* kept on course.

The following day Jack could see nothing through the glass. A haze had descended into which everything was absorbed, the waves, perhaps the tips of submarines, anything beyond the railing of the ship. Jack lost his bearings without the sun so a compass was sought. The ship, with the little bobbing boat ahead, pushed on.

A south-west gale whipped up. The ship dipped and rolled. A smell of vomit. He went from bed to bed, his head dizzy. We'll soon be there, he said, as much to himself as the men spewing around him. Then, at last, the air began to clear and the waters settle, and the coast of France appeared through the porthole, dim on the horizon.

While the ship drew in to the port, Jack again helped the orderlies clean. It was nearly over, the waiting. What had he done that first year? Not much. Been pulled off a boat when he was needed ashore, worked in a manor house with more luxuries than home. He plunged the mop into a bucket that the day before had been filled with the green bile of seasick men. But the hospital would be left sparkling, ready for the load back to Australia, soldiers who had done their bit, wounded men. As he looked around the room, everything seemed in its right place – the cloths neatly stacked, the syringes gathered in a dish. Soon he would disembark and catch the train north.

Later, tucked away in a window seat, he passed through villages with flowered window ledges and ducks waddling in the yard. The strangeness – catching snippets of French; women in long black dresses; a pretty girl handing a soldier a chocolate; kisses on the lips that tasted of hope.

On the edge of the village, Jack watched from the car as the last of the gassed men disappeared into the walking wounded station. A man with a cross on his arm stumbled at the entrance on a flap of canvas. He was the patient now.

None of those lads could have known what they were in for. No-one would have come all this way to end up like that.

Chapter 6

The *château*, 21 April 1918, 10 a.m.

This would be the very best day of the war, thought Georgette, as she picked asparagus from the vegetable garden for the officers' soup. A dinner would take place this evening after the troops had shuffled back to camp. Her mother had offered to host a grand sports event this afternoon in the little pasture where the cows and horses grazed now. Soon hundreds of young men would be leaping over the grass, grasping long ropes to heave across a painted line and, of course, filling up on French pastries and tea which she and her sisters would serve. Later, some officers would attend a dinner to be held in the dining room of the *château*, an occasion, Maman said to the girls, like before the war, those elegant settings with Papa at the head and her brothers teasing, sometimes a few guests, the servants bearing steaming plates of thick legumes. Tonight the house would fill again with men and the sweet aroma of a perfectly cooked duck, one of the few birds left on the farm. With Michel and Serge fighting in the east, and Antoinette and Lucie gone, only the three eldest girls would attend. The youngest two were with Maman's parents in the west – the war was no place for little ones, Solaine said – and Céline, not yet sixteen and still in plaits, was to help in the kitchen, despite her whimpering.

“There will be plenty of time for you to attend suitable functions,” said Maman, drawing herself up to tower over her daughter, “when the war is over.”

As for Georgette, she was quite old enough to be chinking glasses with men in uniform as they toasted the future. And seated beside her would be her fiancé. At last!

The killing and plucking of the duck was to be done by old Claude. The feathers would plump up pillows for billets. She heard the first squawks from the yard. She would

know which one was missing – the birds that were left had names – but all that mattered now was the dinner! Maman would not scrimp and bottles of the best wine would be served. For once, the war would be put aside. Élise would play the piano so they would not have to listen to those nasty guns!

She gathered the asparagus in her hands, their coloured tips purple like lavender. On a Sunday afternoon, Papa used to place a sprig on Sebastian's bridle there on the path, the cart set up behind him. He would shout out, "All aboard for the Calais-Bâle – *en voiture!*" He would extend his hand and the girls, in white dresses, would pile on: she in the front with Thérèse, who always drove, and the little ones in the back. Their father, his beard short and combed, his nose a little pink from the red wine at lunch, would walk in front, singing. The donkey and cart would follow him into the little pasture, past the coloured stakes now set up for the sports and along the path by the rivulet. If Papa were in a very good mood, he would lead them around to the road by the mill. He would bow to the villagers on their way to confession, who might stop and say, what pretty girls! Her father would thank old Madame du Bois waddling down from the mill, or Monsieur Trompette from the auberge, the garlic strong on his breath. Papa made up names for everyone once they had passed out of sight; the little ones would nearly fall off the cart with laughter, but not Georgette, who knew how to behave. He would lift her off, saying, you're becoming quite the young lady, and kiss her on the forehead.

She was too old to think of such silly things. Papa would have been alright if the Germans hadn't come at the beginning of the war. A few years ago, right there in that spot – no wonder she thought of it now – she had been digging potatoes when they arrived.

A whinny in the stable and urgent horseclips on the pebbled road had heralded, or so she had thought, her father's early return from the village. She had rushed out with dirty hands to the front of the *château*, bent beside the flowerbed to pick him a daffodil. But the clatter grew louder on the road behind the high stone wall, until it hurt her ears. Who would ride in such a way, in a large group? Should she find her mother, back feeding the chickens? She was protected from view by the wall in all but one place, where the iron gates hung, so she crouched amongst the flowers to see what was happening.

A strange sight appeared above the wall, a magnificent white bird bobbing up and down with the thundering hooves, then more and more birds, until waves of white feathers rolled on top of the stones. She caught a glint of pointed metal – the plumes of helmets – and her breath shallowed until the mob had passed.

But one rider trailed behind them and, just at the moment of reaching the gates, glanced in and saw the girl. She heard the slowing of hooves, the turning back of the horse until it came to a stop behind the wall before her. A match was struck and a tiny puff of smoke rose above the wall amongst the helmet feathers, pointing forward like an eagle's at its prey. She heard a breath released, saw a perfect circle of white floating up, a message which became fainter, vanishing, when she remembered that this was a soldier and not one of theirs. They had come to take the village – she must tell Maman!

The hooves started up again, over the cobbles towards the gates. An ant scuttled under a leaf. She felt the man staring at her through the iron rails, puffing his cigarette, thinking. He would have seen that the carriage was gone and the house quiet, and the girl alone in a light summer dress, a button undone to catch the warmth of the morning sun. She

listened for the creak of the gate, but the man threw his cigarette to the ground, turned his horse and cantered off.

After, she remembered, Papa, back from the village, sweeping her up in his arms in the garden, a whiff of tobacco on his breath.

Unannounced, some German officers arrived that afternoon. The whole family was called in to the salon. Georgette had been upstairs with little Lucie, cutting bits of cloth to decorate her new doll's house from Papa. Lucie shook her pretty curls and said no, she would not come. Marie had said that she would pick her up and carry her down the stairs herself, that they must both come at once, for they had *visitors* which Georgette knew meant of the unwelcome kind. They had been the last of the family to arrive. A smell of sweat and horses had overcome the room. They were asked to line up in a row – can you imagine?

The leader of the men was stout and his chin was smooth and shiny; he must have shaved for the occasion. She remembered his voice booming through the room. “We would like to use this *château* as a base. It is well positioned.” With not even an “If you please”! The family was asked to move out to the servants' quarters, but Papa said no, that would not be possible. This was their home. Perhaps accommodation could be found for the officers in the outhouse; how many guests should they expect?

Four soldiers stood stiffly to attention behind the officer. Was one of them the man who had spied on her that morning from behind the railings? The plumes on the helmets in a row on the sofa looked familiar, the feathers streaming back from a point. Her eyes moved from the face of one soldier to the other. They were all the same height: young men, like her brothers, holding guard. Then she got to the last, his hair cropped short and flat

above his head. He sensed her regard and shifted his gaze to hers with eyes so blue and sharp that her head dropped, and the pattern on the rug seemed suddenly strange and distant.

A swish of leather on a holster distracted her. The officer was making his way down the line, pistol drawn, his boots squeaking on the parquet, bringing with him the scent of eau de Cologne. He stopped before her, his head following the curve of her breasts. She stared ahead, pretending not to care, that he was only a boy in the village who did not know his place; but her heart was beating so fiercely he must have noticed. She remembered the silence, except for the ticking of the clock in the hall. The leader glanced back down to Papa, but not a word came from him. The man took another step to Lucie, who grasped Georgette's hand, her little fingers cold and trembling. The barrel of the gun caught the lamplight, frightening her. Yet Papa did not speak. She begged him, silently, please Papa, answer him, who cares where we sleep, and waited. The room felt hollow and cold, the morning sun gone.

In the hall, the clock ticked as loud as a drum; she counted the seconds as her father had taught her to do when she woke at night. But a soldier was holding a pistol in front of the little one's nose, forcing her eyes shut. Georgette wanted her father to push those bad men out the door, slamming it behind them. How dare they come in and order her family around! But nothing was as it had seemed yesterday, nor the day before: the light in the room had blinded her, then gone; the ticks of the clock were too loud; little Lucie, who could laugh at the shadows in the corner of her darkened bedroom, stood quivering beside her; Papa was silent when he should speak. She heard a click and opened her eyes. The leader of the men held the weapon at little Lucie's head. Then, when the word "Yes" had

resounded through the room, she remembered the trickle of peepee between her sister's feet, the sharp odour, chuckles across the room, a gun slotting back in its holster. The corners of an ugly mouth curling up.

“*À cet après-midi,*” the leader said and strode out of the salon with his men. But their smell hung in the room, as if they were still there.

She turned to Papa, for he would protect them, and little Lucie would stop sobbing. But he had fallen back on the sofa where the helmets had sat seconds before. His face was grey, his mouth twisted. Maman stayed with him; Thérèse too, the little one clinging in her arms. The rest took some bedding and a few precious things to the outhouse. Sleeping in the servant's quarters! But her mother, who normally would have had a lot to say about that, went quiet; she tended to Papa and told the household to look after the new guests.

A drone from above brought Georgette back to the spring day and the asparagus for the grand dinner. And Jack. Her nails were dirty. Why did she have to work this morning? In a plain dress, that made her look like a sack! Still, he wasn't expected until noon.

Chapter 7

The village

In the centre of the village, the driver turned off to a tucked-away square to drop letters for the mayor. Next to the *mairie* was a church of red brick edged with white, tapering to a dark spire. On the peak was the shadow of a cross and a black rooster crowing over the rooftops to the river. Georgette had talked about *l'église*, the family pew with a little brass plaque that announced the grand family seated there, all in a row. He'd not seen the church, might not be allowed inside. Only Catholics could be married there. With a creak the massive door to the church opened and a thin man with a white collar emerged, his face solemn and quite dark, as if he spent time outdoors. When he saw Jack staring at him from the car he nodded – he had met the doctor once before at the Giscards – then stepped back in, leaving the door ajar. The car was near enough for Jack to peer in past the pews and support columns to steps of blood-red marble. The altar was painted with stars of gold leaf, guarded by figurines in gowns and lit candles. Glass panes behind were boarded up, blocking the sunshine. Over in the shadows sat a dark structure, a little cabin with carved doors. What secrets might his lover have divulged within? What had she said to the priest about him?

He tried to picture St David's at home and compare: less colour perhaps in this, no, in the other; more glinting of silver. He couldn't remember the details of the other church, only snippets of women in long skirts puckered at the waist and being handed a plate of cucumber sandwiches by Ethelwyn. She was short and plump and he'd thought about asking her to the new film *Around the World in 80 Days*, written by the great Jules Verne himself here in Amiens! But the moment was never right. His Saturdays were filled with

notes and books. A doctor indeed, his peers at the university had said, wondering about the order of things. A miner's son! He worked harder. On Sundays, Ethelwyn held out glasses of cool lemonade.

Then the war came.

The huge wooden door to the Catholic church was still open. Jack would get a better view from the doorway, but before he could hop out of the car the driver returned.

The car wound back to the main street and soon slowed to a putter outside the stone wall, the gate with tall railings and corkscrew tops: *la grille d'honneur* which in seconds would clang shut behind him. His heart thumped against his chest. Adrenalin, that's all it was.

At the gate stood a tall uniformed man, feet apart, his rifle propped against his shoulder. Security had been stepped up. Before, an old man with a bushy white moustache would appear at the gate with a rake in his hand and a scowl on his face. The guard saluted, put his weapon aside to open the railings and waved the car through. Pat grinned at the doctor, who said nothing, just swallowed loudly, as if something were caught in his throat.

Excitement too much for him, thought the batman. This'll do him good; shake away those cobwebs.

They pulled into a drive still lined with roses, but on what had been the lawn an army truck that needed a good clean was parked; to one side some horses were tethered. As the car swung past stables and a coach-house for two, Jack craned his head out the window. It was always an impressive view, that first glimpse of the three-storey structure in white stone, the steep slated roof and red chimney-tops. Paned windows stretched from floor to ceiling, arching on top, with white shutters open. Steps led to a door and the chain of a bell.

Between drapes he saw an embroidered settee, the silhouette of a statue on a mantelpiece, the dancing of shadows.

The *château*.

He sighed and closed his eyes; took a deep breath. He was known to be calm in a crisis. With rest, these palpitations would pass.

She was used to the planes puttering close for a look at the lines. She could make out the pilot's goggles under his helmet. If she raised her hand upward, the pilot might give her a friendly wave, but he didn't see her from his world of downy mists and formations of wild ducks. Those boys of the squadron – how lucky they were! What they'd see from up there on a clear day, beyond the river. When she was a very little girl, she had left the house one freezing night in her nightdress. She had decided to climb a tree in the pasture to look out over the water. Papa, his brows crinkled together, had found her perched halfway up the old oak by the marshes, gazing up at the moon, a perfect white circle in the inky sky. Her father had told the story many times. Later, she had accompanied her mother on one of her many visits to Madame Martinez, a fortune teller with jingling ears and a crystal ball, who saw, for the little girl, a vast stretch of water ahead. Not the river, Solaine said, concerned, and made sure her daughter never went down there alone again. Georgette had in mind the sea. She loved paddling on the beach with her grandparents in the west; perhaps that was what the gypsy had meant. And then Jack arrived at the *château* and with him dreams of sailing across the ocean, a white house by the beach with children and dogs, with room for the servants as well.

Above, the pilot disappeared into the morning fog in which a man could lose his way, veer too near the ground and end up on that mound at the back of the plot, young and perfect in the strawberry patch, a hero lying beside his crumpled plane. A young Frenchman gasping for breath, his mouth full of blood. All the children had rushed out to the vegetable garden – the crash was so loud – and then were hustled back inside by Maman. One morning, too, some children in the village had heard engines and had run out to catch a glimpse, when gunfire splattered down the cobblestones. Her friend Amie's little brother was killed. For running in the street. After that, Papa said, come inside when the planes fly low.

But the one she saw this morning was on their side and though she could hear the roar of other engines downriver, they seemed miles away.

“Georgette!” On the edge of the orchard stood her eldest sister, hands on hips. Yes, she looked quite like Maman, with her brown hair like a bird's nest. She clucked around like a mother hen!

Thérèse sighed. That girl was a dreamer! What would she be like when she heard that the doctor had arrived? But first, Maman must have her eggs. The pair swung the basket between while the collie chased its tail with excitement. What a clatter from the river! Poor Praline, running in front of them, stopped in her tracks just before the back door, and the basket of eggs and asparagus, which they had been carrying between them, was nearly upturned.

Georgette looked up. A movement at one of the windows on the third floor of the building caught her eye; someone had stepped back into the billowing cloth and disappeared from view. It was the room she had prepared for Jack yesterday, with roses the

colour of lemons on the table. And she in this dress! She ran inside, leaving her sister, who had the strongest arms, to lug the basket into the kitchen.

Chapter 8

The Somme, 10 a.m., that Sunday in 1918

In the marshes beyond, old Claude stopped by the little wooden bridge he'd helped his patron build years before, when there was time for such things. He pushed a loose nail down with the heel of his shoe, careful not to push it through the leather. Now he couldn't even keep the garden weeded. Today the Australians were trampling all over his flower beds, though the roses knew how to protect themselves. Those young men should be fighting the *Boches*, not sipping tea with the *mademoiselles*. Still, the water was clear; a frog croaked; he would catch a fish for the grand dinner.

Across the stream the army band played "*La Marseillaise*". He hitched his old trousers up and raised a fist to his chest – sang of blood and the rising up of citizens! A ripple on the water caught his eye and he saw a familiar shadow in the shallows. A great carp faced him, motionless, as if observing the old man and the rod lying waiting on the grass beside him. He glared at the little devil until the last verse was drowned out by the hum of engines. A couple of Allied planes were making their way through the clearing fog to the front. A pilot waved and Claude tipped his cap. What a view! If he were younger ... yet the river was his domain. No-one knew it like him. But when he looked back to the water the black shadow had vanished.

The old man shook the can of squirming maggots until the biggest rose to the top. Just the size for his best hook, he thought, securing it with an extra turn. That fish would look perfect on a serving dish sprinkled with herbs, its eyes flat and glassy. This evening.

Cappy, 10 a.m.

Manfred von Richthofen, who had been pushed to one edge of the bed through the night, was nosed on the cheek by his dog.

He hadn't slept much, the number eighty flashing before him. A number with wholeness, Bodenschatz had said, and organised a party to celebrate. But later, when the heat of the dog melded into his back, Manfred thought of the burning plane spiralling down and the man inside it, screaming. His head ached. Was Bodenschatz right; was it time to stop?

From a drawer Manfred pulled out a box, a rich blue cross. Golden words, *Pour le Mérite*, shone out. How pretty it would be crowned in leaves of gold. What was that worth, ninety kills, a hundred?

Moritz edged a great paw over his chest. Manfred felt the hot breath, the lovely warm smell. The dog's dark eyes were on him, expectant.

"Morrie." The dog lifted one ear and the half that was left from that nasty propeller! "Remember the days in the trenches?" Now the pilot slept like a prince in a warm bed; his days were spent soaring in the skies above the enemy while their own poor boys rotted in those ratholes. The war would not be won on the ground. Didn't First Lieutenant Bodenschatz know that?

But the Great Dane didn't care about them; he was ready to start his day. He ran his tongue over his master's lips, so the roll and laughter on the bed could begin.

Later, as the first engines warmed up across the way, Manfred strolled down the steps of the little red-brick *château*, which perched like a doll's house on the top of the hill, and wandered across the fields towards the airfield, his dog by his side. There was no rush;

the air was still thick with fog, covering the village snuggled into the valley below. The wind was from the east but brisk. It would whisk away the haze then, hopefully, drop off.

Claude, by the river, felt his age, a little off balance. The war was wearing him out. There was too much to do. The chickens would wander if he didn't fix the wire. All those men gone off, who could do his jobs in half the time. Like Serge Giscard, with those poor pigeons right up the line. Now he must catch that fish, but he thought the carp had headed down the waterways towards the main river, rushing and gurgling, or was it something else he heard – a harsh clatter of propellers carrying down the valley. Not again!

Near the airfield, the engines grew louder. This morning Moritz seemed more excited than ever and kept jumping up, knocking Manfred off the path. He grabbed the great beast by the front legs and hugged him close a minute, whispering, my silly boy; he rested his head across the man's chest and lay quite still. The fog was beginning to lift, so he let the dog gallop ahead to the aerodrome. At this moment, always, approaching the airfield before a flight, Manfred's heartbeat would quicken a little. The planes were in position on the field, pointing out to the valley. The deliciousness of it! He was *der Rote Kampfflieger*, the leader of men! But today the pain in his head was bothering him.

Manfred was still out of sorts when he tripped on a stretcher on which a boy slept. At this hour! The lad landed in the mud and slinked away. But that was not the end of it. As the aid pulled one furry boot over the pilot's knee, he heard a clatter behind and a yelp. Moritz ran to him, a large wheelchock tied to his tail and cutting in as it bounced. Everyone was sniggering. It was too much. Manfred freed the beast, his heart twisting inside of him.

As the dog crept off, Manfred turned to the men, a row of eyes waiting for the tempest to break.

“Breakfast in the village?” asked Manfred and they all laughed together at the old joke, glad that the incident with the dog had been put aside. The ace’s laugh was the loudest, shrill almost, but it pained him to see the poor dog’s good ear twitch as he disappeared in the crowd. Dear Morrie, his little lap-dog!

He must brief the men about discipline and how to treat animals, but not this morning, with a couple of enemy craft snooping over the line. The rule was: no fights among the men before a flight. Aggression, yes, but keep it for the other side. For a battle with honour, not a schoolyard brawl.

The dog had not missed a take-off in all these years, even came for the ride one day. But now Morrie was elsewhere, licking his wounds. Those lads ... but the ace, suited up, thought of that eightieth man plummeting to the ground – he stinks! – and the promise of the day to come. The airfield was on a flat piece of land that dipped sharply to the village, beyond which the Somme wound its way like a giant python to Amiens. In the next few days the town could belong to Germany – what would the Americans think of that! This morning the skies were clearing, and the fools were up there already taking photos. There would be happy hunting. Yet his headache bothered him still. He thought of the warm bed, Moritz licking his nose. The Americans arriving. An end to the war. Did he have to kill another man?

But what was that fellow beside him saying, Bodenschatz ... that he’d make a great Inspector of Fighter Aviation? He must be joking – him, a paper shuffler! Just to keep him alive, shrivelled up at a desk, when he was on the path to that most magic number of all, the hundredth kill!

But where was that dog?

Where is that fish, thought Claude on the riverbank.

Rays of morning sunlight glistened on the dark wings. Even the gust flicking Manfred's chin seemed to murmur, one more today. That would keep them quiet. He was booted, jacket zipped, helmet strapped ... ready. Hoisted to the wing he swung into his nest, tight and secure. His goggles fit perfectly, fly-like. The Circus engines roared as one. He grasped the control column in his hands. The man who flipped his propeller backed away, eyes wide with the honour, but the ace, entranced by the rattling between his knees and the task ahead, only glanced at him to be waved on.

Hans, who would shadow the ace in the dogfight, left before him, followed by the others; there would be no-one at their rear. But the glory of the Fatherland, the freedom of the air, the anticipation of a nod from *der Rote Kampfflieger* when they returned to the drome, surged through their veins.

At last the red devil, in a blaze of engines and propellers, took off, just as Claude leaned his rod on his shoulder and whipped the line over the water, causing the reel to whirr so hard he thought it might drop off. The net lay open on the banks of the pond, ready for the carp. He could have given up by now; that old fish would never be caught today. With a smaller lure he could catch two, maybe three others in time to give Madame. But the old man remembered the dark shadow in the water, looking at him.

In the skies the sounds of battle on the line, the shouts, faded. As always, Manfred looked at his little red bird, the struts holding fast, the lines of the wings cutting through the clouds. Now where were those two planes? Hans appeared to the side and nodded in the direction of two craft scuttling off, then past to where a group of planes were gathering. Ah, those Englishmen! Manfred led his men towards the enemy. His nerves tingled as they

drew closer. Camels were difficult for new fliers to manoeuvre; he'd have one picked out in a flash. He could see it all in his mind's eye, the short chase, the hit, the drop. And it must be today, for tomorrow he was due to take leave and they would set to work on him, Bodenschatz and the rest, needling and cajoling, and before he knew it he would be sitting at that desk in a defeat and ... What was he thinking? He would down one more today.

Manfred waited for the rush of blood which would help him focus on his task, then the calm. The pack of Englishmen must have been farther out than he'd thought or the east wind stronger, because they seemed to take forever to reach him. Moritz's hurt look flashed before him, but he pushed the thought out to the wind before it could gather force.

The dance of the planes, swirling, sweeping, soothed him. He felt composed at last. Now, to find the weak link, the pilot unsure: there he was. The target, with the shadow of the ace's plane on his, broke away in a spin and Manfred swooped after him, leaving Hans in the thick of the scrum. It was time to fire, though he was well out of reach. As planned, the novice panicked, zigzagged and was easy to catch. Get right up close and shoot, Boelcke had said. But the little fellow was careering all over the place, along the river, from bank to bank, brushing fences and bushes as the east wind pushed them on.

When Claude heard the commotion, his line slackened off. He'd seen the two planes emerge from the cloud, one bobbing about from side to side, the other glued to his tail, a red shadow from which a stream of bullets flung forth like a dragon's breath. The old man rested the rod end on the ground. A third plane appeared through the mist. Machine guns were poised on the banks.

Manfred noticed the line-up but it was so enticing, the prettiness of the water and the plane jiggling before him, tantalising and fresh, as bullets buzzed around it. What had

he written in that manual? “One should never obstinately stay with an opponent ...” Yet he had broken every rule in that book and look at him now, the German knight swooping on to the golden leaves they would carve on his cockpit and coffin, resplendent in oak. So magnificent was that vision that it did not leave room for the other plane following, the gunners on the banks aiming up to the sun and the haze of red.

As the river turned and the Camel neared the ridge, Manfred raced up to get a clear shot, thinking, as he had always done, this one must fall. He heard the round go and remembered Moritz jumping up, the sweet nothings in his ear; a pain searing his chest. The instruments before him, just seconds before edged with gold leaf, exploded in tiny rays of metal and glass that peppered his face. His hands squeezed the control tighter, pulled up the engine, as if to land.

And flashing past the pilot in a blur were planes he'd brought down, dying men smiling. He hovered on a cloud, watching the crashes and plummeting flames, while his red bird steered herself, or was it him on a last breath of wind, gliding onto the ridge.

The morning sun was glorious by then, the moment over in an instant, gone.

The fisherman saw the little dragon veer up and over to the right. Amidst the shots, it stopped in mid-flight, then slowly, gently, floated towards the ridge.

But just then the old black carp, lying on the river bed quite still, bit the hooked worm with such a chomp that the old man would have lost the lot if he hadn't pounced on the tip of the rod pulled from under him.

With swollen fingers Claude reeled in the line, now yanking from side to side. He leaned back, gasping, pulling the rod up with all his force. The line must snap! But no, the

great fish swung out of the water, landing on the ground behind him. Its eye was a perfect black circle on a ring of gold. The fisherman stood for a second, catching his breath. Then, pinning the creature down in the net, he picked the hook from its mouth, hardly tearing it.

Chapter 9

At the *château*, Solaine was occupied in the salon, where this evening the officers would be received. It was her favourite room. The rays of the sun through the panelled windows to either side gave a charming effect of lightness and space. Each of the walls was edged with the same trim as the doors, but in a darker cream, like giant picture frames. Within these borders hung paintings edged with gold and some photographs taken by Monsieur Herbert in Amiens: one of Émile in a white bow tie and jacket made of silk, his beard trimmed around his chin, his piercing blue eyes staring out of the frame, so that sometimes she stood on the left, imagining for a moment he was gazing at her; another of Solaine, younger, her skin pale and unblemished, her frizzy brown hair drawn up, a dress which she recalled was brocaded in silver. No widow's shroud then. The sheen of the tiny blue flowers on the upholstery of the divan delighted her so. The seating had been turned towards the piano, tuned and polished, ready for Élise to play. Even the roses on the table between the windows were just right, she thought, the yellows and pinks, gentle colours which soothed, after what they went through when other men stood in this room, uninvited, their feathered headdresses meticulously placed on her floral couch.

It hardly seemed possible that that could have happened here, in this glorious room. The children pushed in a row – those vile men! The leader, shiny pistol in hand, sauntering down the line, as at a shop window searching displays, until he came to little Lucie. Poor Émile: they had called his bluff. Would they really have murdered a child for a soft bed? But young ones had been killed for less. And when the pistol was raised, her husband had put a stop to it but in a tone that Solaine had not heard before, flat and defeated. That day, as the men gathered their helmets and left the room, he had stumbled back, one arm

outstretched. The boys lifted him onto this same couch, where she loosened his clothes and soothed his brow with a warm cloth, dripped cold water on his tongue, while the others cleared the rooms for the uninvited guests. She remembered each detail of that day and dreamed about it, a nightmare in which her husband died, there on the sofa. But she had him for two more years in which she clung on, despite his suffering, not letting him go.

Sometimes at night as Solaine dozed in their bed, her husband's arm reached around her still; his whiskers brushed her cheek as his lips moved across her face, his hips on hers. But as soon as she opened her eyes, the bed was cold and she would pull the pillow from his side to her breast, whispering the rosary to shut out the blasts from the battlefield. And now that big gun was wrecking their eardrums! Her girls were still with her – that was something – but the two eldest boys were at the front and could no longer protect them. Today she would do her part, open her gardens to the Australians and provide a dinner the officers would not forget. A night of pretending. She brushed her black gown into place. Her hands lightly played with the stems in the vase so the roses would be perfect for this evening, when the chandelier was lit ... though in a few days the flowers would be past their best, the soldiers' games over, the officers gone.

And into the salon, with the buds reaching out to her and the sunlight filtering through the curtains, came a tap on the door announcing a man in uniform, who pulled off his cap to reveal dark hair combed back with oil, and another in the shadows, holding a polished suitcase.

“Madame Giscard!” the first cried, “I am terribly sorry to disturb you.” What an impressive figure she cut, her skirt black and sweeping to the ground; her collar stiff, right up to her chin; tight curls piled on her head. A woman in mourning.

How presumptuous of him to interrupt her. On such a day, with the preparations taking place! Yet he was a hardy type; she liked him for that.

“Not at all, Captain Fray,” she said. “I trust your room is comfortable.” And when he had finished his bow, she added, “You will dine with us, of course ... and your friend?”

The man emerged from the shadows and extended a hand, fine fingers with scrubbed nails.

“Jack!” She grasped both hands around his, then pulled back a little as if to inspect him – such a tidy man – and the new medal. “Major! My sincerest congratulations.” He had been brave, she thought. The war was the making of some of these young men, if it didn’t kill them.

“Madame. I trust you are well.”

She nodded. Far better than he, it seemed. His face looked more serious, thinner. Something about his eyes.

“And the family ... Miss Georgette.”

So correct, Solaine thought. Well brought up, though with no money. Solaine was sure her daughter’s mood would be most improved with the doctor’s arrival, but said, to keep him guessing, “We were all impatient for your visit.”

Waving off Captain Fray, she led the major by the arm up the stairs towards the officers’ rooms on the third floor. She chatted about the sports day ahead, the baking and set-up of tables, the dinner. He looked as if he needed some spoiling. On his last visit, many months ago, he had given her a piece of jewellery for safekeeping – his mother’s opal brooch, glittering colours of the rainbow set in good silver, that had been left to him in her will. A precious thing, a talisman. He entrusted it to Solaine for the duration of the war

and would be back for it when it was over, he said. He would give it to Georgette as a wedding present. Such a tidy man; a hard worker, his batman said. Courageous. Her daughter was besotted with him. But Australia was too far away for an old woman to visit. She might never see her daughter again.

From the shine in her girl's eye at the mention of Jack's name, Solaine suspected that things might go too far, if they hadn't already. Émile, bless his soul, would have kept the couple in order. Solaine had more to do, with the afternoon tea and the dinner, than play chaperone. The doctor, older, had filled her daughter's head with thoughts of marriage. And still no letter from his family, who were that strange faith, Church of England, to agree to the marriage. Captain Fray said his own mother had warned him off the French girls, though it hadn't stopped him pursuing each of her daughters in turn. The Australians ... cheeky boys! But they were here to defend France, after all.

With each step up the stairs the young doctor's grasp on her arm seemed to grow heavier, as if he could hardly make the distance. Would he last the war? That battle, Bullecourt, had nearly driven them all to distraction; Georgette was in tears and would think of nothing else until news had come through. Then, the medal - he must have taken risks and yet had written nothing of it; the letters had almost dropped off.

For him the matriarch had chosen the room with the view of the brook rushing between the trees. The bed was comfortable and made up with the best linen; the table, though small, could accommodate both the roses her daughter had chosen and a book or a letter, should the doctor, an educated man, wish to read or write. Not the grandest room, but one in which he could imagine a different life, how it was before. He would wake tomorrow to ponies in the pasture and the trills of larks in the trees if he were early enough.

He was in need of comfort, this man used to death of the cruellest kind – not the natural way of things – in whose hands other men might live or die. The bags under his eyes! In this house she would make sure he was well fed, but first he must rest. He would not be disturbed for an hour and a half. She would keep Georgette busy in the kitchen.

“Ring if you need something,” said Solaine, pressing the buzzer with one finger to show how it worked. “Émile was so proud of his electricity,” she added, smiling.

But Jack would not ring the bell, not here, surrounded by lace and flowers, the trace of lingering scent. Was it hers? He had not dreamed, growing up in the mining town, that he’d ever set foot in a *château* or be entertained by a family such as the Giscards. He had nearly fainted on the stairs, yet Madame had acted as if it were nothing, securing her grasp so that it was she who carried him up, rather than him, the man, leading the way. What would his benefactor have thought!

Through the open window he heard the men arrive to set up the sports, but the breeze carried a spatter of gunfire and the memory of a dead stench plastering his nose.

His first encounter with a dead person – not his mother, who had been whisked out of the sight of the seven-year-old – was in the anatomy room at the university. The corpse lay on a cold slab, ready for dissection. The smell was sickly sweet and seeped through the surgical gloves. Jack’s hands still reeked of it that evening when, at his sister’s table, he raised a fork of roast beef to his mouth. In the trenches, death was not camouflaged by formalin; it had its own odour, vile and all encompassing. Sometimes, emerging from the aid post for fresh air, he would receive a blast of it and would fall back to the dugout, where the wounded were alive or only freshly dead, not putrid. That was in the early days, years ago. When had he stopped noticing death?

The men's morale, he had been told, was more important than anything. No matter what befell them during battle, help would be close by: stretcher-bearers to whisk them away, doctors at the aid posts. Rubbish, every last word of it. Often the men who did make it to the aid post had a look in their eyes that was raw and frightening, that Jack wasn't sure would heal. The promise of a sterile bed in Blighty had grown thin and dreamlike, and he had to choose his words to the men before an attack carefully.

He'd been in no-man's-land.

He held his palms to the light from the window, looking for traces of blood on the skin, dark and dirty, but it had been washed away, scrubbed with lanolin to soften the cracks. A doctor's hands were everything. They had to be clean.

German blood, too, had filled those creases and been washed off with the rest. The first time, the jibes and sneers he'd heard about Fritz played in his head. But the man's leg was torn away so he applied a tourniquet as he had sworn to do in a sterile hall a world away. From then, they were just cases, poor fellows who moaned for their mother like all the other poor sods.

The moustache helped; it covered his pursed lips or even a smile. He learned to steel his eyes, so no-one felt too shocking or out of place; they knew he would give them his best. He tried not to think about those who were too far gone and were put aside. Then it didn't matter which side you were on.

Jack heard an explosion of some kind from the direction of the battlefield, then a dog barking in the yard. He pulled back a curtain and peered out over the farmland at the back of the *château*. A few cows grazed peacefully while a chestnut pony was led away.

The pastures were divided by two gushing rivulets over which little wooden bridges had been built; upstream the wheel of a mill ground away. In the leafy gardens over to the side, the trees were strung with apples ready to be picked.

In the grounds men from his battalion were tracing out lines for the races, measuring rope for the tug of war. He let his eyes wander beyond to the marshland and ponds, where an old man was fishing. Above a lonely plane wobbled back to base: a precarious, frail craft, with only the air to protect it from the dangers which could lurk behind the morning cloud, a red shadow, the herald of death. But this lucky one had got through. Jack's fingers traced the grain of the window frame, the cold wood comforting and strong.

Another bark! Just below him on the path from the outhouse a collie danced at the feet of two girls who balanced between them a basket of eggs. The girls reached the steps below him. The one with the head of golden wavelets looked upwards just as he, not yet composed, retreated behind the curtains into the darkened room.

Before, he would have shouted out, leaped down the stairs two at a time to be in her arms. Eyes closed, his finger would have trailed the path of a silky curl along her temple, the scent of fresh lemon tingling his nose. But his legs began to wobble and the image faded to nothing.

He must rest until noon, Madame had said.

Jack unlaced his shoes and placed them in a pair on the floor. He hung his uniform on the tallboy. The quilted cover of the bed was drawn back. He crawled between the sheets and lay his head on the pillow, plump with feathers and fresh linen.

As his head grew heavy, a curious thumping started up in his ear, ta-dump, ta-dump, louder and louder with each beat of his heart. The blood surged through him, red and viscous. He thought it might seep through his singlet onto the pretty bedspread, but when his hand shifted to his breast it was dry. Then the bedding vanished, leaving him with his hands steeped in blood on that very first day at Fromelles.

Part Two

. . . The surgeon seemed

So kind and gentle, saying, above that crying,

‘You must keep still, my lad.’ But he was dying.

(Sassoon, “In an Underground Dressing-Station”, lines 6-8)

Chapter 10

Fromelles, 19 July 1916

Blood soaks through the soldier's jacket; when Jack pulls away, his fingers are covered in it. He tries to wipe off the muck on a few blades of grass sticking out from the trench wall.

"Leave him," yells Captain Copples, a few yards along, pushing the way through a column of men moving up. Jack could stop the bleeding in a minute with a tourniquet; a wad of padding might do. But if he loses sight of the others ... He dodges some grubby men falling back and trips on a figure crumpled up to the side. A dead man covered in flies. Good God! What of the men's morale?

"You'll get used to it," calls Copples, his moustache a fiery red in the crowd. The man had seen it before at Gallipoli, while Jack was sleeping in an English hospital bed.

A blast sweeps through him like paper, throwing him back. But his legs are still working, propelling him on through the marching men and sprays of vomit fouling his jacket from the soldiers still drunk from the night before.

Copples points to a clearing in the vegetation, a dip in the fields protected by a row of bushes. The dressing station! Men in hard hats and rolled sleeves bend over like children searching for shells on a beach; figures on stretchers lie covered in blankets under a hot sun. Patients, at last. A few ambulancemen sit slumped to one side. "We'll relieve these chaps before we move up," Copples shouts above the din.

Just a raid to distract the enemy, they'd been told, to train up new men on a quiet part of the line.

The doctor's bloodied hands are now streaked with dirt. He can't touch a patient like this. "Here, Sir," says Pat, holding a bowl of water. Where the hell did he get it? But it looks clean enough.

He peers down at a man with closing eyes and a bandaged head: his very first case. His chance to make good. But at a glance Copples yells, "Clear him," and the stretcher disappears through the bushes.

Jack nods to the next patient, introducing himself like he would in a ward. "Shot in me left leg, Sir," the bloke gasps, to move things along.

After that, he begins with "What happened?" or just follows the trail of bleeding. He can't think with the whizzes overhead, the flashes of light, the sour odour of urine. He washes his hands. Infection's the killer, a voice whispers from far away as the water bloodies. He tries to look each patient in the eye, but some turn their heads away.

He is handed a tin of hot cocoa. A row of Soyer stoves has appeared; the cooks are boiling water for thousands, it seems. The drink warms Jack's throat. Pat winks as he sips his own.

They load a cart with supplies to take forward. Jack notes what is needed: more syringes, morphine. He underlines water and soap.

"Times that by twenty," Captain Copples says, looking at the list, joking, of course, because it is only a raid. Yet why are they to go forward? A drop of sweat dribbles down Jack's brow.

A shell explodes behind the clearing and the scissors in his hand end up in the dirt. The others work on. He prays, let me be up to it.

Then, a lull. The ringing in his ears eases off and in its place the song of thrushes, lovely and close. The madness has come to an end. But the column of troops again gathers pace, and the birds are drowned out by the heavy footfalls and clash of tin.

A whistle rings out, sharp as a schoolmarm's. A blast of machine guns is followed by shouts.

Copples stands before him, his thin face quite still. Jack brushes the dust from his jacket with his hand.

It is time to move forward.

Chapter 11

The *château*, 11.30 a.m.

“He must be woken,” Solaine said, lighting the stove for the kettle. The doctor must attend the sports. She picked a pear tart from a platter for his tea.

Not bad! Marie insisted on tasting everything – and thus the problem with her waistline. Every morsel she produced was delicious. The cook’s height, or lack of it, was of no disadvantage, allowing her to whip a bowl of mayonnaise on the table or sniff caramel on the stove without bending her back. She could get the Giscard girls, who were renowned in the district for their stature, and thus much taller than she, chopping and slicing around the old wooden table without an argument. That woman could run a kitchen! Though Solaine, of course, was in charge of the household.

The duck itself lay fat on a plate, plucked and empty, ready to be stuffed. As she filled the teapot to be taken to the doctor, the butter began to swirl in the copper pan. The bird’s liver must be browned for Marie’s special *paté*, the only part Solaine insisted on doing herself as the cook always added too much pepper. Madame Giscard had handed over a large bottle of Armagnac kept hidden in the cellar, an ingredient without which the cook refused to make the dish. How she spoiled that woman! But Jack must not leave the house without trying such a delicacy, which would be enough to entice a man back, and as they had killed the duck ... Her starry-eyed daughter appeared from nowhere; she had fixed her hair and changed into a black skirt, with the hem raised to reveal too much of her ankle, as was the fashion in the city. But this was not Paris – it was practically the front!

Georgette grabbed the tray, saying that she must take the tea up to him, that she couldn’t wait another second and would help in the kitchen later, which caused Solaine’s

eyebrows to lift and Céline, peeling apples, to giggle. There is more to life than chopping onions, Maman!

Jack was dozing under the soft coverlet after his nightmarish return to the battlefield. It was time for his mind to rest for a moment on the feathered mattress. He would be back at the line soon enough. He imagined he was sitting under a eucalypt on a hill, reading Keats' poem about a nightingale. Above him on a branch, its sweet song floating down through the crackly gum leaves, sat such a bird, rare and exotic, a creature not suited to aridness.

He thought of the first time he saw Georgette, right here, in this room. The flowers on the table had been violets, not roses, which had made him think of home and holding a bunch to Beryl as he told her of his commission. A soft tap had come from the door and a girl's voice, "*Capitaine*" in an accent, strong and lilting. He jumped up to pull on his shirt, shouting, excuse me, I'm sorry, and when there was no reply he suddenly thought of "*excusez-moi*".

Georgette, she told him later, had been tired from carrying such a heavy tray with the cake and coffee the guest had asked for. Coffee, when the other Australians drank only tea, cup after cup of "tay"! She was looking for a surface upon which to rest her burden when he, in shirtsleeves, opened the door.

She was dressed in mourning, a black shapeless outfit. Yet her fair hair looked freshly washed, with her fringe in wild curls and two long braids, thick as ropes, hanging down each shoulder.

Just a girl. Yet the scent of sugared pears wafted into the room.

"*Bonjour,*" the doctor said, his eyes still moist with sleep.

As she strode to the table by the window, she stumbled and the tray tilted, but he grabbed one edge before it could overturn. Her hair, just inches away, had turned brilliant gold in the sunlight. Her eyes, a silky blue, were streaked with white rays like the light of a star.

They stood for a second, the coffee pot balanced between them, his hands steady and sure.

“Merci beaucoup,” he said.

“I speak English,” she said and tugged the tray back. When she drew herself up, even in flat shoes she was close to his height.

“Yes, of course,” he replied, not wanting to seem rude, but after that stood tongue-tied.

“I had a tutor.”

She said later that she had walked backwards to the door, like a servant, because she was afraid he would think her bold. She wished Maman would not invite the officers to sleep in the *château* – it gave the impression the family were there to serve them. Though he had not treated her like a maid. No, not at all. And the coffee had not spilled.

Jack remembered now his awkward schoolboy French; that she’d had a tutor. Her wayward curls from beneath the black headband.

“I see,” he said, and closed the door behind her, not wanting to, for he thought he’d wake up, that the moment would be broken and the emptiness would fill again with gunfire and vile things. He listened for her step on the stairs but could only hear the tick of a grandfather clock on the landing.

There was something else she had noticed, she told him later. He didn't shout like the other officers. No, his voice was gentle, like her father's.

The tall clock on the landing was made of knotted oak, so finely polished that the children, when younger, searched for their reflection as they walked by. After the German visit, Émile lay in bed listening to the ticks, marvelling at the endless rhythm which marked his demise until, one day, he could hear them no more and sank into a gurgle of streams and whispers. For Jack, the sharp sounds were as regular as the thrust of pistons on a train, a decision made quickly on who would live, the passing of others.

If he listened too long to the ticking of the clock, he might again be transported back to the post, his breath stilted as if great hands choked his neck, the whip of bullets past his ears. Someone crying. No, away!

He heard knocking on a door. A voice calling, "Jack, Jack!" But the walls seemed to close in, twisting out of shape.

There was lace on the pillowcase, a bunch of roses, her voice at the door. He sat up, dabbing his eyes with the back of his hand. The man she said she would marry! He must not drop his bundle.

What was this panic? A moment of despair that any man might have. With deep breaths, it would pass.

He was at the *château* at last and she, lovely she, stood behind the door.

Her arms were full of a tray and china, just like before, but this time her plaits were poised on her head, her waist narrower, her breasts more full. She was taller. He would not

have recognised her in the street, the shape of her, her gilded hair swept back softly from her face, but for her eyes alive with tears and longing.

She posed the tray on the table, drawing him to her just as he had imagined so many times, her hands caressing him in a wave of warmth, the taste of honey on her tongue.

He's thin, she thought, and there is a strangeness in his eyes, but the feel of him ... the soft brush of his moustache against the side of her mouth. He has not changed!

His lips, like velvet, touched the nape of her neck. He thought, I am falling.

"The coffee, Georgette," said Solaine from the landing and, while her daughter, lips smudged, marched across to the table and raised the steaming pot a little too high and Jack grabbed his jacket from the tallboy, the matriarch pushed the bedroom door wide open and, without giving the pair a second look, sashayed off down the stairs.

Chapter 12

In the kitchen Georgette was handed a broom – Marie and old Claude were outside setting up – and with long sweeps she finished the task. Now you can do it properly, her mother said, and made the girl begin again. Just a kiss, Maman, for my fiancé! There was no use scowling, as her mother would not back down. She was so old-fashioned; didn't believe in love, since Papa died. We must get through the war, she told her daughters.

But Georgette was no longer a child. Soon the grounds would be filled with handsome young men, dashing around, showing off, and she would serve tea, wipe a dribble from the milk jug, stand with her shoulders held just so and her neck long, elegant. The men would dream of the French girls that night. The Australians were fun. She would make sure that Jack caught a glimpse of her admirers. Then after the dinner they would dance and he would whisper in her ear that there was only her, and him, she would say, only him. He was perfect! There was nothing she would change about him, not a single thing. Except to stop him leaving again.

Who was this behind the kitchen door? Solaine reached for a towel to wipe her hands.

“Can I help with something, Mam?”

The soldier whipped off his cap when he saw the girls, straightened his tunic, but they ruined the jacket anyway, wrapping their arms around him in childish hugs. A good honest face, thought Solaine, but a man, nonetheless.

“Private Turner,” she said, giving him a tray of teacups to carry outside. “You always arrive when we need you!”

He made himself busy, lifting all the heaviest things. Do call me Pat, he said with a wink as Élise handed him a madeleine. Another pair to look out for, thought Solaine. This war! But who could blame him when the girl was as pretty as Élise? Her gentle smile, her grey eyes soft with melancholy ... Though her younger sister Georgette was more stylish; even in mourning she had fashioned a headband, *à la mode* in Paris. Just because they lived in the country, the girl had announced to her mother, did not mean they must be behind in the fashions. To say such a thing in wartime! And in Australia, Maman had enquired, how long before they hear of the latest *haute couture*? But the girl would hear nothing of the distances or the isolation from everything she loved, replying that as long as her sisters described the latest fashions in their letters, Georgette would still hear of the styles before anyone else in that distant country, which was half a year behind, at least. And she liked to sew her own things!

It was all about boys and dresses at that age, Solaine recalled, and she had to admit that Jack and Pat were excellent young men, even if they weren't French or Catholic ... After the batman left to dress the doctor for the sports, he returned later to the kitchen for more jobs, his grin cheering them all. A solid man. She heard him say to Claude, in from the horses, that his father was a farrier. He found time to juggle a few apples and dropped one on purpose so he could eat it. She smiled, yet though he stayed for nearly all the morning and was most obliging, only Élise called him by his first name, as if the girls had decided it between them.

Praline, who was really Élise's dog, never left the private's side, not after he slipped her half a madeleine.

This morning Élise had curled her fair hair in a new way, her fringe framing her face. She'd chosen the prettiest apron to put over the black dress. She hadn't forgotten Papa, but she thought he would want her to look her best on such a day. That night the girls would dress in lace and sparkles, as was befitting for a young woman attending a grand dinner for the first time; Papa would understand that too. The need to pretend that they had no cares.

A table had been set up in front of the little chapel and was covered in platters. At the end were placed the mugs, horrid tin things but there were not enough cups for all the men. The family had been cooking for days and the soldiers were already casting looks their way, anxious to start, as if when they blinked the whole feast might disappear. The soldiers were used to flat biscuits which, Claude said, were as tough as horseshoes. The tablecloth was crisp, not the best one the girls had crocheted together, but good linen none the less in a pale green, edged with lace. To their left was another table with chairs for the officers and nurses, who would be served tea in china cups by Thérèse, the eldest sister. We must try to keep up our standards, war or not, Maman had said.

The tug of war started, the yanking back and forth, like a battle in reverse, thought Thérèse. The Australians were crazy, hopping in sacks, racing with arms and legs bound. The track that had been traced out across the big pasture was lined with men, jostling, barracking for someone, calling out words she didn't know. Across the creek some soldiers chatted with a couple of nurses. But then the head coachman, resplendent in riding boots and coat, led onto the grass the donkey, Sebastian. Strapped to its back was a little embroidered cushion on which sat Fifi, the smallest pooch. So sweet, gushed the nurses, rushing over, the men following behind them.

A little band was set up close to the *château*. A man began to play Beethoven on the old piano dragged from the outhouse, accompanied by a few trumpeters and another with a shiny brass horn. A large fellow with rolled-up sleeves pounded at a drum. Some of the soldiers walked in step to the music for fun. One of the men clenched his hand in the air, as if around a microphone, while others held in their arms imaginary partners whom they twirled around the floor. A few lucky ones with a nurse on their arm started dancing to the music; the whistles soon dropped off as those alone stared from the sidelines.

The music slowed, became more melancholy. The strains of “*La vie en rose*” wafted over to Élise. How she wanted to be in this one’s embrace, or maybe that one – what fun!

“Would you care to dance,” said a voice behind her, and it was Pat, the doctor’s batman, bowing so low that he almost toppled over. She laughed, but as he straightened up, cap under his arm, she saw that he expected an answer, after all. His shoulders seemed broader than this morning, his jaw more defined. The sun’s rays warmed her shoulders. Yet she put him off as the tea was about to be served. “Not now,” she said softly and he smiled. She had not said no full stop.

Then he said that he must go to see his brother and drop off some medical supplies. By the time he got back the sports would be over and the band packed away.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, I’ll see you later,” he said with a grin. That confused her. Their teacher at Versailles, Madame Deschanel, had taught them the words sweet and heart, but she knew that together they meant something else. Pat had called her sweetheart. “The dinner,” he added, as if that was what puzzled her. Perhaps he would help them out in the kitchen again.

She would have another chance.

After the relay race, accompanied by much shouting and cheering, the afternoon tea was served. Thérèse attended to the officers at the table, and Élise and Céline to the rest. We have much the best job, thought Élise, looking over at her older sister, who looked as serious as a priest distributing the host, then back to her own table and the friendly smiles of the privates, the digs in the ribs when one of them stared at the girl for too long. She heard a lot more “sweethearts” that day, but it was all in good fun. She was glad that Madame Deschanel had been so insistent – English was useful after all.

The food the men ate! Poor starved creatures, she thought, as they stuffed their faces with pastries and tea, then circled back for another “cuppa”, a tart, until the platters, which had been piled high, stood empty and flat, dribbled with crumbs and streaks of red jam. It was good to pour drops from the teapot into the last tin, knowing the men were cheered up. One or two of the bolder ones cast a last look her way as they moved off. This evening she would talk to Pat. He’d only said that he would see her later. There was nothing in it, nothing at all.

Where was Georgette? She couldn’t wait to tell her!

Chapter 13

Just as Georgette had been unfastening her apron, Maman drew her into a corner and asked her to help the doctor upstairs. There was a corpse to be dressed, Maman whispered, bringing a finger to her lips, without saying who it was or why the body had been brought to the *château* on a day when they were so busy and the grounds were full of men.

Upstairs! That morning, news had reached the household that an enemy plane had come down near the old brickworks. Then old Claude had rushed into the kitchen, cap in hand, to say that he had seen it come down, a German plane, perhaps that of *le diable rouge* himself! But there had been so many stories of the Red Baron's death that no-one believed him; the dark red craft had come well up the river and the ace would not have done that. Maman said even if the plane were red that all the pilots had painted bits of their planes to camouflage the leader. But Claude said, no, he was sure it was completely red. At that point the kettle came to the boil and there was tea to be made for one of the officers who had arrived, so the story of the plane was put aside and the old man placed his cap back on his balding head and went about the business of scaling the fish.

Georgette tucked her apron away by the window, while the soldiers traipsed in to their very own garden, looking around with wide grins. Over by the birdhouse the nurses had set up a station. How delightful the women looked in those little red capes. And all the while a dead man in the house! The music wafted in the window from a little band of cheerful men playing on the driveway, their sleeves rolled up, as if it were a lazy afternoon at the *kiosque musique* in the gardens at Albert with Thérèse and Pierre pursing his lips to hide his smile as they disappeared down a tunnel of green leaves, holding hands. It wasn't

fair, the war, missing out on all that. Jack was upstairs with a dead body. Tonight, after the dinner, would her lover dance with her?

This was a day – with men in the garden, Jack upstairs – to forget this dreary war, a day for laughter, for love! Dead soldiers were not brought to the *château*. The armies attended to them, although she had overheard Claude whisper to the stable boy that corpses lay by the road, foul in the sun. She thought of the morning she returned to Papa's bedroom with a glass of water and found him dead. It came back to her again and again, half dreamed: her mother's bent head; the feeling that time had gone on without her and would never wind back to his last moment, so she could say goodbye; her father's still body swallowed up in her tears; her mother, unable to quieten. She remembered approaching the bed, with not a rustle from it. The room bristled with soft light from the window. She had never touched a body with the life drained out of it. But just as her hand reached out she heard Papa's words, I would not do anything to place you in danger, like she was on the little bridge between the pastures with water tumbling below and he the other side, coaxing her across. Even now, at the foot of the stairs, she could summon up the feel of his fingers that final morning, cold and clammy against hers, and him, a wisp of air in the room, whispering to her. Sometimes, even now, she stood under the oak tree with the sounds of the battle grating in her head, her hand out, waiting, until there it was, his voice, the words, and she knew she could withstand anything.

That morning, she and her sisters had taken Papa's pyjamas, washed his pale skin, dressed him in his favourite suit, and kissed his cold hand for the last time. She felt close to him; grateful. Claude must be mistaken about the soldiers left to rot in mud. She'd seen the truckloads of coffins headed for the front – they must be buried somewhere. Yes, there was

a new graveyard outside the village, just for soldiers. But strange things were happening. Nothing was as it had been before, not her family, not the *château*. Dying. Today a band was playing in the garden while upstairs was a corpse, of a German, perhaps, for why else the secrecy. And Jack waiting for her.

With her hand on the wooden banister – she had loved to slide down; how ridiculous! – she glanced into the salon. Soft light streamed in through the panels of glass on the northern side and bounced off the chandelier in coloured strips that made her think of rainbows and fairies, of childish things. Before, she had stood arms outstretched in the centre of the room and watched the colours dance on her skin, the warmth of the sunlight soft and protective. A passer-by could look in the window and see through to the glassed wall on the other side and the garden beyond, but not notice her hidden in the play of light, just another shadow beyond a stranger's reach.

But the day the invaders came in, the room was tinged with shadows. It stank. Plumed helmets covered the pretty cornflowers on Maman's new upholstery that she had taken so long to choose in Amiens. Georgette could not look at any of those men, or the boy, Wilhelm. Especially him. Her tongue tasted metal as a gun was flashed in front of her nose. When the officers marched out, the feathers trailing behind them, her father had clasped his chest and tumbled to the ground. Could she wipe her thoughts clean of that day, so that when the light poured back into the salon, as it did now, she might spin in the centre again like a plant reaching out to the sun?

The statue stood on the marble mantelpiece, still trying to throw seed from her cupped apron out into the room. *La semeuse* was Papa's favourite object, a present from his sculptor friend. Albert Roze, he used to say to him, his arm hanging over his shoulder after

a good lunch of pheasant, you are a genius. You have created a symbol, not just of the journal but of *la France*! The man with the pistol in the salon had liked the statue too. He had run his eye up and down *la semeuse*. Yet he did not take her with him when the soldiers were pushed out of the village. She's too much for those weaklings! Papa said. A few weeks ago, when the bombs were so close the windows rattled with each one, a stray bit of shell flew into the room and sliced her hand off at the wrist. Now the arm looked strange, broken off, ending in nothing. The seed could no longer be scattered.

"I'm glad your father isn't here to see it," Maman had said on the day, smoothing her long black skirt, but the girls didn't believe her. She left the statue on the mantelpiece, just like it was. "They will not succeed," she had added.

But it seemed the Germans could do anything they wanted – slice the arm off a work of art or poo on the billiard table. Stare at a girl through the railings, but then the image flashed in her mind of a young man's hand held out to the donkey, grains of sugar glistening in the sunlight.

The mysterious corpse upstairs was not one of their own, she was sure, but one of the enemy dead in their house! Old Claude had said a red plane was shot down, that of *le diable rouge*. It might be him lying on the frilly bed in the spare room, with cornflowers in a vase on the table for the next billet. Who else would disrupt this grand day, the day of the sports, after the baking and cleaning and the laying out of chairs?

The stairs that she had climbed so many times before seemed steep today, her feet slow to lift off one step to the next. She wasn't afraid – she had seen a dead body before – but that was Papa and this, with Maman's whispering at her shoulder and old Claude's tale in her ears, was an outsider who didn't belong. On the landing she felt quite out of breath

and stood for a second, grasping the banister and counting the ticks of the grandfather clock. The corpse was that of *le diable rouge*, without doubt, and she, of all her sisters, had been entrusted with the task of ... what? Helping the doctor, Maman had said. But that could mean anything: undressing the man, touching him. Surely Thérèse, older and cleverer, would have been her mother's first choice. But her elder sister was in charge of the day's refreshments and Élise had been so looking forward to it all.

Beside the closed door sat a soldier picking at a sore on his hand and another who waved her through, staring as she walked past. Two guards! Did they think the man would rise from the dead and slip through their fingers? Was he so dreaded? But the energy which had run through his veins might now rest in the room, like that of Papa had, yet lurid, hateful ... out to get her! She would not lift her foot from the floorboards; she could not see such a man. And her memory of Papa, floating gently over a body he had outlived, was shunted away by the vision of a monster, bloodied and cut down in battle, lying in wait beyond the door.

Jack, though, was in the room too. What was there to fear, after all, from a dead man?

Chapter 14

The doctor had his back to the door and was bent over the bed, his sleeves rolled up. She knew that he would protect her. An hour before he had kissed her neck ... until Maman arrived. The hero of the Battle of Bullecourt. How romantic! Yet he had not told her a thing about it. Would he, tonight?

Just then he was buried in his task, and stood between her and the corpse. All she could see was a pair of massive fur boots quite unlike any she had seen, thick and solid, turned up at the toes, poking out from the end of the bed. The flowers she had gathered the day before were gone from the table and two objects arranged neatly in their place: a pair of black leather gloves smudged with grease and a small silver badge on which was engraved a tiny scene, an aeroplane flying in a frame of leaves, with a few words in German beneath. So it was the pilot who had been shot down! At her own *château*, protected by two guards, his head on a pillow her mother had stitched by candlelight, must be that killer, Manfred von Richthofen.

At the sound of her step, the doctor turned. She noticed that his shirt and trousers looked neatly pressed, as always. Even the fleck of hair which had fallen across his forehead appeared charming. Beneath his moustache, his pale lips were drawn tight as if over a secret.

How beautiful she is, he thought, pearl earrings matching the flat buttons of her blouse. Cheeks flushed; lips moist with an unfinished kiss.

But a tang of dried blood wafted up from the corpse. The stink of violence.

Richthofen's plane had come down near the ambulance track, so he had been transported by a rail carriage to the village. There had been no need to rush him to the

dressing station – the bullet had finished him. The ace had been brought to the *château*, through the gates of honour and up the stairs, but with no pomp – in secret, while the men gathered in the grounds behind for the sports. The lads must not even have an inkling. They needed to relax before the enemy attack. A well-earned day off. The body needed to be seen by top men, who arrived at the *château* promptly and came in the front door without fuss. Richthofen lay stiff on the frilly bed beneath their stares. They grabbed papers from a wallet in a pocket of his jacket. It was truly him, they said, who had crashed on the ridge. Quite sure they had their man, the leaders left the guards and a medical officer to prepare the body. The corpse was to be taken to the hangar at Bertangles for more viewings before the burial the next day. Jack, standing in the corridor on the second floor (Fray had descended early for the sports), was given the honour of attending to the corpse, which had to be washed and prepared for the next viewing.

Thus it was that the doctor, who had arrived only that morning and would not be missed by the men, stood before the bed about to strip the body of Manfred von Richthofen.

“Major,” Georgette said, curtseying, as if they had not met before, or kissed an hour ago!

Jack smiled. How lightly she had placed one step behind the other; how elegant she was, even with a corpse stiff on the bed behind him. But she should not have to behold such a grisly sight!

“I asked your mother if Marie was free,” he said, frowning.

Maman! she thought again. Still, the kitchen was in a flurry and Marie was more efficient amongst the pots and pans. Georgette had never been squeamish, nor shown it at least. But he seemed not to want her there.

And he did not. It was an unseemly task to undertake with his fiancée. The thought crossed his mind that Solaine had sent her daughter as a test, so that he might decide that she was not suited to be a doctor's wife. Well he wouldn't be put off by that! He would ask her only to perform errands, take the clothes to the washhouse or ask cook to put more water on the boil.

He moved aside so she could view the corpse, the first shock of tattered overalls, a face splattered with blotches of caked blood. The nausea rose in her throat, but she would not be pushed out of the room else Jack would think her weak, a young girl after all. In the dead man's faraway stare she saw not just the things he had done but all that had gone wrong in the last four years, the death of her father, of lost afternoons by the river, even the afternoon tea taking place on the lawns below that she could not attend. But for the war, she would have stayed at Versailles with Madame Deschanel, had trips on the train to Paris, in a swirl of fashion and *cafés*. She had forgotten about those things. Since she had met Jack, she thought only of his safety, their next kiss, and days by the seaside in Australia. But today the fog had lifted. There was music on the lawn, dancing. And now the corpse of a stranger; the emptiness of something grotesque.

This dead man on their spare bed – the sheets must later be boiled – was the hero of her enemy, revered. He was her enemy. Good riddance! Her lips pursed to spit, but an image flashed into her mind of a hand and a donkey slurping sugar, and her mother angry at the door of the henhouse. What had become of that boy? Then, just as she was reminded

of Wilhelm, the dead man's crazed and mocking eyes seemed to pierce her own and a thought gathered force that she squashed as one might do with a mosquito on an arm, quickly, decisively, before it can do its harm: that Jack had not written because he had met someone else. He was ten years older and a man; this was wartime. And who wouldn't be drawn to him, his sudden laughter, his clipped moustache! But just as soon as the idea arose, it was shunted away. He loved her. Something else must have stopped his letters, something he could not yet share with her. But he would, she would see to that. The girl stared at the dead man spread out on the bed, anger and strength flushing through her. You have not won, she thought.

The doctor leaned down and placed a hand over the man's eyes, a sign of respect, but they would not be closed and stared out, glazed, from some other place.

Richthofen was smaller than the doctor had imagined. He wore overalls, the strap of which had been cut, so that a flap of blood-stained cloth fell open around the wound. His leather jacket, the furred collar marked and matted, lay folded neatly on the chair. His skin was encrusted with blood and bruised, the eyes and mouth half open as if caught in a moment of ecstasy that would be forever frozen on his face: the thrill of killing a man. Yet the ace had only done what had been asked of him. Jack thought of the trenches and the ruined men he himself had pushed aside in order to treat another who might have a better chance of pulling through. Kill one to save another; one of ours, one of theirs. Would a woman understand such a thing? He looked across at Georgette, her young face transfixed on the body on the bed. Would she?

Richthofen had chased the wobbling Sopwith Camel over no-man's-land into enemy space. A miscalculation, indeed. Foolish fellow! And yet on this bloodied face Jack

could see triumph – the pilot poised for the kill, wings and man soaring as one as the bullet entered his chest. The Australians were the first to reach the battered red Fokker on the ridge and hear the ace's whispered last word, *kaputt*. Yet the puff of air from the lungs of a dead man could sound the same. Ah, *kaputt*, gone, the line crossed, that last bit of wind pushed out with none to go back in. The ace was dead.

The ace, without his wings, lay prone and powerless, like all the dead men.

Jack leaned over the body and, as gently as he could, separated the shirt cloth away from the wound as if opening a gift. He traced the path of the blood, the angle of the bullet fired and its movement through the air, the spots at which it entered and left the skin, its journey between. The pain, fierce and pointed, would have spread like morphine from a needle. The end would have been quick. Yet apart from the rib fractured by the bullet, and the jaw which had taken a bashing, no bones appeared to have been broken, as if the craft had not crashed but rather steered smoothly to the ground, by luck or the dead instinct of a headless chicken scuttling away.

Now the corpse could be undressed for washing – no job for a woman. Smith had gone for hot water. What was he doing, chopping the wood?

Georgette, however, pushed up her sleeves and positioned herself at the end of the bed. Her hands wrapped around the heel of one of the enormous furry boots. It seemed moulded to the stiffened limbs. Jack saw how the girl's shirt hung on her thin arms; she would never have the strength. While she wrestled with the boot, he hooked his arms under the dead man's shoulders else the body might have fallen to the floor. His nose was an inch from Richthofen's bloodstained face. He gagged at the foulness. It stinks! the dead man was reputed to say when his victims tumbled through the skies. It stinks! The words

seemed to issue through the dead man's smiling lips and echo through the room. Jack laughed as a friend might partake of another's joke, the girl too, quickly, releasing one hand to her mouth, drawing him back to the interrupted kiss, her mother bursting in, his neediness. Such a gruesome scene for the poor girl – where was Smith? But just as the doctor was about to call the private, Georgette lifted a foot onto the mattress for leverage and, chewing her bottom lip, with a twisting motion she shook the massive thing off the dead man's knees, as if it were one of her father's slim riding boots.

As the second boot came off, a whistle sounded from the yard.

The men climbed the ladder to the top.

“A race,” the doctor said. The girl glanced at the window as she folded the garment. He saw that her blouse had pulled tight across her breasts; the pearl necklace was askew.

“Go and look.”

He watched her arrange the creases on her skirt, loosen the catch of her blouse. The straight line of her shoulders from behind. The clock in the hall ticked loud and slow. He could leave his work for a bit but he didn't want to watch the race. The winner would later be asked to run messages at the line. To volunteer. It was good pay, for sure. He would get a good run, with an armband that would flatten the troops to the sides of the trench. And alert enemy snipers! Important message coming through! A matter of life or death! The messengers were sent off in threes to make sure one got through. She wouldn't know that. He must protect her from such things. But he wouldn't watch the race.

The whistle sounded again and the girl at the window turned to watch the games. But for the doctor, the dead pilot still in his arms, the cheers changed to cries, then

machine-gun fire and the thuds of fallen men. He was back in the trenches and that first day of battle in 1916.

Chapter 15

Fromelles, 19 July 1916

A whistle rings out from far up the line. Jack is pushed to one side as a runner bursts through the crowd, his eyes on the path. Shells whizz past like skyrocket and the path of each one seems pointed, terrifying, so that when they reach the entrance to what looks like the cellar of a demolished house, Jack longs to plunge down the steps. But Copples points along the trench to a flimsy dugout lined with sandbags. "That's us."

The shabby screen hangs in tatters and someone is sent for a gas curtain. Inside, the aid post looks more like a garden shed than a refuge. The rough beams and shelves rattle with the blasts. In an alcove, coffee brews while dirty faces stare from the bunks. On a bench in the centre lies a man, eyes closed, blood oozing from an ugly wound on his shoulder which an orderly tries to soak up with a rag. Copples calls for water and threads a needle before Jack can find a spot for his medical bag.

"Sir." A soldier covered in dust stands in the doorway with a man draped over one shoulder.

"He's yours," says Copples to Jack. "A hot drink might help." A few drops between the lad's lips work wonders. There's not a scratch on him, but he curls up in a blanket and winces at the least sound, as if he thinks the tin roof might tumble down upon them. The boy's ready for his battalion, Copples says when more cases come in, but Jack, remembering Haddon at Harefield, lets him finish his coffee.

"Good luck," he calls as the boy disappears through the curtain into the din outside.

He soaps his hands and forces a bearer, Dodd, with blisters on his fingers, to do the same; then all the orderlies. Dodd's doing pretty well for his first day. At least the doctor is

used to blood, like the boys from Gallipoli, who have a vacant look as if something has been rinsed out of them.

Word comes that the infantry can't bring in all the wounded stuck between the lines – the ambulancemen must help out. Jack catches his breath. The poor fellows must go into no-man's-land!

The doctors work on through the night as patients pile in and out of the dugout on stretcher or foot. Pat supplies what is needed: needles, morphine, a kind word.

Dodd arrives panting at the door: a stretcher is stuck in the trench. Can someone come?

Copples, his hands covered in blood, glances at Jack. "You go."

Outside, Dodd pushes the doctor's head down away from the bullets pinging overhead. Good thing not to be too tall, he thinks, following the bearer along the curve of the trench to where a stretcher is wedged on a sharp turn. The man upon it lies still and white-faced. A runner's armband! Jack quickly retrieves the message folded neatly in his pocket and passes it to Dodd. Someone offers to carry the note and put off going over the top. He turns back to the patient, who must have copped a bullet in the gut. He lifts a flap of uniform and recoils as his fingers brush the soft warmth of intestines. Too late.

"Sorry, Sir," said Dodd, but then a call rings out for bearers and he and a mate disappear over the edge, leaving Jack beside the corpse. Is this the young man he saw careering down the trench, so full of life, daring to run like the wind through the bullets and shrapnel?

A smoky breeze sweeps over the parapet with a sound like whimpering children. Jack's breath slows; the gunfire and whistles fade. The cries of the boys remain, a sound so

desperate and soulful that the doctor thinks he too might cry, as if he were a small child again finding his mother lying on the wooden bed white and cold. A soldier's pack whacks him and the doctor stumbles back along the trench, a steady hand guiding him back to shelter. Pat makes him coffee and does not speak of it again. Then the doctors and orderlies stay in the little dugout which shakes and rattles while the battle it has become – it was never a raid – seethes.

A case comes in that is too far gone and after the morphine is given, Copples says simply "Outside". The man will be left to die alone for no-one can be spared to hold his hand, to whisper words of hope. Jack's stomach lurches. Failure to treat or even to comfort: a doctor's cardinal sin.

There aren't too many cases like that, though, which doesn't seem right.

"Where are the trunk injuries?" he asks Copples, who a minute later sends a message to headquarters that help is needed urgently: injured men lie abandoned in no-man's-land, despite the promises of prompt clearance. It is a medical disaster.

Night falls to the soar of Verey lights and the wailing in the wind. Jack blocks his ears, thinks of Beryl at home, shelling peas.

Pat tops up the jug and replaces the soap. Prods the doctor to keep him awake.

Then Dodd doesn't return; another bearer thinks he's been hit in a round of fire. Jack knocks a bowl of water off the table. A few minutes later Dodd comes back in one piece, but carrying his mate with a torn away knee, a calf dangling.

As the night wears on Copples grows silent, except to ask for something or to question an injured man. His face shows no emotion, no attachment at all, and Jack hopes

he himself might be like that soon. Gallipoli turned Copples and the others this way. Still, it is hard to tell what a man is thinking, what is inside.

Chapter 16

The *château*, 21 April 1918, 2 p.m.

The race was over quickly. Georgette took a deep breath at the open window. The garden was brimming with men – boys, most of them, near her age. A long stretch of lawn, set up as a track, was lined with soldiers, some on crutches or wheelchairs. A few nurses stood with them sharing a joke. At the end of the track a group gathered around the winner, his singlet and shorts soaked in sweat, and raised him up on their shoulders. In an area near the band reserved for those of rank, she spotted Captain Fray searching for someone in the crowd. A funny, pompous man, she thought, though not unhandsome. Gentlemanly. Céline, in a frilly white apron done up at the back with a large bow, stood stiffly behind the table laden with platters. Thérèse lifted the large kettle and began to pour steaming cups of tea. Soldiers jostled at the head of the queue, eager to be handed the first cup, to exchange the first smile with Élise, the blush in her cheeks shining out.

She should be down there, thought Jack, roused from his thoughts, watching the white curtains settle around the girl.

All that, she thought, in her back garden! He was missing it!

As the cheers died down, Richthofen's deadened gaze seemed to fix on Jack. He held the bedpost to steady himself. In this war of attrition, he had seen so many dead and wounded soldiers, and their replacements. At Fromelles, the face of each wounded man had etched itself in Jack's brain. But after that first day, once a case was seen and whisked out of sight, he would not think about the soldier again, unless he came back to the battalion. The doctor had to work, to survive.

So this was the Red Baron, who celebrated each kill with the purchase of a silver chalice, until the metal became too precious to waste on such folly. A strange exchange, biblical, almost: a cup for flesh and blood. But this time the prey had escaped and it was Richthofen who was *kaputt*. More knights would fill the skies to battle it out until the last young man had died and someone said, enough.

The enemy was pushing hard for Villers-Bretonneux. The walking wounded station had been moved well back out of range of the shells. An attack was expected in days and then the casualties would pour in; the sifting would start up again, of those who could and couldn't be helped. A factory process – the treating, the non-treating – for which he had a natural talent, his superiors said. Of all the things to be good at!

Another cheer rose up from the garden. The covers had been lifted from the platters and Georgette, at the window, knew that the tea served to the men was hot and her madeleines good. She looked back at the doctor, intently inspecting the wound, his eyes wrinkled with concentration. He was not old, not even thirty. He, too, should have been out in the gardens, sitting at the officers' table while she added a dash of milk to his china cup. They both should be out on the lawn enjoying the day, not stuck inside with a smelly old body. Outside the band had started up again, the laughter! But the guns were so close. She sighed under her breath and stepped back into the room. The dinner would make up for it, and the dress. He would be entranced with her. They would sneak into the garden and dance beneath the oak tree. It would be perfect after all!

The laughter from the lawns cheered Jack a little. The ace had been smuggled in undetected – who would think that the body was upstairs? Why ruin the sports for the lads? The burial would take place the next day and put an end to the rumours and speculation. In

the little churchyard near the aerodrome, between pomp and gun salutes – a full military affair, no less – villagers would stand by and watch Manfred von Richthofen, who'd shot eighty of their own from the skies, lain to rest alongside their fathers and grandmothers, all mixed up together, ashes to ashes.

A tune he knew blew in through the window. The boys clapped and sang along to the refrain. Knees up, knees up, never get the breeze up, knees up Mother Brown! The chaps were having a good time!

“What is neezup?”

She faced him, one slender arm still holding aside the curtain which fluttered in the breeze like an angel's wing.

“It is ... this is the knee,” he said, pointing down. But she stood, waiting. He bent one leg up so the knee slapped on his outstretched palm, and added, “knees up”.

Her laughter made it alright that he'd looked so silly and though he had made the song no clearer to her, she turned back to the window. He wanted to stride across the room and scoop her up in his arms. But the smell of the corpse was on his hands. It wouldn't do, with that man in the room.

She waited by the curtains, thinking, he doesn't love me anymore.

The lads outside quietened down when the band played a waltz, a tune to make a man want to grab the nearest person – woman or man – and twirl them both into giddiness. It was the closeness that mattered, the solace. A reminder of sweethearts at home they might never see again. The most some hoped for here was a quick end and a proper grave, a priest crouched beside them whispering a prayer of deliverance. What morbid thoughts – how could he rid himself of them? How could he stop these boys dying?

That German devil would have a dignified funeral, though Jack didn't begrudge him that, nor this final rest on a lovely bed, the girl with slender arms – his girl – to assist with the preparations. In the chaos of the war it was a last link with chivalry and the old ways, when a man from either side who had done his duty was honoured in death.

It was a day for the troops, too, to think only of women and French pastries. For him and Georgette. One day he would build her a house as grand as could be, to make up for the *château* she would leave behind, with maids and ringing bells, laced doilies. They would dine at a long table of dark wood, he at one end, she at the other, a child to each side. Pondering this, he turned back to the corpse.

Chapter 17

Private Smith returned with the bowl of heated water, muttering something about a queue in the kitchen. Pity that Pat was not here, thought Jack. Smith was good enough, but this was a moment for the war records.

Pat had requested the leave a few days before when the major was examining a dysentery case at the last camp.

“Sir?” The batman seemed restless, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

The doctor placed his fingers on the distended abdomen of the patient, who yelped at the touch. Slight deterioration, Jack wrote in the notes. Men were not meant to live in burrows in the ground. A nurse took over, wrinkling her nose as the man passed a large flatus. She’d been working half the night too.

Pat followed him to the next patient. “Well?” the doctor said.

“Tomorrow afternoon, Sir, after I’ve assisted you at the *château* ...” The private straightened up. It wasn’t too much to ask. “My brother Tom, Sir. He’s at Villers-Bretonneux.”

“Yes, of course I remember Tom.” From long ago, in a hot and dusty place that was no longer home.

“Sir, could you please spare me during the sports? I could take supplies to the aid post and be back by nightfall.”

The aid post? With an enemy attack expected! Jack shook his head, thinking of Pat’s mother smiling at him after school as she kneaded dough, her elbows covered in white flour. “Too dangerous. Someone else can go.”

“But Sir, my brother ... Tom. I heard he’s not too good.”

So Tom was on the line, waiting for the offensive. It would be a bloody battle, both sides desperately wanting that village, the gateway to Amiens. The station for the walking wounded had been moved back, just in case. The soldiers on the line would be waiting, their fears growing; some might even think of escape. Jack remembered Tom as a well-built kid, but fighting wore the men down. They all had their limits.

“Alright,” said Jack, “I won’t need you until four.” Too late he thought of the two brothers there at once in that dangerous spot, but it was said and he wouldn’t go back on it. “No later though, Pat,” he added, to cut the time short at least. “Remember the dinner – I want to look my best.”

“I know, Sir,” the batman said. It was to be the major’s big night. All those perfumed letters, the fading photograph in his breast pocket. Pat thought that it was about time too, though all he said was, “Thank you, Sir”.

So he had gone off.

No-one could have known that on this day the Red Baron would be shot down or that he would be brought to the *château* to be washed for the funeral. Nor imagined that Jack would be entrusted with the task.

When the pilot’s body arrived at the *château*, Private Smith had been summoned. Shame about Pat – it would have been something to tell the grandchildren – but it was Smith’s story now.

Pat, on the other hand, striding along the road through the woods with a knapsack full of morphine, a red cross on his arm and pistol in his belt to protect him, had never felt better. Fancy approaching a girl like Élise, with those beautiful pink cheeks! He couldn’t

wait to tell Tom, see him green with envy. And Dad would have to be proud of him stepping out with such a girl. A looker and a sweetheart rolled into one. Even with his stuffed foot he could dance; he twirled a few steps to the dazed stares of soldiers stumbling out on the road. How close the *château* was to the line! He would ask her this evening to go walking with him. He'd catch her alone in the kitchen, they'd chat and perhaps – if his luck held out, and indeed why not, he'd survived the war this far – he might steal a kiss in the shadows, to wipe out all this around him. The horses piled in the gutter, the man with so many bandages wound around his face that you knew not much was left underneath. He would tell his brother the good news when he found him, to buck him up. Yes, tonight he would ask his girl to go walking with him; to dance under the stars.

During the sports, Thérèse felt at ease attending to the table of the officers who, unlike the other men, were quite reserved. She had tried to listen unobtrusively to their hushed conversations as they planned the days ahead. Although she could only catch a few words here and there, from the serious tone it was clear that the worst was expected. Only Captain Fray looked pleased with himself after excelling in the officer's race, so she offered him the plate of cakes first and smiled as he recounted the story. Each time he visited the *château* he used any excuse to impress the Giscard girls with his talk of the latest patient he had saved from death. Today, though, he kept peering around as if looking for someone: a person who, if Thérèse had guessed rightly, was at this moment helping Maman in the kitchen, to calm the girl down after the arrival of the doctor. And though her younger sister had not been pleased to miss out on the sports and the band warming up

outside the window, perhaps, thought Thérèse as Fray pushed his chair out a little too forcefully, it was a good thing.

Captain Fray was indeed put out. Major Brown had arrived at the *château* in time, as usual, to cut his lunch with that gorgeous creature. Not a bad fellow – immaculate, and good for a laugh – but with a habit of appearing at just the wrong time. At school no-one had noticed him, the son of a miner, until he won a prize at the end of the year. Breezed into medicine, when Fray himself only just got in. Major Jack Brown. He was plucky, to save those fellows, though the battalion might have been left a doctor short! Had a guardian angel. But could he offer the girl security, connections?

Captain Fray had looked forward to saying a few words at the presentation of the prizes. He would thank Madame Giscard and her four beautiful daughters, at which moment his gaze was to meet Georgette's, linger for a second. Of course he knew of her engagement with the major, but until the war was over all bets were off. Fray must make his intentions clear, in case she needed a backup plan. But though the speech had gone well, and Madame was most flattered, the girl was not even in the crowd, nor the major. She hadn't even seen Fray win his race.

While the presentations took place on the lawns, the girls stacked empty tins on a tray.

“Pat seems nice,” said Thérèse, eagle-eyed, to Élise. “What a pity he had to leave.”

But her sister would not be drawn and busied herself with wiping crumbs from the

tablecloth. Thérèse, however, remembered herself at that age when she first met Pierre, and thought perhaps she should keep an eye on those two as well.

Chapter 18

Georgette took the overalls and shirt, neatly folded, from Jack, and their arms touched, startling them both. Jack smiled, patting her on the arm, but behind him she could see the vacant blue of the dead man's eyes, unnerving her.

The clothes must be brushed and the worst of the stains removed, a task done in secrecy so as not to alarm the men. The overboots, which wouldn't fit in the coffin, had been placed by the private in a corner uncleaned. By the time she returned for the last of the soiled clothes, the body was naked, a towel neatly placed over the groin.

Between the shoulders of the doctor and his aide she caught a glimpse of blue skin, limbs stretched out, taut, cold-looking. Her father's corpse, old and wrinkled, had still felt warm to her, the love dripping down his arms and up hers. That's what he always said to her, can you feel the love? But this young man deserved to die young. She had heard that he'd taunted the new pilots by painting his plane blood-red. That it was all a joke to him, another death, another glass of champagne. That he was a devil. That all the *Boches* were.

Then she remembered the week the soldiers came to the *château*, when her father got sick and the men disappeared from the village, the laughter and harsh-sounding banter, the boy holding Sebastian's bridle while another held out his hand, calling, *Esel, Esel*, grains of silver glistening in the sun. Sugar from the dinner table, when it was becoming so scarce! Sebastian wouldn't give the carrot she had in her hand a second look. And when the soldier turned, she knew it was the one who had watched her through the railings, who had caught her gaze in the living room. His eyes glinted as if it were him who had caught her out, rather than the other way around.

“*Mademoiselle*,” he said, with a deep bow. The other could not reach quite so low, with the rope in his hand.

“I’m here to feed Sebastian ... the donkey,” the girl said in French, though she could speak his language perfectly well thanks to Maman’s parents in Strasbourg. There was no need to explain herself in her own yard. Sugar indeed!

“Go ahead,” the first soldier said, stepping back. But when she held out the carrot again, Sebastian ambled back towards him, dragging the second boy behind.

The soldiers laughed and even she could see that it was funny, that the donkey was spoilt. The soldier stepped towards her and reached for her spare wrist, his fingers for a second brushing hers. Into her palm he trickled the grains, which Sebastian, his muzzle tickling her skin, sucked up with one slurp.

But when the donkey had licked up the last of it, the soldier did not let go of her hand and she had to pull it away. She grabbed the rope, muttering that the donkey must go back to his stall. The animal wouldn’t budge, despite her whisperings in his ear that she would not take him out in the cart for a month. The soldiers stood by, smiling, until the donkey decided that no more sugar would appear and he would go back to his stall to munch on the carrot.

Her mother had been angry that night, warning her off the enemy. They are bad men, thought Georgette, and this one had looked at her through the rails, made her want to run to her mother and bury herself in her apron folds. But then he had fed the donkey sugar, had cupped her hand in his ... she brushed these thoughts aside. Maman was always right: she knew the ways of the world. Georgette had decided not to speak to the men again.

Her mother had made sure there was no chance of that. While the Germans were at the *château* the chickens were fed by Thérèse, who had been grilled by Maman. Each day she hid some eggs in the cellar – the officers were too well fed to search for stores. But one day when Solaine was upstairs, her older sister was called to mend an officer's uniform and Georgette went to the outhouse instead.

Surrounded by squawking chickens, she did not hear him come in, but saw the flicker of a shadow from the door.

“Georgette.” Strange that he knew her name, as she hadn't mentioned it.

“Wilhelm,” he added, his voice loud and clear, as if she had asked, “My name is Wilhelm.”

He stepped towards her and she looked around for the broom that was usually propped up nearby.

“Don't be afraid,” he said, stepping out of the shadow into a ray of sunlight from a small window.

“I'm not,” she said, as he was the intruder, not her.

The young man laughed. “Good.” He reached forward and she wondered if he were about to take her hand again, but no, it was the bucket he was interested in. He grabbed a handful of grain and threw it to the fowls, starting off their cries again.

“My parents have a farm,” he said. He could have been one of her brothers, doing his jobs.

But Solaine, at the door, was furious.

“I will take over from here, Monsieur,” she said sharply, at which he stood tall and bowed, then handed her the bucket and left.

Georgette didn't see Wilhelm again. Solaine spoke to the officer-in-charge and the young man disappeared from the *château*.

The soldier who fed the donkey – where was he now? Attending to horses? Or face down in a ditch, as lifeless as *le diable rouge* himself, whose sneering grin was filling the pretty room with unpleasant thoughts.

Chapter 19

Jack rinsed the towel in the soapy water and began wiping the face of the dead man, hard and staring. A pretty flannel in lavender, soft to his fingertips, compared with the boiled rags at the dressing station. A towel for guests, like the one folded so carefully on his own bed. The ace struck fear in the hearts of opponents yet would let an injured pilot land safely on enemy land to be captured. Didn't kill for killing's sake. Jack tended to the enemy corpse, washing him with care, remembering the fragmented bodies of men from his own battalion left scattered over fields or stuffed in trench walls. The blood was caked on in wrinkles and pockmarks. He worked slowly around the open eyes, blue and cloudy with secrets, and inspected every crevice or possible point of entry that might add to what was known about the death. He could see how it had happened, the trace of the bullet. It would be fought over, the honour of killing Richthofen, and his work must be precise.

Shame that Pat wasn't here with him. A great shame.

The woods

Pat walked alongside the sunken railway until he got to where the ammunition was being unloaded, carriage after carriage of the stuff. A few yards further on, the coolies were digging a tunnel to extend the track, but the ground ahead was thick with bushes and trees. The workers were bent over like old men, wiping the sweat off their faces with the sleeves of their jackets, buttoned right up. They didn't say a word and none of the soldiers spoke to them. As the batman passed by, one of the men straightened up. His skin was dark from the sun, his face twisted in pain, his brown eyes sad – for his own sorry situation, or that of an Australian bloke headed for a bloodbath?

Pat offered him a smoke. "Here to see my brother," he said, but the man shook his head, not catching a word. When the cigarette was lit, the man bowed and dipped his head, knowing how to stay out of trouble, so the batman went on his way.

From there the road was so bad that carts and bicycles were getting stuck in potholes. Young boys in patched clothes stood by, watching. Pat felt their wide eyes on his, willing him on. Don't worry about me, he wanted to say, this is just a delivery, a social call, but it wouldn't have been fair to the soldiers around him. He fell in behind some Australians marching up the middle of what was left of the road. It was easier to get through. The locals dropped off when the trench system set in.

He had paused for directions when a hulk of a man appeared around a fork and came flying towards him, knocking him to the ground. A spray of bullets skimmed the top of the parapet.

"The pack, thanks mate," the man said, signing for it, his thick hands crusty with dirt. What would Jack think? But he was not a medical man, just a messenger who, after pointing Pat in the direction of some trees over to the right, scrambled off up the trench, the pack bouncing on his back.

The wood hid the battalion alright; the ground cover was trampled thin but a canopy of leaves high up on the trees muffled the hum of planes circling above. Men sat around writing letters; no-one smoked. He'd only got access because of the morphine and Major Brown. He trod carefully, trying not to disturb a twig. In a clearing under a tree, he found his brother sleeping. It wasn't the best spot as the cover was quite thin. When Pat dug him in the ribs he lashed out and had to be gagged to keep him quiet.

“Hey, Tom, it’s me. You okay?” said Pat, sorry he’d given him a fright. But his brother’s eyes bulged and his unshaven face began to shake as if it were a freezing night and not a warm spring day. Not fucking shell shock! Pat grasped around for a blanket, for someone to help, but all he could see was staring faces, no good to anyone. Why hadn’t these men been relieved? He crouched beside his brother and took him tightly in his arms, rocking him gently as a child. A few notes of a French song came into his head, a vision of white hands and a kiss under the stars. But this morning, and the evening to come, seemed so far away ...

Pat drew his brother closer, softly humming the tune to calm them both down. The major would know what to do – he’d get Tom right. “You’re coming back with me,” he whispered in his brother’s ear, but he couldn’t think of how he was going to do that with those darned planes making such a racket up above.

One swooped low over the forest, just over their heads.

The air filled with the sound of a rushing river and smoke, yellow and disgusting. Both the brothers had a mask. The batman’s was on in seconds – the major had so insisted on drills. The strap of the second was twisted around a buckle on Tom’s open jacket. Pat released his grip on his shoulder so the mask could be ripped off and put into place. His brother, freed, jumped up and vanished into the creamy curtain, swallowed up by the sticky mess. Pat ran, calling out, but the sound echoed in the padding of the mask close around his mouth and eyes and he had to put it aside for a second to call his brother’s name, Tom. The gas was so vicious, so intent on its path, that without a sound the wicked fumes slipped into the soft lining of his nostrils and eyes, his gaping mouth, the pores of his clothes and skin, until the doctor’s best batman lay writhing in the gloom.

The gas sank over every remaining blade of grass, each man that rolled and spewed, while the greenery overhead, holding the mess in like a giant shroud, shrivelled.

The alarm rang out to the trenches and the fields where the men worked on the sunken track. Soon the buttons were loosened on Pat's vest; strange disjointed words floated in the darkness as the white man with a cross on his armband who had offered a coolie a cigarette was carried out of the woods.

Pat travelled back on the sunken track on a horse-drawn carriage, the little Chinese man running by his side. The man had stripped off the batman's stinking jacket and placed him on his side to vomit. There was no water to wash the poison away and he cooked in his own skin, which turned a deep red. The coolie brought him to the mill on the edge of the village, already filled with blinded men, foaming at the mouth. He slipped through to the front of the queue, and whispered hope into the soldier's ear as he was wheeled off to be stripped, washed, orifices pumped, eyes covered, blisters dusted, anything to save the man.

But the gas had done its work.

Chapter 20

The *château*, 4 p.m.

When the afternoon tea cups had been packed up, Solaine moved to the dining room to check the table settings for the dinner that evening. A spoon was lined up here, a napkin there, and the grandfather clock on the landing upstairs began to chime. After the Germans had vacated the house in 1914, Émile asked for the clock to be moved from its welcoming place in the entrance hall. Too far from the bedroom, he said. He wanted to hear the seconds pass, each one precious, an event. The relentless ticking reached into every corner of the house.

While Émile was recovering, Solaine had shocked the village by inviting Liane de Pougy, the famous courtesan who had married a prince, to call in at the *château*. Madame Giscard, entertaining a courtesan! We hope Monsieur Giscard doesn't mind, the villagers had chattered. But her husband, who so loved society, the lunches at Godbert's with writers and sculptors, was not at all perturbed. Comfort for a sick man, he declared, adding a splash of eau de Cologne for effect as he dressed formally for the occasion. The ways of men!

That year, the plane of Liane de Pougy's son, Marc Pourpe, that greatest of French aviators, had slipped from the mist and crashed in the vegetable patch of the *château*. What mother would not want to see where her son took his last breath? The woman arrived with her husband at ten in the morning as if dressed for dinner. She wore a feathered black gown, low cut and scented, a glittering veil over her painted eyes, thin slippers interwoven with silver and gold. But she insisted on going straight to the gardens, where she became overcome with remorse, sobbing that she should have spent more time with her son and

persuaded him not to fly. Solaine tried to steady her with words praising her son. A fine man who died for his country. A hero of France! But Liane de Pougy would not be consoled and sat with her husband for half an hour on a seat that had been placed under the apple trees for that purpose.

Dear Émile had thought the woman quite beautiful. What of it? Why pursue a princess when I have my queen in bed awaiting my every desire? he whispered to Solaine that night, pushing up her nightdress. It did a man good to have a little freedom. It made him nervous; more attentive.

How she missed him! On the middle of the table roses overflowed from a vase, as if still hanging on a bush in the garden, reaching for the sun. The army band outside was playing an old melody that she and Émile had danced to at the *kiosque*, many times. The silver glittering on the table, the tumble of roses ... she could feel her husband's hand on her waist as they turned around the room, the train of her emerald dress swishing from side to side.

But as she picked a dried leaf off a stem, some soldiers outside started to sing their own version of the song and even though the words were unfamiliar to her, she could tell from the laughter that it was not the correct translation. Her poor daughters, out there serving tea! But they were good girls – they knew how to keep a man in line. She had taught them that much!

It was unfair to be young in wartime.

She remembered that day at the start of the war, when the Germans were still in the *château*. Georgette, pulling a light shawl around her, had announced that she would feed Sebastian.

With Émile unwell, Solaine had tried to keep the farm going, the animals happy, the vegetable garden thriving. Each morning Claude had brought in woven baskets brimming with salad and tomatoes, spinach, courgettes – and for what? With a house full of foreigners the supplies would soon be gone, leaving no stores for winter. At noon the girls served the officers at the dining table, while the family ate in the kitchen. Émile, wrapped up in bed in the outhouse, was at least spared this. Lucie was there too, coughing and spluttering, her face whiter than these plates; but the doctor wouldn't come from Amiens. News had swept in of round-ups in the square of local men who, for their families' sakes, thought it best to cooperate; they were herded into trucks and driven away. Each morning Solaine gave thanks that Émile was still with her at home; that he had not died in the night.

In the evenings, here in this dining room and with the best silver too, Solaine and Thérèse, in coloured gowns then, had dined with the officers. Their leader's invitation had been polished, delivered in good French and with a bow. There had been nothing to reply but yes, Monsieur, of course. The younger girls waited on the table in a courteous manner, as they had been told to do, and did not notice the eyes of the young rogues following them around the room.

Solaine herself had been around that age when she had first seen Émile in a market in Strasbourg. His hair had a life of its own; it stuck out around his head, though it was cut short. Friends introduced them and then he would turn up everywhere she was: the theatre, at church, even the bakery. He took notice of small things, laughing when she put on airs. She felt his breath when he leaned over to admire a daisy she had picked; she caught him staring at her when she turned his way. Then one summer's day, when they were walking by the river, they stopped to regard a fish in the water, the silvery body shining in the

sunlight. When Solaine looked back to Émile his eyes had sparkled so, and he had placed trembling hands on her waist and his lips had brushed hers in that first chaste kiss.

Ten children later, three boys and seven girls, with two gone already and her husband sick in the outhouse, Solaine had entertained the German officers while Georgette served the soup. She remembered her daughter looking tall and elegant. She wore her sisters' clothes, long skirts and heeled shoes; they had braided each other's hair. To serve men like this, young men they knew nothing about, like servants. It was atrocious! In wartime the rules changed about whose company one kept; a young man's days were numbered and so why not cavort with a girl for he was soon to disappear with the wind. But for a girl, the first time a boy's eyes catch hers, her heart warms and opens like a lily to the sun.

Georgette had announced that she would feed the donkey.

"I won't be long," she had said, grabbing a carrot from a basket. "Sebastian must be missing us."

But it seemed he was not, was being entertained by some of the German soldiers, Georgette told her when she returned to the kitchen, cheeks flushed. Solaine thought of the eyes on her daughter at the dining room table, the eyes of men with nothing to lose.

"Which ones?" she said.

"The youngest," said Georgette.

Those soldiers were a most dangerous age, recalled Solaine, thinking of Émile and even her own sons. That age when they think like a man, feel like one, but without the good sense. And now, in these extraordinary times, it was so much worse.

"You will not speak to them again," she said.

“But Maman, what if they address me? You do; you sit there at dinner with Thérèse.”

“That’s different,” she said.

While Émile suffered in the outhouse, there she was, in her best clothes, trying to pretend she was in charge. The Germans were polite to her, courteous even. But could she ever forget how the war had changed her children’s lives, what had happened to her husband? As soon as the dinner hour was up she would run across to the outhouse to feel his brow, wipe the sweat from his chin.

At the time Michel and Serge still worked on the farm. Food was necessary for the survival of the household, and more was siphoned off for the army. But the boys had left soon after. What good are the best chickens if only to end up on the plate of a fat foreign general? If Solaine could take a bullet instead of one of her boys, she would, but then who would be left to look after the girls and the *château*?

With so few of their men left around them, the women had to be careful. She would teach her girls how to play the game: to survive, no more.

Solaine had kept Émile’s business going when he became too ill, walking the ten miles to the printers in town and back three, four times a week when the road was still good. He asked her to keep the journal running – for when the lads came back from the war, he said. Yet the girls had shown interest. Élise loved to find errors in the text before the print, the rustle of pages spurting from the machine. For Georgette it was an advertisement of gloves or a discussion on the length of the skirt Madame X had worn at a parade. The journal could be for Élise, Georgette if she stayed. But what was she thinking, after what had happened to Antoinette? Émile insisted the girl work with him when she

wanted to be with that man in Geneva ... Now two of her girls were dead and two boys at the front. There was no space for sentimentality. With Émile sick in bed, Solaine became head of the family. It was up to her to guard her girls until the last soldier had gone home, from both sides.

“The Germans,” she had said in a low voice, placing a hand gently on Georgette’s arm, “are here to take everything. Our army will soon push them out.”

That night at dinner, Solaine noticed that the young man stared at her daughter as she moved around the dining room serving food. The girl kept her eyes down, except for once when she leaned down to pick up his plate and he smiled.

The next day Solaine told the girls in the kitchen, “Claude will feed Sebastian until the soldiers leave.”

There were other chores to be done, but closer to the house. The vegetable garden needed tending and Solaine had given strict instructions: only pick the biggest vegetables, leaving the smaller ones for later. She would tell the officers that the vegetables were bitter until they ripened and must be left in the ground.

Then there was the incident with the chickens ... who knows what might have happened if she hadn’t found those two! Georgette didn’t understand the ways of the world.

Yes, soldiers would do anything for a comfortable bed. Scare a family half to death in their own salon! Of course, the officers left when the French army arrived a week later. But things were not the same after the enemy had eaten food from this kitchen, with Émile sick and half the villagers gone.

After the Germans departed, Solaine went up the stairs to check the rooms. The place was a mess. Some of the lighter objects, including her favourite ceramic dish in which she kept her hairpins, had gone. In the billiard room, on the table covered in felt, was a large and disgusting *caca*.

“They left their calling card,” Solaine had said to Claude and he, muttering quietly to himself, found a bucket to clean it up. He did not have trouble with the stairs then – was it only four years ago?

Soldiers, soldiers. And now, Australians everywhere again. Kind men, the ones she had met: dear Jack, of course, and the other doctors, that juggler, Private Turner, who helped in the kitchen. But they were still men and these were extraordinary times. Death hovered over them, a vulture ready to swoop.

Chapter 21

It was time for Georgette and Jack to dress the corpse. Not the underclothes, of course; Smith had done that.

The shirt had been dried before the oven, with Tottie, shining cutlery for the dinner, under strict instructions to let no-one come in. She did not move from the spot, polishing so hard that some brown wisps escaped from her cap and Solaine had to remind her that appearance was important at all times.

In the washhouse, Marie, her ample hips heaving and swaying, had brushed the worst off the overalls – and dog hair too! – swearing under her breath that there was a duck to prepare. The body would be dressed and taken away without the Australians in the garden knowing of it. If the walls could talk of the secrets, the goings on! The cook was discreet; Madame was correct and always thanked her for it, gave her some little thing, a spare cut of linen. She never questioned. At times she might be told to lay an extra plate at the luncheon table for some poor soul who had asked for bread at the gate. To serve him! Once, a photographer at the *château* for family portraits decided to take one on the front lawns. Monsieur coaxed Claude, tending his roses, into sitting in the centre next to him. That old man with his straggly moustache! The photo had been placed in the album. Why not, Tottie asked, but Marie answered no, it shook the order of things. She could not abide change, the shudder of guns in the background, her husband gone. The Giscards had been good to her. She would cook the duck; she would clean the uniform of the *Boche*.

Yet it was not Marie, whom Jack had asked for, but Georgette upstairs dressing the corpse. When she and her sister had prepared Papa – with Maman seated by the window, looking out – she had pulled the woollen pants gently over his stiffened leg, cushioned his

neck in the fold of a silken cravat. Dear Papa! When the Frenchman, Marc Pourpe, lay crushed in the vegetables, the villagers, teary, had held hands in a circle around him. The German's body, on the other hand, looked pale and vulnerable, far from those who cared for him: the people of Berlin, who had lost their best pilot; a jilted lover; an old woman with a row of shiny trophies for each young man gone. The dog that had jumped in his arms just hours ago, with a few hairs left under the sleeve of the jacket after all Marie's work – three hairs, brown and coarse, to be buried deep in the ground with a master. The killer was dead! Yet the pilot's gaze, that had chilled her heart, now looked past her; his jaw, then gripped in tension, had widened and his lips parted. He was alone. Georgette arranged the sleeve around the armpit, smoothed out the creases with her hand. With a brush she drew back the wet hair, slippery clean, from his brow. She sprinkled powder on a lavender handkerchief to soften the dried wounds on his cheek. There he lay, nestled in his jacket and the smell of polished leather.

“Thank you, Georgette.” Jack wanted her to finish; there was little time. Indeed, the body looked impeccable, surprisingly so.

The doctor, facing her, saw the light catch on a pearl button, a white curtain drifting around her like a veil. A church with smiling faces from the pews, a dark cabin of secrets to the side.

As she turned to leave, the tip of her shoe nudged something fallen under the bed: a black wallet, empty and discarded, the documents ripped out to prove the death of a man so feared that folk could hardly utter his name. But Claude said people admired the pilot's skill and his habit of letting an unarmed enemy plane land on the German side instead of shooting it down. Wouldn't kill a defenceless man, he said ... she had forgotten it! He lay

on lace, drained of life, just as Papa had done. The girl's thumb, tracing the line of the stitching on the case, tingled. Some leather on the corners was a little ragged; a bit of dried blood had seeped through one side. The doctor must have this cast-off piece. But when she held the object out to him, as one might a purse of silk, Jack shook his head.

“Keep it for me,” he said, his eyes glistening. “Safe.”

Her steps were light on the rug in the hall; the sunlight streamed in at last through her bedroom window. She held the leather object in her cupped hands, as if in church.

“For when he comes back,” she whispered to herself, smothering her laughter in the feathered pillow.

Georgette skipped back into the kitchen and grabbed an apron, humming as she fastened the strings around her waist. Her mother, folding napkins at the table, sighed. The war was not over yet.

But she chopped and scraped with an eagerness her mother had not seen before, her young lips curving upward. Her daughter wasn't made for war. Yet of all the girls she had found something in it. If Jack came back ... but look at Georgette! It was like the early days with Émile, when she had seen the shine in her own eyes reflected in the glass. Only minutes before the girl had seen a blood-stained carcass; her lover, sleeves rolled up, fingers deep in death. That smell stuck: the thought of it chilled the veins. And yet her daughter seemed untouched, more content, ecstatic even! Strange child. Perhaps the girl could live a different life; perhaps she would manage away from here.

This kitchen work, thought Georgette, slicing a carrot from end to end, wasn't so bad, with the dinner ahead. So she had missed the afternoon tea, a smile from Captain Fray

... More carrots! It seemed that with each chop she was closer to the day that she, a married woman, would prepare the dinner for her husband. He would like the gravy just so, the French way, and all her new friends would ask for the recipe, which she would give almost complete so they could never quite do it the same. But a married woman would have maids. Until the first baby came, she, the lady of a house by the beach, would busy herself with furnishings and roses – she would have them in the front garden! In the afternoon, before Jack returned from work, she would dress for dinner, colour her lips for the embrace. Each kiss would taste like the first, two years ago, out there in the pasture, with the scent of lemons fallen on the ground, the pounding of guns across the river as he asked for her hand, and she still dressed in those horrid black clothes for Papa! But the warmth of Jack's body against hers, his brown eyes soft like chocolate, and her answer to his question whisked off with laughter in the wind.

No-one had believed her.

He's after one thing, her oldest sister had said.

But he loved her! Today, he had given her the hero's wallet. She would polish the hide until it gleamed, like a good luck charm until the fighting was finished.

Such happy thoughts, after what she had seen! She had peeked into Jack's world of blood and death, and not crumbled. And yet something niggled from earlier in the day, when she stood at the window after the race. She had spun around to share the excitement, but Jack did not notice, stood pale and drawn, one hand clasped on the bedhead. He stared beyond the dead man and the flowers that had been swept from the table before him, and appeared suddenly far away. She imagined the space between them filled with the letters he had not written, what he had not said. To protect her, no doubt – but he mustn't! She had

seen the crumpled pilot amongst the turnips, touched the dead German, felt Jack's heartbeat next to hers. And as she stood by the window, pushing the curtain aside, the wind came rushing through, rustling the frill of the pillow like a last breath. A ray of sunshine lit the dead man's side so brightly that the room faded into darkness. The leather jacket vanished and in its place was a uniform like Jack's; a band around the arm with a cross the colour of cherries dripping, staining the white linen. A cheer from the yard disturbed her and the vision flicked away, for it must have been that, a playing of the mind, because there was Jack, standing by the bed as before, loosening his grip on the post and turning back to the corpse, leaving a wake of silence behind him.

She had wiped that vision from her mind – it was too ghastly – yet here in the kitchen, with the duck stuffed plump on the sideboard and her mother casting strange looks, the thought of it grew stronger until she felt about to burst. Maman would listen to her; she believed in such things. But next she would be whisked to Madame Martinez and her jingling earrings, and there wasn't time for that, with an attack due any day. She must talk with Jack. Just as her parents, each evening, would discuss the tiny details of the day (while the children, to keep awake, kicked each other beneath the table), so it must be with him. She would pay more attention to conversations at the table, though the details of the war seemed dreary and she would much rather chat with her sisters about a pleat in a skirt she had spotted in town. But why would he care about that, him, a doctor, who spent his days at the front where people were killed! And where does he sleep? He must tell her everything. She was quite old enough. How else could she show him the life he would have with her; how else could she keep him safe?

She would ask him at the dinner or, better, after a waltz in the moonlight. With a man you must find the right time for questions, Thérèse said. This evening she would find such a moment, before he vanished again.

Chapter 22

While Richthofen's body was carried downstairs on a stretcher, Jack discussed the matter with Colonel Shepherd. Or rather, Colonel Shepherd discussed it with him, occasionally peering at him through his monocle and calling the doctor "My dear man" as if they were the best of friends. In the doctor's opinion, he was asked, had the bullet come this way or that towards the pilot and how long had it been before, as he so delicately put it, lights out – seconds or more? The man spoke in whispers, as if whatever was said would disappear behind the stairwell with all the other businesses and goings on. Of course, an official examination would be conducted at the aerodrome, but what did the major think?

Behind Colonel Shepherd a doorway led to the kitchen and there was Georgette at the table, beaming at her fiancé while his companion carried on. It was all because of that business at Bullecourt. But why distinguish him for that and not the sawing and sewing, the pep talks for men who could not go on? Something he could remember, not just piece together from what he'd been told. In his mind the letters on the citation formed foreign words which echoed against the stuccoed walls. Even Colonel Shepherd, as Richthofen was loaded on the truck outside, mouthed the sounds "fearless" and "inspiring" and tapped the doctor on the arm, as if it had something to do with him.

A movement in the kitchen caught the doctor's eye, as if the shadow of a boy had pulled up a chair, bent over a book. The lad would look up, his eyes, like his mother's, an iridescent blue. Would he see other battles? Were the seams of the world so loosened and pocked with holes?

But just as quickly, with a chop of Georgette's knife on the table, the thought of the boy was gone, as if a bullet in no-man's-land had passed half an inch closer to the left or

the right, or Jack had fallen this way or that and was submerged a head deeper, too far for the shovels to reach in time, and the lad, the dealings with important men, the marriage, vanished along with him.

He had risked everything, so they said. Would she understand?

Colonel Shepherd was saying, Major, well? and Jack hesitated, because he hadn't a clue what the man was asking, and to speak might dispel the dream completely of the company he would keep, the life he would lead.

And here was Fray, saluting and hovering just as Colonel Shepherd asked again who had assisted Jack upstairs and must be told in hushed tones to keep it to themselves; Captain Fray, with a blue ribbon that was pinned to his breast while Jack worked upstairs on the corpse.

In the back of the truck, the lifeless body was covered in a clean linen sheet. Colonel Shepherd sat upright in the passenger's seat, nodding and smiling with the knowledge that he would return later for dinner, at Madame's request. As the truck took off with its cargo, Fray, in the hall, cleared his throat. He was a tall man who stood with feet ten inches apart to steady himself.

"Sir, should I speak with Miss Georgette?"

There seemed no reason why Fray should speak to his fiancée about this delicate matter, except that the man, here for a few days already, felt on a footing with the girl. Fray had arrived at the *château* with Jack that first week years before and was quite taken with the girls. Made the war worthwhile, he said. He was not the sort to hold back; he might have written since to the Giscards. And why should he not ... a man of good family, with prospects. Presentable.

Imagine the family's excitement at receiving news: his own name mentioned, perhaps, or the doings at Bullecourt! With nothing from Jack himself for months, just a few lines here and there. He'd twist a pen between his fingers, hoping to think of a joke or a pretty scene, then spot something on his finger which must be scrubbed before the filthy fluid, the stench, sank so far in he would never be rid of it. Cleanest hands in the corps! Infection was a killer. With all the bullets and shrapnel flying around, a man could be done in by the ragged edge of a tin of stew, or a doctor's hands when soap and water ran out. So when there were fresh supplies and a brush, he would scrub back and forth until the last of the spilt blood washed away.

If his hands were clean, he'd find another distraction. How do you write what cannot be said, even between men? Pat, who was near the post when it was blown in, sought to edge it out of him, would mention a small detail, suggesting the major must enjoy fresh air at the window or that the doctor ran like the clappers that day at Bullecourt. Try to start up a conversation, as if he were the doctor and Jack the patient, and they were sitting down for a talking cure. Last week Pat saw a letter left unopened on the table from the stretcher-bearer McAlister, who had been sent home on the hospital ship.

"Would you like me to read it to you, Sir," Pat said in a cheerful voice, though that good-looking boy had lost a leg at the hip, so much had been shot away. His sweetheart says to say thank you, Sir, Pat said, and the doctor had said, huh, some things turn out, and the two men smiled. Though it would be hard to find work with one leg.

Why did Jack stay with those dysentery patients when Fray left for the *château* days ago?

He frowned. Sometimes in the trenches, with cases piling up and shells bellowing above, he would see her silhouette in a halo of light, her golden plaits unravelling. She wore a white gown, gossamer thin, through which he could see the shape of her breasts, the shadow of her legs, slender ankles peeping under the hem. But if he reached out a patient on a stretcher might grab his arm or an orderly pass a syringe, and the spell would break.

Damn Fray! The cheek, stepping in!

Jack couldn't have written to her after Bullecourt. He couldn't remember most of it. Yet he had allowed her to stand before Richthofen's corpse, leg bent as she, with a shrill laugh, levered off the stiff boot – a man's task. Now, staring at the two doctors from the kitchen, knife poised above a pumpkin, her smile was gone, her face unsure.

He must put on a good front. Those blasted nightmares, waking up in a sweat, they'd soon ease off. The looking backwards must stop, for she might think him a fool. No, she was sweet; she would pity him. Not yet eighteen, her head should be filled with ribbons and hummingbirds.

In the silence he thought he heard crying and saw a man with his head in his hands.

"Major Brown?" Captain Fray was still there!

"I'll attend to it, Captain," said Jack, dismissing him.

Fray retreated, respectfully, as one should from a major. Jack shook his head. How idiotic! She said she would marry him. He was the luckiest man in France. He had thought only of himself, not her. This evening, at the dinner, there was a chance to make things right.

Chapter 23

“Jack?”

The girl stood at the foot of the stairs. Her eyes were in shadow, darkened.

“Am I disturbing you?” she said.

“No, of course ...”

A burst of big guns on the front rattled the panes of the window by the stairs, startling him, though she seemed hardly to notice. Was she only seventeen? He forgot what he wanted to say to her.

In a lull she spoke, but her voice was too soft, girlish, and he caught only a couple of words at the end: “something wrong”. Her arm, resting on the banister, looked too thin to have pulled off Richthofen’s thick boots. On one fingertip remained a smear of pumpkin which he longed to lick off to make her laugh. Why not tell her nothing was wrong, that the harsh sounds would soon fade and give way to the twitter of birds, the splat of water against the paddles of the mill upstream? He might say that the battle was drawing to a close and the soldiers were leaving; that the *château* – her home – was safe. That he was the same person she had met two years before. But her stance was upright; she did not weep or quake though the enemy lay impatient just a few miles away. He could not lie to her.

She waited for him to reply to her question: had she done something wrong? For when the doctors had stared at her from the stairwell, she saw the glint in Captain Fray’s eye – she was used to it – but Jack had gazed past, as if looking at something else. Like he had upstairs, clutching at the bedpost, shutting her out. She had performed her duty. Had she gone too far, adjusting the pilot’s sleeve, smoothing his brow? Did Jack not trust her?

These last few weeks, after the arm of *la semeuse* was sliced off in the salon and Maman shut the journal down in town due to the bombardments, Georgette had been unable to sleep. She worried that the Germans would take over the *château* again on their way to Amiens; that Jack would get caught up in the fighting, despite his promises, and not come back to her. If only Jack would write to her!

And here he was, staying with them for one night. At last.

But he did not answer her.

“Please, Jack,” she said, and he wanted to trip down the stairs and wrap his arms around her and squeeze her tight, this lovely precious girl! But another blast might shatter the window panes, sending shards of glass out, piercing them both.

He saw the flicker on her face. The disappointment.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

But she would not hear of it, brushed it off as if it were nothing. You must rest, she said. Maman’s instructions!

The evening hung before them like an orange on a tree, bright and perfectly round, a little out of reach.

He was hustled along the stairs, her arms whooshing him up and away and out of her sight. For she could no longer look at him standing a few steps above her. They could be separated by the fighting, a tent of wounded men, her mother’s protective glare – that she understood. But not a few steps, while the doors trembled with the blasts, and the ticks of the clock marked each second until he left in the morning. He stood, silent, as if they had all the time in the world.

She had done something to displease him.

Or was there something wrong with him? She didn't think so; not Major Brown, with his row of medals pinned to his breast. He was entrusted with attending to the pilot's body. He sewed up the wounds of French men. Such an important man would have secrets. Why tell her?

His strangeness was somehow her fault. That first week, they had talked and talked; they had made promises, embraced. How soft his lips were! And the kiss this morning ... had she flung herself on him? Did she now seem like a silly girl hanging around his neck, asking questions?

This evening he would see her in the dress.

Thérèse was right. There was a time to ask questions. She would talk with Jack at the dinner, as planned. Or after.

Halfway up the stairs he thought of asking her not to mention Richthofen's name. There was no use frightening anyone. But when he turned she had disappeared, which was just as well with that window shaking like that. She wouldn't say anything about the pilot. She was young, but had a good head on her; very good indeed.

What a lovely girl! And he was messing it up. Standing there like a chump. For God's sake, she must be scared out of her wits, though you would never know it! She deserved someone who was going to look after her, not crumble over nothing.

He'd better buck up, before Fray persuaded her she could do better.

Chapter 24

First, Jack had to write a letter. This, like the others, had been put off, each day becoming more urgent until now, as he sat at the table, everything seemed to hover – the grandfather clock about to tick; the lark in the oak tree with the burst of song in its throat; Marie, a beater poised above eggs, shiny in a bowl – waiting for his pen to touch the page.

He was writing to Beryl. His sister had been with him that dreadful day he found Mum on the bed, throwing her arms around him, rocking sweetly, calling out through her tears that God's will had been done. The house, damp and cold, had closed up, but draughts of wind made their way through cracks of doors and hissed down the hall. Beryl opened the windows, invited the fresh air in; put the kettle on, made cake and arrangements; was there like his shadow in the doorway, beside the mulberry tree in the garden. And he with a great hole inside, a part torn away, like he had copped a blast of a shell and his insides were turned out.

She stood by his side when Dad came home after the accident and looked grim, and told him he had to leave school and work down the pit. She was there when the little doctor swooped in on a white horse for Hannah, gave money for the new school in the city with so much lawn and fields you could swear you were in the country, it was so green.

Again, the thick drapes in the house cast a pall of sadness when Hannah, her belly full, visited that last time and left in a coffin, the sorrow floating like dust motes over the bed and chairs. Beryl wrote that the motherless baby was doing well. She cared for them all, married the little doctor, and had time for Jack.

Her letters had buoyed him after the Dardanelles; held him through that first stint at the front. And he, who these last months could say nothing to Georgette, had barraged

Beryl with stories of how his girl had cut her hair, or rescued a pheasant from a shell and hid it in the chook house. What a marvellous girl Georgette was, how she helped him through. Yet in his sister's replies was a hesitance. She was happy for him, she said, but was it a good idea to tie himself down when the war wasn't over; had he thought where they'd live? But no question, he replied, the girl was willing to follow him; she would leave everything she knew, her family, the farm, to be with him. While he waited for word from Dad, Beryl asked, in the nicest way, had they discussed the religion of their children?

She was sure that the stories she had heard of the French girls were untrue ... oh, Beryl, please! He didn't dare tell her how some of the Australian men behaved! Georgette is a *fille d'une bonne famille*, a very good family indeed! I am sure she is lovely, wrote Beryl; forgive me, I am too cautious. We want you back with us. We are afraid.

During a lull in the bombardment, the pen poised in Jack's hand was lowered and a torrent of words tumbled out on the page until the letter sat before him finished, ready to be sent on its long and perilous journey:

My dearest Beryl,

I hope you and Dad and the family are in good health. I am staying in the *château* tonight for a grand dinner with all the trimmings – I wish you could be here! Of course, you are much better off where you are. Less noisy!

Dear, dear sister, I am grateful for all your parcels, the knitted socks; when I have spares I share them around and the boys ask for your address, the wool is so even and kind to sore toes. To save you from being inundated with letters (and declarations of love from strangers), here is a thank you

from all of them. If I, God willing, make it to the end of all this (which of course I will), I'll come back and hug you till you squeal.

Georgette is a wonderful girl, dear Beryl. She reminds me of you – beautiful (yes, you are, with your big brown eyes), clever and strong. You will love her, and Dad will too – he won't be able take his eyes off her!

Please, dear, I ask you to write to her mother on our family's behalf. Georgette and I have been engaged, unofficially, for almost two years. Madame Giscard, kind as she is, seems also a little dubious and it would console her so to receive a letter from you. To persuade her I am serious ... as if she can't tell! After the war I will arrange for you to come to the *château*, before we marry, to meet everyone. The French are so formal about these things and I know it would make you feel better too.

If you could see the way they live, Beryl! The *château*, the servants ... like a dream. I am afraid our life in Adelaide will appear so simple to Georgette. When I have finished my training and claim a good income, I will build a grand house for her, with room for the children and a servant. Yes, at least one, maybe more, of both!

As to the matter of the religion of the children, I must state now, before there is any doubt, that my lovely wife will choose, for she will have given up so much by then. Rest assured, they will be Christians.

With all my love and sincerest hope of good health and happiness for us all in the future,

Jackie xx

With the last kiss marked on the page, he stretched back in the chair while he waited for the ink to dry. He had done it! Yet his words sounded shallow. An emptiness, a false tone of jollity, something not said. He spoke of his own affairs, not the grand scheme of things nor the imminent attack. The to-ing and fro-ing over the line at Bullecourt. He couldn't remember it. Nothing of Beryl's fear. Nothing will come of nothing ... and for an instant he only saw what was not there, the space between the trenches and the rumple on the bedspread after his mother had gone. From his coat he pulled an old photo, turning it in the afternoon light to see the woman's silhouette more clearly, but the shades of brown and yellow were blending in and the edges of the paper starting to unravel.

He picked up another that had fallen on the floorboards: a girl in a headband, her eyes lit up like diamonds, tinged with hope. He heard a clatter from the kitchen, sudden bursts of laughter. She was here in the house! Real. They would dine together this evening, in full dress; the candles would flicker; the stars would outdazzle the big guns. He would not allow Fray to come between them, nor fear of the unknown. He thought of the fold of a child's hand at communion. Such little matters, with the night before them.

Chapter 25

At twenty past four there was still no sign of Pat, who was never late; even as a boy he had got to school early. He was a man you could set your watch by.

Perhaps Jack had said five o'clock and not four: a mere slip of the tongue. He'd been tired. Yet the batman knew of the tasks required to prepare an officer for an event, the dabbing, the polishing, and the time to set aside for them. He would have questioned the late start. He knew the importance of appearances.

Turner should have never left with such an important dinner ahead. Why had Jack allowed it? So many things could go wrong near the fighting – a blocked trench, a bad road. Gunfire. But his brother, big Tom, who would swim out to sea with strong, determined strokes, was unsettled. Who could blame him for that, thought Jack, raising his hand to check that it was unwavering. Pat asked so few favours. But where was he, for God's sake? Attending a wounded man by the roadside, still talking Tom through? Of all days!

Of course, the man had forgotten the time. He was in the kitchen this minute helping Madame in the kitchen ... or Élise! His eyes lit up around that sweet girl. But would Madame think a batman suitable for her daughter? Would the girl?

"Does your family know the Turners?" Fray had asked at breakfast one morning, after Jack recounted the accident with the horse that had buggered Pat's foot.

"We lived in the same town," Jack had replied, hoping that his father would never hear of it. Dad was not one for airs and graces. When Jack arrived home from that plush school for the summer, his father would give him a list of jobs to do, holidays or not. But his benefactor always asked him, "Have you made some nice friends?" for he knew how

important it was to get on with people. In the city, Jack didn't talk about the mining town. No-one seemed interested.

So Pat was downstairs with Élise and good for him! Still, the bell must be rung, to give the batman time to prepare the jacket for this evening. A major must be immaculate.

Voilà the knock at the door!

But it was Private Smith, apologising that the batman was nowhere to be seen and that he would take over.

Tom must be in trouble. Pat would get him evacuated – he knew what to do and was probably beside himself right now at letting his officer down. How rotten for the poor fellow to miss out on Richthofen and now this!

“Let me know when he turns up,” Jack said to Smith, adding, “Immediately.”

It was so unlike the man not to send word, at least.

Chapter 26

“He’s handsome, isn’t he?” said Georgette, leaning back in the tub, her hair floating on the water like Medusa’s. A good kisser, though she wouldn’t tell them that!

“Yes, Gigi,” said Élise, handing her a sponge. “He was missed at the sports.”

Before Georgette could ask who had been looking for him, Thérèse, seated at the dresser brushing her thick brown hair with long strokes, announced in a deep and solemn voice that at least his batman had been present.

Élise glanced away, her cheeks pink in the steamy air, but then, as much to her own surprise as her sisters’, she turned back, her face lit up like sunshine, and said, “Pat asked me to dance.”

Looking back, the soldier had made himself very amenable on each of his visits, and suddenly images of Pat and Élise talking, which none of them had noticed before, reappeared in all their minds. It was true that in the morning the pair had circled each other; the juggling of apples, the passing of the madeleine that had been disregarded became secret signs of something more to come. Now they could all enjoy the prospect of the budding romance. Georgette saw the pair dancing to a gay tune from the battalion band, the trim of her sister’s skirt picking up the wind with each twirl. Élise and Pat. Her beautiful sister with Jack’s batman! But he did seem nice and she was surprised how easily the names rolled together, like at a wedding.

“But I said no,” Élise added softly, not sure why.

Georgette sat up, sending water over the edge of the bath and Céline to the next room for a towel. Just as the idea of the pair was beginning to take shape! And if they were married ... She saw a wedding with two sisters veiled in white lace, two Australians

waiting outside, adjusting their bow ties. Jack could not enter the church, Maman had said, as he was not Catholic; he was not French. But think of what he is, Maman! Georgette had paled at the thought of standing alone at the altar with Jack in the vestry, the priest running between to exchange vows. Now she could have her sister beside her, and Jack his friend. But Élise had refused him.

“I couldn’t dance because I had to serve the tea,” Élise said, thinking of the men lined up in a row, waiting for a pastry and “a cuppa”. How funny the Australians were! How cheery!

Little Céline, mopping up around the tub, poked her head up. She held the end of her plaits in her mouth to keep them from dragging in the water.

“Where were you, Gigi?” she said, the braids dropping down.

What had Georgette been doing at that moment? Was she to blame for the lost dance? She remembered looking through the curtains of the upstairs bedroom to the teapots on the tables in the yard below, the steam rising from their thin spouts; at the colour on Élise’s cheek as the first cup was served. She had felt a warmth float over her, too, while the curtains billowed around her arms, drawing her back into the room. But when she turned, Jack was clutching the bedpost as if he might fall.

She stared at the water thick with froth rising up the sides of the tub. She loved a bubble bath! Why did the pilot’s nasty sneer have to ruin everything? But after she had washed him, his body lay stiff on the bed, cold and alone. She tried not to think of the eighty Allied planes he had shot down. What if that French pilot, Marc Pourpe, had crashed not in their vegetable garden but on the other side of the line? The Germans would have looked after him. How strange, to shoot at people one minute and then wash the blood from

them. The gunfire went on and on. Listen! And what of that other one, the boy Wilhelm, who had looked at her through the railings at the start of the war? He had fed the donkey sugar from the table, thrown grain to the chickens. Just a farm boy, nothing special. He could be dead. Why was everyone killing each other? Why did Jack have to bandage them all up?

She must think of happy things; she must, with her sisters staring at her, waiting for an answer. She would not let Manfred von Richthofen dampen her spirits. He must not win. But he was dead at twenty-five. Younger than Jack. She thought of her lover slapping his knee in time with the music from the band in the gardens below to make her laugh. He was so sweet! So alive!

Céline grabbed the sponge back. Her nose was sharp, pointed as a dog's might towards a scent.

"You were with Jack!"

Georgette laughed and dipped her head under the water, washing away the worries of the day. She came up slowly, the bubbles clinging to her curls like fairy molluscs.

"Maman will find out," Céline said, her eyes wide with excitement, until the thought entered her mind that her sister's suitor might be sent away, the dinner cancelled ... and the wedding, just when she had been asked to be a bridesmaid, for the very first time!

Such a baby, thought Georgette. "Maman sent me up to the spare bedroom," she said, submerging her head in the suds to quell the choking feeling that was rising up, laughter or tears – she couldn't tell which.

When she emerged, her little sister protested, no, Maman would never have done that, not with the tea to be served and Jack upstairs alone.

“There was a dead man on the bed,” Georgette said in an unsteady voice.

The younger girl dropped the sponge on the floor. Thérèse pulled her into her arms and cast a look at the girl in the bath as if she were cross and sorry at the same time.

“*Poupette*, she was helping Jack.”

And because there was nothing romantic about washing a dead body, they laughed – even the youngest, not one to hold a grudge – but then fell silent, as it must have been dreadful to do that while the sports took place in the gardens below.

Céline gazed at her sister in the tub – two years older, soaping her breasts, while Jack upstairs trimmed his moustache, ready for the evening ahead. That afternoon Georgette had washed the body of a soldier; had left Céline behind; thought her childish.

And to make matters worse, a loud crack sounded outside which seemed to shake the whole house. The girls were used to constant battering, but this seemed to slice the air in two. They heard the missile hurtle through the air above them.

“That big gun,” muttered Thérèse, sheltering her little sister in her arms. “It is pointed at the town. It will not hurt us.”

Still, the sound woke them up. If they were not dressed and ready to receive their guests in time, Maman would be formidable too.

The topic of Pat had been put aside, but when the others had left for the bedroom, Élise whispered that the young private had promised he would see her tonight.

“He’s in love with you,” Georgette said. How beautiful her sister looked - that pink on her cheeks, her eyes shining like stars! There could be a wedding, Georgette thought, sinking back in the water as cold air swept in through the open door.

Nothing more was said about the dead body upstairs, though she had a story ready about an Australian soldier. She remembered the two doctors on the stairwell talking in hushed voices, glancing over at her; the feeling that something was wrong. She would not say a thing about the pilot, if that’s what they’d been worried about. The joke with her sisters had finished with a sharp edge, as if something had been cut between them.

She didn’t want to talk about it again. Was this how Jack felt?

Chapter 27

In the bath, the water seemed suddenly used, cloudy. She had traces of a dead man under her fingernails and had taken the last turn to bathe, smelling the blood in her pores, though she had scrubbed her hands already. It had stuck with her, the smell, the dirt in her nose, the dead eyes following her around the room.

Papa used to say she could do anything her brothers could, but since the war began the rules were different. The boys went off to fight. They knew how to hold a gun. Papa and the boys had loved to hunt on the river; they would stay the night in the hut covered with reeds and bushes, one of the farm ducks tethered to a post on the water to entice the others down from the black skies. Did the duck on the water try to steer its friends away? Call for help? And when a few glided down, the flap to the hut would be opened, a rifle cocked and a shot taken, the wild bird dropping to the water. She had seen it. Why did she insist to Papa that she go that night? Why did he agree? She would never forget it, the splash as the dog was thrown in to collect the prize, the green wing glittering in the candlelight on the table. A wild thing, dead. How she had cried and Papa had rocked her in his arms, saying, little one, I shouldn't have brought you, some things are for men. She would never understand it.

She and her sisters were so close to the fighting that they heard whizzes and cries, saw the night air light up, knew children shot down in the street by a plane. Their mother and the soldiers tightened the rings around them so that they could not even go for a walk in the marshes. It had been worse these last days, with the trip to church cancelled this morning. The village was filled with soldiers, Maman said. Father would say mass in the chapel before dinner.

The dinner was all she had thought of from the moment she had heard that Jack was coming. She had not noticed Élise and Pat circling around each other. What else had she missed? Today the soldiers had laughed in the yard. They were not concerned about rumours of a German attack. But why were so many pouring into the village? Why was Jack here?

Thérèse appeared at the door, her hair half down, saying, hurry up and stop dreaming, while Georgette splashed water on her tears to hide them. What was the use of crying? Her face must not be ruined for the dinner ahead, and Jack. She stood to lift herself out, the soiled water dripping down her knees.

There she was in the mirror, tall, small breasts, her hips fine. The dress would sit loose with the hint of a shape beneath. But her bare arms, so elegant beneath the cotton of a crisp shirt, may seem too thin; would he find them scrawny? Like the legs of chickens, Thérèse had told her more than once. Her sister could not keep the weight off from the bite of a macaroon! Yet Georgette envied her now, staring in the mirror at the chicken legs. Was there enough of her? She didn't look like the nude women on the walls of the gallery in Amiens, or the statues of full-legged angels guarding the dome. She looked more like a boy, even if she didn't feel like one inside.

Tottie brought the news to Solaine in her bedroom that Father Paul had been caught up at the afternoon funerals and would be arriving late at the *château*. The matriarch was seated at her dressing table, her finger tracing the velvet rim of her jewellery box. Would Madame wish to delay the dinner?

“The dinner will proceed, thank you Tottie,” Madame said, for nothing could stop the occasion now, except that the duck was not cooked. But not a second overdone! For the dish must be served *à point*, when the apples were tender, still plump, the juices just falling from the meat, but no further – not tough. How bothersome that she had placed the priest next to Jack. Had it been wrong for her to hope that something from Father Paul might rub off? Now there would be an empty place, most unwelcoming, beside Major Brown, for his first evening with them for months. He was almost part of the family, she thought, as her thumb caressed the smooth stone of his mother’s brooch in the centre of the box. But the ambulance doctors were getting themselves killed all over the place. She must not get her hopes up, nor change the seating. The priest would arrive in due course to sustain the doctor with conversation of a spiritual nature. The mass could take place after dinner, when the other men retired to the salon to discuss the situation. Father wouldn’t mind. He knew that every prayer counted.

She could have cancelled the evening. That big gun was unnerving them all. But Jack had not been here in months, nor Captain Fray – they needed a treat. And it had given the girls something to look forward to.

The seating had taken half an hour to work out. She had placed herself at the head of the table, of course, with Colonel Shepherd and Élise to either side. Georgette and Captain Fray would face each other in the middle, with Jack and Thérèse seated next to the priest. What a masterpiece – so perfectly even! The lovebirds could hold hands under the table. And if Élise and Fray chatted quietly together ...

A rustle at the door and there was dear Thérèse, her comfort. With Pierre away, she had taken to being firm with the young ones. It kept them in line.

“Those dogs!” she exclaimed, to a barking in the garden. Thérèse took one of her mother’s arms, extending it like a queen’s so that she could slip the long black glove onto it. Solaine closed her eyes, throwing aside her cross thoughts to enjoy the comfort of her daughter’s presence and the sound of the dogs barking outside, fighting over a scrap. Just animals being themselves, Émile used to say with a chuckle, knowing that in seconds the beasts would be best of friends and would sleep the night together on a mat.

Humans were different, she thought.

What had Georgette said in the kitchen? How pitiful the dead man had looked? Him! The enemy were showing no mercy, crossing the border, forcing themselves into their home. Taking her husband from her. Solaine had grown up in the Alsace; she knew families on either side of the border, spoke German and French. But old friendships are put aside when a family is forced to stand like schoolchildren in their own salon, a Luger pointed at a child’s head. Unlike dogs, she thought, we cannot forget.

She had argued with Émile when he was too ill to move; he had begged her to leave the *château*, everything they had built up together, the journal, the farm. A lifetime’s work. Leave Émile and their home to the ransackers? Never. The arm of *la semeuse* she could do without, but the *château* belonged to them. The Australian soldiers were, how could she put it, *un peu bizarre* with their funny way of talking – the drinking! – but they were tough fighters like the farmers here. She had gathered her husband’s rifles and pistols, and hidden them behind the old curtain in the cellar, along with the Armagnac. She had shown Thérèse how to use them if the soldiers came. And tomorrow, when Jack was gone, she would show Georgette and Élise. It was time.

Chapter 28

“Check the table, Tottie,” Marie called from the kitchen, where she pulled steaming trays from the oven to add a sprig of rosemary, a dash of salt. She could not wait until the last plate was emptied, the sauce all mopped up, when Madame would hold out her arms and declare that she was the best cook in Picardy!

Claude lit the candles on the chandelier in the dining room and stepped back to admire his work, for they looked like little stars dangling up there, as if the night had been brought in, not the sky of battle, but how it used to be. The old light.

“*C’est très joli*,” he said to Tottie, as he passed her at the door. And it was. The silver service that she had rubbed until her arms ached now gleamed upon the table; the crystal glasses, so delicate to wash, glittered like ice; even the carpets, blood red in the daylight, looked warm and inviting. The windows holding back the black night were as polished as mirrors. In their reflection her plain dress transformed into another garnished with beading and sequins, and her hair was pulled back as she had done for Georgette. But the pane wobbled with the wind or whatever was outside, and she was left adjusting the ribbons of her starched apron. At least she was not out there in the darkness holding a gun.

She wandered from setting to setting, counting the knives, imagining conversations that would take place. And if she herself were seated next to Colonel Shepherd, he might ask politely whether she had enjoyed the fish, to which she would reply that it was delicious, thank you, Sir. She felt part of this beautiful night. Gaston came in limping, his arms full of bottles, his dark eyes flashing. We will see, young man, she thought, for Private Smith had quite a look about him too; there are not only French boys in the village.

But she smiled as she left the room, for it must be hard to serve wine at a lovely table when your brothers are out in the cold.

Upstairs, the last clasp was fastened, satin shoe slipped on, droplet of perfume smeared in the hope of a kiss. On the floor above, belts were adjusted, moustaches clipped, nerves allayed with a quick whisky delivered on a silver tray.

The priest, down the road, dropped his hand before the final grave.

In the garden, in a lull, the song of a bird rang out.

“Tiens, Maman, un coucou!”

“In English tonight, Thérèse.”

Solaine stood before the mirror, the black lace on her gown like a spider’s web, her hair pulled in a loose chignon. The opal on her bosom shot out coloured sparks. Almost ready. She had thought of everything and everyone. She relaxed the muscles on her face and the lines, the downward turn of her mouth, disappeared leaving an aura of calm.

When the birdsong had finished, she would nod and the pair would descend, feet in step, a hand resting on the banister to steady her.

Tonight she would taste Marie’s sweet duck; sip wine from hidden corners of the cellar; enjoy the company of men, even if they were not her own. As if there might be no tomorrow.

“Will he help out in the kitchen?” Élise asked, pulling Georgette towards the door, for the quarter of the hour had chimed and they must not be late.

“If Marie will let him. You know what a dragon she can be during a dinner.”

“But will I see him?” Élise pleaded, for since the afternoon tea she had thought of nothing else. She had stood before the mirror, swivelling her gown this way and that, thinking of the dance she had missed.

“*Chérie*, the prettiest girl in the village,” said Georgette. “You could have anyone. What about Captain Fray?”

Happily the man in question could not see the two girls bend over with laughter, as far as their corsets would allow them.

But when the giggles had died down, Élise said, quietly, “I like Pat.”

And Georgette was pleased and continued to plan the wedding in her mind.

In the hall below, two men, their uniforms spotless, talked in hushed voices.

“Good God!” said Fray under his breath, his nose high to catch the scent of the two girls descending arm in arm, the backs of their gowns trailing on the stairs, their smiles like angels, their eyes wide with hope. The sequins he had given them sewn across their breasts. What a glorious sight!

The other man was silent as Georgette, her golden hair drawn back in waves, stepped down in a haze of black chiffon and pink silk towards him. Jack strode forward, extending his hand and lifting her fingers to his lips, kissing them lightly, his moustache tickling her skin. Closer, her blue eyes sparkled, leaving his heart tossing inside of him.

She knew then that he was utterly hers.

Chapter 29

When all but the priest were seated in the salon, glasses of sherry in hand, Élise, urged by her mother, approached the baby grand piano. Colonel Shepherd, in the front row, cleared his throat. How pretty she looked, her skin like ivory above the black beading. She lifted her fingers and the notes of Debussy began to drift through the room. What a treat!

“So sad, he is dead,” murmured Solaine, beside him. Such a talent. Yet the composer left something behind, black marks on a page that in the gentle hands of her daughter – those lessons had been worth it – were uplifting, as if the heavens had opened up above the scorched countryside and let a bit of life through. She was sick of death. But nothing could destroy this beautiful piece.

Élise, her fingers like feathers on the keys, closed her eyes; saw light skipping across the water, Papa in his straw hat holding the hand of Maman. Others, too, were taken to secret places – whispers in an ear on a dark balcony, a wave crashing in bubbles on the sand – and were sorry when the music slowed, coming to a close.

As the next piece lifted, became brisker and lighter, Jack inched towards Georgette. He wanted more of her, to surround himself with the fragrance of roses that wafted over to him in tiny bursts. He drew a little closer. If he could lean over, hover his nose just above the skin of her neck and breathe in, fill himself with her, then maybe he could ward off the smell of suffering and blood that threatened to choke him and drag him back to those deadly fields. He could not stand it. No, no more!

In the distance, a single gunshot carried across the marshes, lonely and harsh. He looked away from her to compose himself.

Why does he not take my hand? she thought. For to see him like that at the bottom of the stairs, a row of gleaming medals across his breast, his face turned upwards, had quite turned her head. And his hand reaching for hers, a kiss alighting on it, the softness of his moustache, had conjured in her mind a nobleman, a prince, drawing his lover in. The night had taken a magic turn, a night that was only for them and the music binding them together in a swirl.

Suddenly, as the final note was played and silence descended on the room, a tear fell on her cheek; she could not remember crying in Jack's presence. She stroked the drop away gently, as one might do a lock of hair that has fallen across a forehead. None of it would be forgotten: not her tears or the moment she was on the stairs in the dress when he lifted his hand to hers, nor the music twinkling in the air like fairy dust.

With Debussy in their ears, the little group left the half-sipped sherries in the salon and wandered in the direction of the dining room. Solaine on the arm of Colonel Shepherd, was grateful he had made time for the *soirée* with such pressing matters at hand. Thérèse and Élise, to each side of Fray, were bombarded with compliments. But Georgette and Jack, bringing up the rear, exchanged only glances, as if to speak might break the spell and it might all disappear, the attentive lover, the table set to perfection and the promise of the glorious evening ahead. If any of the party noticed a burst of gunfire, the spring of Verey lights illuminating the darkness outside, they kept it to themselves.

The servants, at attention, lined the hall as the ladies and gentlemen ambled past. There was no sign of Pat at the kitchen door, which made Élise wonder if he wanted to see her at all. Perhaps he had been put off. He would not have liked to see her on Fray's arm.

She wished he would appear in a tuxedo and bow tie, as if the war were over and with it the problems of who was an officer and who was not, and whether you would see them again.

Where could he be?

The melody she had played faded from her mind and in its place she heard a note struck on the piano, loud and hard, the click of boots echoing on the wooden boards, the swish of a German pistol waved from side to side. That day, the memory of that bad man, kept resounding back, no matter how hard she tried not to think of it. She wanted to believe in the goodness of people, even it was kept hidden deep inside. Each night, kneeling beside the bed in her gown, she prayed to God for compassion, an end to the war and her brothers home safe. Now she wanted to see Pat. Upstairs with her sisters, she had felt these things possible, and again in the salon, when her fingers had struck each note as if Debussy himself sat with her on the stool, turning pages of the music she knew by heart.

Through the windows she could see the night, black as ink. She had no idea of what lay beyond the stone walls. When Pat had said he was going to see his brother, she had thought of a row of tents, or even a barn. They sleep in the hay, old Claude said. There was always fighting going on, but the blasts had seemed more frequent these past days. With the baking and sewing she had not given it a second thought. The noise had become like the rustle of the wind, a gate banging against a fence, with only the big gun to surprise them. She had let Pat go from the *château* without saying a word; without a dance.

Her mother stood at the head of table, directing the guests. Colonel Shepherd must sit here beside her, said Madame Giscard. Colonel Shepherd blinked with satisfaction, removing his monocle to appear to his best advantage; even in wartime one could enjoy the

company of an elegant woman, near his own age at that. And didn't the dining room look marvellous with those scarlet walls! The French knew how to do things. He made a mental note to tell his wife all the details – she would stun the Melbourne ladies with a room like that!

“The sports went off particularly well,” Colonel Shepherd said to the matriarch when everyone was seated. “The men are not used to such ...”

“Beauty,” said Jack, looking at Georgette, whose eyes shone and he felt, at last, that he had said the right thing. And a smatter of laughter ran around the table, for hadn't he done well, the young doctor in love!

A good start, thought Solaine, even with the priest still not there. The dining room looked exquisite ... and what an inspiration the white roses were in the centre! She might leave it like it was for a few days, with the food cracking on the plates, red wine staining the crystal stems, so that the enemy, should they arrive, might see how the French had been living right under their noses! But she knew that tomorrow the dinner would be washed away and the lace tablecloth soaked. Tonight, the guests must eat well and the rest would be given to the servants. Not a spoonful of fish nor a twist of onion would remain for the intruders.

She saw the girls slip into their seats as she had taught them. They were as uncomfortable as she in those blasted corsets, but do not tell the men! The gentlemen looked so trim in their belts, except for Colonel Shepherd – a portly man, though his grey moustache gave him a certain presence. Listen to Captain Fray, so pompous in French yet trying hard. It was a most respectable party. Thank you, Gaston, a glass of white wine would go well with the fish! If Émile were here, he would say, drink the lot! And from that

spark in Colonel Shepherd's eyes as the first bottle was held for his approval, he would do his best. Yes, a good beginning. She, as hostess, would in due course steer the conversation to important things. But first, the pleasantries.

Chapter 30

“Have you been to Godbert’s lately?” Solaine asked the men.

Only Colonel Shepherd had. Marvellous place, he said, the *langouste* as good as anywhere in Paris. Such a charming part of Amiens.

“It was Émile’s favourite,” Madame said. And for fun she added, “He and his friends, Monsieur Jules Verne – you know him? – and Monsieur Roze, of course. The sculptor. Dear Albert, I have not the heart to tell him about *la semeuse*. Together the men would drink the best *champagne*. It was their little extravagance.”

Colonel Shepherd nodded, enjoying the white wine in his glass, too.

And Fray decided that his next free night, he would go to Godbert’s; perhaps Jack would accompany him and Colonel Shepherd too might honour them with his company. But a date was not set.

Fray, however, was not put off and, while Georgette’s head was turned to Major Brown, engaged the eldest daughter Thérèse in conversation. When was Pierre due back, he enquired, and for how long? And her brothers? But no-one knew when the soldiers would be relieved from their posts, with the east so unsafe.

“Please, Mademoiselle, I pray that you are not afraid of the enemy here,” Fray said, wanting to reassure the ladies. “Villers-Bretonneux is safe in our very capable hands!”

How quaint Captain Fray was! He tried so hard to pronounce that difficult name. Would he say it again, for their pleasure? And the conversation would have continued on this lighter path had Solaine not turned to Colonel Shepherd, who was enjoying both a portion of Claude’s fish, lightly fried with cloves of garlic, and his second glass of chilled white wine, saying,

“So Colonel Shepherd, will the Germans attack?”

A hush fell on the table, for the Australians were not used to such directness from a woman. Just at that moment, the big gun pointed at Amiens chose to go off in full blast. The panes wavered and the flames of the long candles set on the lace tablecloth fluttered a little. Georgette, closest to Colonel Shepherd, saw beads of sweat forming around his collar. But Solaine smiled, and when Gaston offered yet another wine she said, please, and her guest felt it would be impolite to refuse to answer her.

“Well, Madame, I do not wish to alarm you ... or your daughters.” And looking around the table he saw what pretty girls they were and how starved they were of the truth. For here they were living right on the front and it was the duty of the men to defend them and this magnificent *château* in which they lived as noble people should. What would be the harm, anyway, in saying what everyone knew. “An attack is likely,” he said, and even Fray had nothing to add because he thought that perhaps he had said a bit too much already and had better stay out of it now.

To which the matriarch sat back, nodding, for it was a different thing to hear talk from the villagers of a possible attack and Colonel Shepherd putting it so bluntly. At her lovely dinner ... yet she had asked the question and there was no turning back.

“When?”

“I wish to reassure you,” the older man said, looking over at Captain Fray, who had pulled the napkin to his mouth as if to wipe it. “We have our troops in place, Madame. Our best.”

So it was true. The soldiers in her garden – how quickly they had run, how high they had leaped! Every last pastry had been scoffed, every last drop of tea. Thank God she

had been able to do something for them. The doctors needed comforts too, with the lives of the young men in their hands. She had heard the horrid noise building up around the *château* and had tried not to dwell on it. But an attack was likely, and she must prepare herself and her daughters; lay out those rifles. Where were her sons? No warm bed or a dinner fit for a king for them. Only prayers. A morsel of garlic from the fish was crushed between her teeth, bitter on her tongue. She placed her fork on the plate.

“*Je suis vraiment désolé, Madame,*” and it was the priest bustling in, shivering and flustered to join them at such a late hour, but he had been detained. Solaine turned her face away and he patted her gloved hand, seeing that the knowledge of the battle to come had sunk in.

A blaring of horns came from the direction of the main road, as trucks revved past.

Thérèse, taking over, indicated the spare spot at the other end of the table and fussed over Father Paul, calling for his plate to be filled and his glass. When he had taken the first bite, he heard Solaine ask Colonel Shepherd about his hometown, his wife, the names of his children: in short, of anything but the war. What a splendid woman! Émile would have been proud. In the candlelight the grey streaks in her hair seemed more noticeable, as if she were ageing even as she sat, though perhaps it was the freshness of her daughters around the table which made it seem so. Georgette was positively glowing, leaning towards Major Brown in a most enchanting way. But Madame held herself with dignity; she would always be strong.

Of all the ladies, Élise was the most relieved that the priest had arrived, as he had promised to conduct a mass later. There was still no sign of Pat, though what did she expect, that he would appear at the door, say “gidday” in his funny voice? She prayed

under her breath, while Fray gazed at Georgette when he thought Brown was not looking. Poor Father Paul; to be a priest in these times must be so tiresome, always praying to keep others hopeful. How kindly he attended to her mother – as if he cared so – and all of them. He was sorry to have missed the recital.

The guests waited patiently while Father broke off a little bread to scoop the sauce from the plate into his mouth. A few thought privately he needed a little fattening. The fish, that old black carp that had played with Claude down by the river, had made an excellent *entrée*. And although the conversation did move back to the events of the day and the shooting down of the pilot which the old man had witnessed, not a word was said about the dressing of his body upstairs, especially not when a duck, which in other times might have been shot down from the very same skies, was about to be served.

A great platter finally was held before the party and the silver cover was whisked away with a flourish. Juices oozed from the bird, and the sweet aroma of the rosemary and apples stuffed within.

Solaine sat back. Her face felt less tight; she had regained her composure. Appearances were so important. Her girls were just as she had taught them to be in company: listening intently, drawing the men out, making comments to surprise them. Thérèse and Élise were behaving perfectly as ever, and as for Georgette, she had never seen her daughter more radiant. She herself felt her age: dropped, shrivelled, dried out. But not her girls. The men were attentive, sitting upright – though dear Jack had not said much after he had cheered them all up with his talk of beauty; from time to time he glanced at Georgette as if he could not quite believe his luck. If they had not been engaged, Solaine might have objected. His eyes lingered on her hair, then followed the line of her neck, like

her husband had done to her when they were courting. She remembered that wanting to be close, the urgency! Later, looking out to the stars, Émile would guide her finger to a constellation and the brightest light in the sky which reminded him of her.

That seemed long, long ago. The children arrived, one after the other; two died; her husband became obsessed with work, then sick; she grew older. But when they first met, if a war had been beating around them she would not have pushed him away, held back for a moment that might never come. Why should Georgette? War changed the natural order of things. Perhaps it was enough for Jack to clasp his lover's hand under the table, though she could tell he did not, for he was quiet, Georgette's smile unsure. These two had cackled like children in the garden on his previous visits; they had fun. But not tonight, with the room full of ghosts from the past and the battle looming ahead. She should not have forced Colonel Shepherd to scare them all. Her impatience had wrecked the dinner. The duck which had smelled so delicate when unveiled, now tasted too sweet on her tongue, almost sickly.

The seconds ticked by, each hour more precious than the last as the attack approached. If those lovebirds wanted to get closer, she would not encourage it, but she was no longer sure she would stand in their way.

Chapter 31

Colonel Shepherd, his mouth still full, announced that the duck was a triumph. For what were manners when there was game on the table, the relentless carry-on from the battlefields nearby? No rest for the wicked, they say! But Colonel Shepherd, teased Thérèse, to lighten the mood now that Father was there, who are the wicked ones? How right you are, dear girl, indeed! What's a bit of wickedness in the war! The Germans are saying their prayers in the trenches just like we are; isn't that right, Father? And the priest nodded, saying, we are all God's men; there is no sense in it.

Élise wondered if all that was needed was one person to point that out to everyone and the war would be finished. The soldiers could go home. Huh, said Colonel Shepherd, if only it were that simple, my dear. But what a good idea all the same, he added, to be kind. Excellent, in fact. And he noticed that no-one laughed at the girl. What did the Bible say, "out of the mouth of babes"? Yes, these young French girls were surprisingly bright and very charming indeed. They could teach his wife a thing about dresses, too, though that of course he would keep to himself. And how to flatter a man; he hadn't felt so ... virile in years!

"It is hard to stay glum with an excellent red in one's hand," announced Colonel Shepherd, lifting his new glass towards the head of the table. "And such marvellous company."

For Georgette, the evening was flying by like a cloud upon which she and her yards of chiffon floated. Jack's hand held out at the bottom of the stairs, the fluttering of Élise's fingers on the ivories, dazzled her, and the notes followed as she hung lightly on Jack's arm

in the hall. The dining room, surrounded by glass and a black night, looked as cosy as the caves she had made with blankets with Papa, candles to light the way, chocolates and sugared drops on a dish, her doll perched against the bedpost. In the dining room, the candles on the chandeliers had just been lit and the wax would take hours to drop down. How long would she have with Jack – this evening, another, before he left her again? She needed him here. That big gun was too loud, and all the talk of another attack made her think of the last time the Germans arrived at the *château*.

When she was young the children would swim in the river and one day her brother left her clinging to a raft in the middle of the pond. She tried to hold on, not even get up; not to sink. The waters were murky and eddies were forming. There might be a snake amongst the reeds and could not her brother lift her out? But she looked so haughty, he said later to Papa, as if she needed no help. But she did. She had been afraid. Is that what Jack thought, that she did not need him? Yet tonight his brown eyes looked as large as ever she had seen them, as if they might swallow her up.

If Jack would talk a little, she would not be frightened.

He did not seem himself. He had only once taken a sip from his glass, which fell to the table with a thud, drops of white wine spilling in an arc on the lacy cloth the girls had made together. Then, when she turned towards him with a smile, he looked down at his plate, which seemed almost untouched. Perhaps her darling did not like fish?

He saw a fine fishbone sticking out from the pink fillet. He did not know whether he could place a forkful in his mouth, or even dig his fork in the flesh, dividing the strands of muscle. Then he was served the leg of duck, a prized piece, which sat on his plate like a

discarded limb that had been chopped away, or blasted, the odour of dead meat pervading the room.

Georgette noticed the barely-touched plates and wondered if the doctor might be too tired to eat. Perhaps he was thinking of his work. Or of her; he might be nervous. The dress must have worked its magic! He had laughed upstairs about that silly dance. What was it ... Neezup? He had given her the wallet, which she placed in the drawer hidden between layers of her undergarments. What would the doctor think of that! The wallet, where the pilot had kept his most precious things. But any photos of a girl, his mother, or even a dog had vanished, along with the body. Perhaps she would put something of herself in the leather keepsake ... a lock of her hair, a snippet of Jack's moustache to make him laugh!

What had Jack's mother been like? She imagined her homely and warm, her arms stretched out. In the photo, his sisters looked formal in their nursing uniforms and older. The face of one, Beryl, reminded her of Élise, sweet and calm. After the war, when she and Jack were married and sailed off over the seas, as Madame Martinez had said, he would hold her hand on the boat as he had on the stairs ... she would be smothered in kisses and love and he would dine with her every night – not once in a year! At the dock in Adelaide, his family's arms would be filled with flowers to welcome her. And after she and Jack had settled into their house on the beach, on Sundays his family, now hers, would visit and she would prepare a meal – a duck!

But Élise would not be there, she thought, looking around her, nor Thérèse or Maman. Father Paul certainly not, though perhaps another priest from Jack's church. She would convert. They must be together on Sundays, bunched up on a pew. She couldn't

expect Jack's whole family to change just for her! But she would not tell Father; it might break his heart, for he believed in one church, although with all those dead bodies how would you know whether a boy followed the Pope or the King. Or no-one at all.

It had been a splendid night for Fray. If only that ravishing girl would look his way. She had fallen for Brown, that was clear, but the war wasn't over yet and the man had a habit of ending up in the most precarious spots. That row of medals positively gleamed even in this faint light. Something could happen to him, of course. Not that he wanted it to – such an excellent fellow and not put off after all he had been through. But Georgette was a stunner. Élise, too, was a lovely young thing, and he did not think a young man had yet stolen her heart, but there was something about her sister ... a steeliness that he thought would go down well with his mother; she didn't like a girl to be wishy washy. No, this girl had oomph. And that charming accent! Mother would come around; she just wanted the best for him. But was he a bit past being with such a young girl? She did seem more than seventeen, living here surrounded by soldiers and dead pilots. And Fray wasn't old – only three years on from Brown.

The war was intensifying, if anything; and that gun! He would be on his best behaviour, just in case.

Chapter 32

“A toast to the ladies,” Fray said, standing, raising his glass. “To Madame Giscard and her beautiful daughters.”

Of course, what a perfectly delightful thing to say, thought Jack. Why had he not thought of it? For it was an exquisite occasion, in the midst of everything else. How kind of Madame to arrange everything in such circumstances, when supplies were scarce and the threat of the enemy loomed over them. And now Fray, elevating himself to the master of ceremonies, stood, wineglass in hand, nose slightly lifted, glancing around the table at the ladies in turn and, finally, at Georgette. The presumption of the man! And she, a little flustered, laughed, glancing at Jack beside her.

His hand trembled on the glass. If only that blasted noise outside would stop! He must steady himself, not frighten Georgette!

Beneath the table he felt her hand reach for his and he clasped it so tightly that she caught her breath, raising the eyebrows of her mother at the end of the table. He could not bear to think of Captain Fray stepping in – he had seen the man staring at her across the table. She looked glorious, there was no question of it, with her golden hair, the sequins of her bodice glittering in the candlelight. Though Fray had not ignored her sisters to either side of him, commenting on a feathered clasp in Élise’s hair, or how delicious the soup was and did Thérèse add a hint of rosemary? Was there anything the man didn’t know? He seemed to be born to a life of privilege and chatter. The padre to Jack’s left had engaged him in conversation, steering to the conclusion that prayer was needed to get through the days ahead. Perhaps he was right. Solaine had raised the question of the possible attack in front of her daughters. Only two years ago, Georgette had recounted the story of the

occupation of the house, knowing little about why the enemy were there. Now the girl listened attentively while Colonel Shepherd instructed her in the tactics of battle, even adding an exclamation here or there in encouragement. She could talk to anyone; would do the same at a dinner with his family, saying yes, Dad, I see, as his father described the workings of the mine. She could do anything.

Who was at his shoulder, just as the desert was arriving, with the welcome aroma of pears and sugar wafting up to his nose and tongue? Private Smith whispered that he hated to interrupt Major Brown but some men from the battalion had been gassed. A doctor was needed at the treatment centre at the mill. Silence descended upon the guests. Jack released Georgette's hand, wiped his mouth with the lace-trimmed napkin, stood to thank his hosts for a dinner that he would never forget, and left the room and his fiancée in the company of the besotted Captain Fray.

But Fray did not remain at the table. Despite the temptation of spending time with the lovely girl, he was disturbed that the other doctor had left so abruptly. He indicated to Smith he should like a word. Brown no doubt was worried about his batman who, he said while they waited in the hallway for the evening's proceedings to begin, had never let him down. Fray rather suspected the pair had even been friends long ago, before the war. Not that there was anything wrong with Pat; he kept their spirits up. Fray suspected that if Brown had been thinking more clearly, he might have asked him to accompany him to the mill. And so, after profuse apologies and thanks to Madame and her family, he, with a regretful glance at Georgette, also departed.

Colonel Shepherd wiped a dab of cream from his lips; the medical men were needed again. He would play his part tomorrow or whenever the attack would take place.

For now, he needed time to digest the marvellous meal, so that his constitution would be strong in the morning. And a few more moments with his charming hostesses to sooth his soul, for he was not looking forward to the next few days.

The priest, sitting next to the major, had heard the bad news. He tried to loosen his collar which, in the heat of the room, chafed against his neck. Would he be needed too? Little Tottie had placed an extra dollop of *crème caramel* on his plate, dear thing, asking softly if she too could take mass in the chapel. He did not want to let her down, or the family, after such a feast. Was he expected at the mill? He was tired of kneeling beside the dead, repeating a never-ending chant that had entered his sleep, greeting him as he waked. Words of light and redemption in the midst of darkness, so that the one who lay stiff beneath the earth or was scattered like wet dust in the fields might rise up to the Lord. But in the background other voices crept in: another, Paul, the Lord needs another. Soon there would be no boys left, only priests and old men; no-one for these young girls, their pretty faces drawn inwards around the table. Georgette's hopes were pinned on a young man who had stridden into the night. Had not Paul always believed in God's will? But this carnage of boys ... The voices grew louder and he was ashamed, for it was the devil's work and he must not listen, for who else but a priest could make sure those souls rose up to heaven. If there is an attack, he prayed that it would be brief, for he had had enough of the war: administering last rites, prayers by a pile of dirt, talk of hope.

He spooned a few drops of syrup in his mouth and took a sip of sweet sauterne. Madame sat in silence, her dessert untouched. She could have left for the west, taken her family with her as so many had done. But the woman had always known her own mind. The day she arrived in the village to join her husband, Paul, then a novice, had called in at

the *château*. Her dark hair had been drawn up like a crown. She sat upright on the divan, pouring coffee into a gold-rimmed cup; Émile stood behind, his hand on her shoulder. Already her husband deferred to her, agreeing to refurnish the chapel in the grounds. For a second, Paul had imagined what it might be like to stand behind such a woman, how his own hand would feel, resting on her shoulder. It is God's test, Father Dom had consoled him afterwards, nothing more. He was right. God had chosen his path and it did not include a farm and ten children and a life with Solaine. But he admired her, and Émile when he was alive, for entertaining princes and courtesans, the cream of Amiens and beggars, without a second thought.

Last Sunday she had come to the confessional to declare in advance what she intended to do if the Germans pushed through Villers-Bretonneux and invaded her home again.

"I have Émile's guns," she said, waiting for his response. He would remind her *Thou shall not kill*. Did she think they could hold back the German army? Why be so rash? But he said none of those things, for he could not stand to think of soldiers beating at the doors, shattering the glass panels with the blunt ends of their rifles, while she and the girls clustered on the stairs without a defence. He preferred to imagine Solaine, eyes wild, cocking her husband's old rifle against the banister, daring them to defy her. And her slim-armed girls? Thérèse, Solaine had said, could handle a gun, but Georgette? Lately she had a most determined look about her beneath those pretty gowns and curled hair that made him think of her mother pouring coffee into a gold cup. They were survivors, those women, growing up with the sounds of battle from across the marshes. So he said nothing to Solaine in the confessional box, hoping that God would forgive her, and him.

But what was wrong with Élise? The girl had left the table in tears. Suddenly the dinner was over. The group, apart from Colonel Shepherd (who assured Madame that his driver would get him home safely after such a memorable evening), dispersed to find capes and then, gathering in the back hall, moved in a huddle to the chapel in the garden so that Father could light candles for their boys, for those at the mill, and themselves.

He would say mass to give them sustenance for the days ahead. Their prayers would be heard. He, too, would light a candle. Then he would go to the gas centre.

Chapter 33

“We don’t want you catching your death,” said Smith in the hall, exchanging Major Brown’s jacket for his coat. The private was doing his best, thought the doctor, but where the hell was Pat?

As he strode down the gravel, the branches of the trees shifted restlessly above him, waving about as if the wind had lost its direction. The night sky above was lit with blasts and smatterings of gunfire from the south. Beyond the railing, the road was packed with soldiers in file, their faces blank in the moonlight. A few, relieved, with bottles in hand, sang a jaunty “Waltzing Matilda” which seemed out of step with the marching men. Soon only one voice, deep and soulful, rang out into the crisp night. In amongst the crowd the locals shuffled, mostly old men, their caps pulled over their faces.

Captain Fray caught up with Jack just before the road veered off to the mill.

“What the devil are you doing here?” he said, but Fray was not put off.

Jack pulled ahead on the cobbled footpath, not caring whether the other man kept up, but at the turn-off he was still with him, matching his steps. Damn him! Could a man not be alone a few minutes! His head had throbbed from the moment he had taken his seat at the sumptuous table. He had held the silver napkin holder in one hand, twisting it, captivated by its shine, watching his reflection wobble with it, a small strange face, narrow and drawn, while Fray had held the floor with increasing finesse. Looking back on the day he wasn’t quite sure of the details. Had he slept in the morning, as Solaine had instructed; had Georgette laughed at his joke while Richthofen lay cold behind them? He thought of Fray at the table staring at her with eyes as droopy as a basset hound. Yet Fray had followed him to the gas centre, all the same.

He remembered bathing at the old mill alright. The rush of water as it found its way downstream. The dark planks leading upwards like a church, the windows up high. Naked men with soaped hands scrubbing backs and squelching water across the room, officers fussing on their way to billets, all wanting to wash the muck off. A good place for treating gas cases, too, they discovered later.

At the entrance to the building they were greeted by a rather officious orderly, Hooper, who quickly exchanged the doctors' coats for rubber gloves and a respirator pulled from a crate. Good thing, Jack decided, to cover his mouth and thoughts.

"This way, Major, Captain," Hooper said, "to the patients who are ready to treat". Washed and sprayed already, thank God. But before they went inside, the orderly added, "It would be wise to keep your masks on."

They stood at the edge of a ghastly chamber. Each of the stretcher beds covering the floor was occupied. A blanket was pulled over some patients for warmth, but many had pushed it aside or pulled at their pyjamas, or simply lay bare, their skin yellow in patches or burned red. They rubbed their eyes, choked on quick breaths, the sound of panting filling the room like a whoosh of air that was never enough. Open the shutters, for God's sake, let them breathe! But it was freezing outside and undressed they would get pneumonia. Amidst the thrashing and the garbling, every now and then a name was called out, clear as a bell, ringing across the room, Mary, Mother, Mum ... Some patients lay still, their lips blue. Stretchers with the blanket pulled over were carried away by men with strong shoulders.

As Jack leaned over a case, through the mask an acrid smell stung his nose. He must not allow feelings to overcome good sense as he had at that first battle at Fromelles,

with just two captains in the aid post and bearers dropping bundles one after another on the table. Just a raid! He remembered his head feeling not quite right, beginning to nod; his batman, Pat, soaking a hessian bag in water and flinging it on him – sorry Sir, orders to keep you awake – and with each lash something was beaten out of him, an ounce of feeling, the tint of sadness, everything that threatened to well up and render him useless. He learned to narrow his vision like a blinkered horse, with no looking back or forward to the men piled up at the door. He got through one case at a time.

He did that now, slotting into that way of thinking. The orderly said that the patients had been gassed in the woods. As he began to work, the weight seemed to lift from his shoulders of all the perplexing things of the day or what he had forgotten, anything that had happened in his life, even the sorrows. It was always thus. Suited to fieldwork, they said. He thought only of the men's needs, not as a single man – though he knew many of their stories – but as a conglomerate of wounded men who needed his help. He worked quickly, confidently. The chats would come later, if the man survived. His sense of purpose felt stronger than ever, though something niggled at him, a question pushed aside as he went from one bed to the next.

Then a patient in the corner, his skin a vile yellow, the ooze of froth around his mouth, called out “Jack!” – not Sir or Major, or Doctor – and in an instant it all made sense to him, the gassings in the woods, the batman letting him down and not sending word, and Jack trying to convince himself that it was just a lapse. No! He had misheard. It was just another case, blistered and possessed. But there it was again, his name gurgled out!

The aide said, “This one is an ambulanceman, Sir”.

“My batman,” Jack muttered. My friend, he thought.

No sooner did the doctor wipe the muck away from Pat's mouth and plunge the cloth in the bowl to rinse, than more would bubble up and the dirtier the patient seemed to become. The doctor, too, had splashes of the stuff on his shirtsleeves which seeped through to his skin, stinging it. The nightmare would stop if only he could wake up – he needed fresh air! But when he turned away, the patient cried out and the doctor gasped, shame running through him, for he had let his friend lose hope, like all the others left aside in the trenches. There was, he knew now, always something to be done, even if it were only sitting quietly with a man, praying.

Pat's lips moved as he tried to speak, the words lost in the clatter and crying around them. The doctor leaned over and a drop of sweat fell on the patient's cheek, whittling down to nothing with the heat. What on earth was he saying? Jack remembered them as youngsters, mucking around in the old mine tunnels, taking turns to guess what the other, around a corner, was thinking, Pat calling out, Hey, mate, why didn't ya say you wanted to go home? Couldn't Jack guess now what he was trying to say?

Then the man's body slumped as if he had gained some relief, but when the doctor cushioned his head his gaze was skew-whiff, his eyelids half closed. A terrible breathing began, each rasp more guttural than the last, the harshest of sounds. A stink from deep within.

Jack had saved thousands of men in France. Why not this one? Jack could have said, no, Pat, you can't go to the line when an attack is looming. You are needed my friend. Such simple words – why had he not thought of them? But here it had always been Sir, this and Major, that and all those tacked-on things. Damn protocol. And the man had gone off.

Pat, who had made him coffee to calm him down ... had beaten him with a bag so that he wouldn't fall asleep on duty ... had thrust a hand forward, through the mud, the clay, the stickiness around him. The stench of burnt flesh. Hold on, Sir, he had pleaded.

“Hold on Pat,” Jack said.

Chapter 34

The chapel, 9 p.m.

After the mass had been said and the candles lit, Father stood at the door to bid the family goodbye. The tiny chapel was almost in darkness, apart from the flickering flames. The priest could only see bits of their faces, eyes perhaps, or a quivering mouth; the rest was in shadows as they waited for word from the front with fear in their breasts. There had been much sniffing from the end of the row during the ceremony and as Élise passed he patted her on the arm as a father might do.

“Have faith,” he said, the words echoing on the wooden walls. Thérèse led the weeping girl away with Georgette following, her eyes narrowed and glinting.

“Jack’s batman,” said Solaine, the last to leave. “He hasn’t returned from the line.” Her face turned up to his, the tears in her eyes shining in the candlelight.

“Solaine,” he whispered, for she had buried her head in his chest and his arms had moved around her, cradling her like a child. She felt warm and soothing to his tired bones, though it was he who must comfort, and when she lifted her head he sprang back, so that he might not deny everything he had done in his life until now, all that needed to be done.

The moment was over. She brushed down her skirt; a look of calm had descended on her face.

“Merci, Père,” she said.

The candles fluttered as the door closed behind her and around him the shadows danced on the chapel walls like spirits.

When the ladies had gone and he had finished his prayers, the priest extinguished the candles one by one between his fingers, for the ritual of the lighting was over and the rest of the wax must be saved. He bolted the chapel door behind him as if nothing had happened, with only a smear of soot left on his fingertips as he headed for the mill.

He didn't see the little figure in the cape waiting beneath the old oak in the garden; he did not hear the soft click of the gate. She followed him, fifty yards behind, dashing to the left or the right behind a bush, standing in the shadow of a neighbour's gate. Georgette knew that the priest would lead her to Jack, but not without her mother's permission.

Upstairs Élise had been inconsolable, sobbing that Pat had been injured, perhaps killed, and she, stupid, stupid girl, had not danced with him. He was dead; she knew it. She would not take off her dress. She would not sleep. She would go to him.

But Georgette would hear nothing of it. Her sister was in no state to traipse through the night. From the window she could hear the movement of soldiers wandering the streets, some drunken singing. No, Élise was too upset and would call attention to herself, be placed in danger. She herself would go with Father. He would take her to Jack. She would be safe.

Now she must be helped out of this dress! And it dropped to the floor, a tangle of lost sparkles and dreams, while she fastened her plain skirt. But then she lifted the gown carefully onto the hangar, for it would be worn and bring magic again.

As she pulled the long cloak around her in the garden while Father closed up the chapel, it did not seem a good idea to reveal herself to him. He would send her inside, for the streets were no place for a girl without her mother's permission, even one accompanied by a priest.

So she followed him.

Twenty steps behind, no more. She saw by moonlight the flap of his cape disappear amongst the soldier's uniforms and quickened her pace. The soldiers didn't bother her. She had pulled the hood right over her head and must have looked a sight gliding in her covered slippers to the mill; the men in the street stepped aside so she might pass, as in the night who could say what strange figure might be hidden beneath that mantle.

She must talk to Jack. He would make everything right. Pat would be found. And though the night was brittle and she could see the soldiers shivering around her, she felt nothing. Not cold, not warmth, not even fear, just the desire to see him. She could hear the light tread of her slippers on the path, yet not feel her legs; they moved without her, as she glided past the chilled men.

But then, suddenly, she tripped on something and fell into the dirt. A man was sprawled over the edge of the path, his jacket reeking of alcohol and vomit. She felt the cool breeze on her bare neck. Someone shouted, "Struth! A sheilah!" Another joined him and soon there was a crowd of men ogling down at her, whistling, shoving, and not a gap between them that she might slip out of. She felt the icy cold on her hot cheeks, the fear prickle down her arms. She closed her eyes and prayed, dear God, save me ... but the sounds broke away and when she looked up it was not a circle of leering soldiers that loomed above her, but Father's stern face.

"What were you thinking?" the priest muttered. He led the girl by the arm back to the *château*, not chastising her, for her face was as white as a sheet and she had learned her lesson already. He knew good intentions had driven her out into the night; that this war had

turned life upside-down so there was no longer a way of knowing what could or couldn't be done.

When they were nearly home, they passed a soldier slumped beside a gatepost, staring ahead without seeing them. He was shaking despite the heavy coat that had been wrapped around him. Father asked Georgette to wait; she stood huddled in her cloak as he spoke to a few soldiers smoking on the street. They carried the trembling man away.

“What is wrong with him, Father?”

“The shells, my dear,” he said, drawing her back. “It can get to a man.”

And although the priest shielded her with his arm as they walked, Georgette felt chilled, like she were back on the ground, the circle of men around her.

When she crept into her room, Élise, awake in bed, sat up.

“Did you find him?” she said.

Georgette shook her head and bent down to undo her bootlaces.

And later, as she held her sister in her arms so that she might sleep, Georgette thought that maybe it was just as well. Tonight she did not want to know what had happened to Pat, nor to think of what might have happened to her in the street if Father had not arrived. She could hear that blasted clock ticking on to the morning when word would come. Perhaps then she would wake and, all of a sudden, understand why such things might happen; why Jack was like he was.

Chapter 35**The mill, 21 April 1918, 10 p.m.**

Jack did not turn from Pat again; he flushed his friend's eyes and nose, cleaned his armpits and groin, applied the spray himself, all the while talking to him of days on the beach – just a bit of sunburn, mate – and of his mother and then Jack's; things that hadn't been said for a long time, if ever. But the doctor could feel his friend's pulse grow rapid and weak, until he was prodding the limp wrist and Fray, who could see a kind word was needed, put a hand on his shoulder and said, I'm sorry, Brown.

He looked up in a daze. He had stayed with a hopeless case, while others needed him. It was the shame of this war that you could not stay with a man to the end. Who sets these ridiculous rules?

Fray led him to the door, saying, "Time to go home". Jack shrugged the man's hand off, mumbled that he would be fine, and plunged into the freezing night alone.

The stars were bright, with no sign of fog for the morning. The days ahead looked set for fighting and more casualties.

Jack stumbled on a stone by the roadside as an ambulance truck roared by, carrying more patients to the centre. There was nothing more he could do.

Those blasted tears were fogging his vision, so he sat for a moment under a leafless tree that somehow still grew by the side of the road. He found a clean handkerchief in his trouser pocket. Pat, he was sure, had placed it there in readiness for the evening, envisaging perhaps a tear of happiness on a girl's cheek after a tender embrace ... not his own death and Major Brown sitting alone by the side of the road, distraught. When had Jack last

cried? He lowered his eyelids, a wave of weariness coming over him as he recalled the thud of footsteps in his ears; a man running beside a train; Pat, bright and fresh, greeting him at the station.

It was coming back to him now, as if the tip of a shovel had pushed down into a crack of dried forsaken earth and water tumbled out, flooding everything in its path. He could see the battlefield at Bullecourt so clearly – like all the awful things that had happened over the last four years – as if the fighting were happening now. The memory, simmering beneath a veil of normalcy, had burst through.

Chapter 36

Bullecourt, May 1917

The soldiers follow the barrage, the dust and explosive, across no-man's-land, with the medical teams not far behind. Saps like tendrils fill with men, though they look more like animals, clawing and ramming at each other, fighting to the death in the stench of the hot spring day.

All for a tiny stretch of the Hindenburg Line.

The aid post is a scrap of iron propped over a deep crack in the wall of the sunken road with a few supplies on a makeshift shelf. A tiny hospital in the midst of chaos. Bullets spatter along the trench. The only way out is a narrow stretch between vantage points where the enemy waits for you to make your dash. Who cares if you carry a weapon or a stretcher? There, nothing protects you but luck.

“These two are doctors, Captain!” says Pat. He stands where a door should have been. A couple of prisoners skulk to one side, dodging their own fire.

The wounded huddle in the hole; more are outside in ruts in the road. No-one is safe. With Captain Copples gone, thanks to those bloody snipers, they are one man down. Dodd and McAlister, bless them, got Copples back to the dressing station for surgery. But then the fellows turn up again with more supplies on their back. Tremendous effort!

So the two prisoners are doctors – recompense from the enemy. They might try to bolt, but where can they escape to with bullets flying all over the place?

He undoes the buttons on a man's grey vest, wet with blood. The Germans stare. It is one of their own. He beckons them over, nodding to the taller one as one should to an

officer, and holds out a bowl, scraps of flannel. “*Danke,*” the man says, then turns to his injured compatriot, who grasps his arm with relief.

The doctors dress their comrade’s wound, which is only skin deep, then move on to an Australian lad losing blood from his leg at an alarming rate. When the gushing is stopped, Jack hands over scissors and thread. The procedure is done quickly, the stitches neat. The prisoners are given more tools of the trade and Pat raises his eyebrows at the scalpels, unaware of the code of doctors, the need to place a sick man first. With the wounded writhing around him, what can Jack do but believe in the doctors’ good sense? Strange, working with the enemy, side by side, like they were visiting surgeons in the hospital at home, sharing their knowledge. A spirit of camaraderie tinged with suspicion.

The doctors’ eyes are blue – not startling, like those of Georgette, but cold with the lids drawn around them. Jack turns his back, wonders if one might plunge a scalpel between his shoulder blades, but where would that get them, surrounded by fighting men and bullets from their own side whistling down the trench? A doctor has to believe in something: not God, in this place, but the Hippocratic Oath, something tangible he can trust. Other doctors. There is no choice. Above them the fighting weaves this way and that. The line moves forward, back, drawing closer to their post, so that at times the slashes and cries are so near that Jack expects the enemy to jump into their tiny haven with its supplies falling off the shelf, rocking with the blasts. The doctors keep working as if they are in white coats in theatre with their hands scrubbed up.

How efficient those Germans are! How quickly this one stems the flow, how neatly those threads are tied, while above they hear the sounds of ripping and shredding as

soldiers tear into each other, and more gashed and bloodied men fall into the post for shelter. Soon the invisible line shutting out the untreated becomes a pile of bodies.

Then a stretcher is squeezed into the dugout, bringing with it a smell of charred meat which coats Jack's nostrils and the back of his throat, making him gag.

He sees the man's clothes fallen away, skin too; his eyes, colourless, are fixed with terror.

One of the prisoners says, "*Der Flammenwerfer.*"

"What's that?" Pat cries. "What's he saying?"

"*Das grosse Feuer,*" the man says, thrusting his arm forward in an arc. He grabs morphine from the supply bag and fills a syringe; it is done tenderly, as if the poor fellow is a child, and the horror in his eyes dulls. The Germans stand back as Pat speaks into the man's ear, soft nothings that are lost in the fracas. Jack lets the batman stay with the patient although the case is hopeless, and it is he who pulls the blanket over the man's head.

The charred smell sticks around, though there is only a sheet of galvanised iron to hold it in. The stink seems thick; it sticks to the receptors of Jack's nose. Later he can still smell burnt flesh and looks around, thinking, hasn't that man been taken away yet, though the body has long been pulled out. In a while the odour of decay, of smoke and old gas, takes over again, but the memory of the stink tucks away.

In a counterattack, when the fighting spills onto the sunken road and he bends over a patient, the prisoners disappear. One minute they are mopping blood, the next, gone, their scalpels with them. Only Pat left now. Jack feels no relief or regret, but hopes that the men don't get shot. Good doctors are needed in the war, whichever side you are on, and that was

sometimes hard to tell under a sheet of corrugated iron and a sandbag, the line swaying back and forth.

The bearers are splendid. Dodd and McAlister set off to the waiting wagons, holding the stretcher high through a thousand yards of re-entrant fire; the courage of it. The vision is lost behind a burst shell, but then he sees them again, those carriers of the sick, upright and strong; they get through.

Jack, blood up to his elbows, the cleaning rag stained and the water gone, kneels by a case on the sunken road, a clear shot from both sides. But the man has been left waiting too long; he is dead. Men who can lean on an arm or a pick are waved on, with or without the bearers, for the aid posts and anyone with a medical armband are targets. All in return for a hit on a German ambulance train which had fired on a British plane; and so the misunderstandings go on, the danger, until in the worst shelling the doctor and his batman lie down with the wounded behind the rise, for nothing will be gained if they are killed too.

The bearers return through the smoke, safe, with a stretcher laden with supplies!

The doctor plunges his hands in the water, cool on his fingers, hears the tinkle of fluid dripping off ... then, a thunderous crack! The bowl rips away, leaving darkness and earth and soft pieces of warm flesh wobbling as he tries to shake free.

Something hangs in the dirty mess, wet and warm on his tongue. He tries to spit it out but a strange taste remains, a smell that he swallows at the back of his throat. He tries not to think of bacteria invading his mouth and cuts, the fine mucosa. Through closed eyelids he sees faces – his sister Hannah, his parents – but they are long dead and he is alone. Or perhaps this is death, suspension in time, the past flitting back, as if it were there all along ...

A surge of energy – he feels light. He hears gunshots, men fighting while he is trapped in this dirty hole; he does not even know if he wants to be out amongst it. His breath is whisked from him and with it all sound. He thinks of crying and having to say goodbye to his girl, of letting someone else do his work. It makes sense. Yes, everything makes sense, suddenly; the fighting has stopped. But what is the thought he just had?

The light grows stronger.

Voices cry out, soil is pushed aside. With a heave and a cheer from above, Captain Jack Brown, gasping and spluttering, is pulled from the wreckage and lain in a rut on the road.

But something is wrenched away; perhaps it is his soul which stays buried in the soil and the wobbly flesh, lying in his mother's cold arms.

Major Brown, slouched in the darkness near the mill in her village, was not disturbed by the passing men. Quite a thing, these days. For an officer must be attended to: his breakfast must be brought, properly cooked and then taken away; his boots polished; his whereabouts known. He could never abscond from his duties. Bad form for an officer with the Military Cross. He must always set the example.

He remembered now, being “badly shaken” after he was pulled out from the dirt. The words written on the commendation had puzzled him. Shaken? By a man's arms, his hands? More likely bloody rocked to the core, gone to hell and back! He remembered now, that he thought he had met his end and that there would be no return; the feeling that it was not of such great consequence. And yet, as if the past and present had been running side by side all along and now coalesced, he was back in the midst of the fighting; the lines were

gone with only pockets of safety left ... a sunken road, a flimsy sheet of iron. A hot sun shining. Had not he done enough?

“Captain Brown to report to the Main Dressing Station,” the messenger says, panting from the run.

Jack grasps his own hands to steady them. All the doctors have gone: Copples, the Germans. He sees a crushed lad laying out in the dip and hears himself say, “I’m better than nothing”, and will not leave. He has a minute to change his mind before the runner reports back.

When the doctor refuses to go, the two bearers, Dodd and McAlister, decide not to go either, bless them. Stretchers have stopped coming back from the wagon post, apart from theirs. Won’t go without you, Sir, they say, though he can see they are buggered. So the runner is sent back with the message that Jack and the bearers, and Pat, of course, will stay. The little team work through the night; the mangled men pile up and the best are carried off.

Then, just as the bearers carry off a man with shattered ribs who is doped up on the last of the morphine, a barrage of guns fires up, an attack or a counterattack – who can tell? Jack, from the dugout, sees the pair drop like pins in a cloud of smoke.

McAlister lies flat; Dodd calls out. The stretcher is upturned and the patient crumpled in a heap, a goner. Pat’s back is turned to a walking case. As the doctor stares out into the smoke, the cries grow louder and the sounds of battle drop off until he can only hear Dodd, who stayed because of him. The doctor’s legs quiver; he can taste the adrenalin. The firing keeps up. Dodd calls out again and Jack runs through the blasts with the sound

of crying and gasping in his ears. A man running through bullets, or beside a train. He pulls the bearer backwards until his arms feel half out of their sockets and his boot catches the dip of the sunken road. A hand is on his shoulder, familiar and firm, but he slips back into the smoke. He sees nothing and trips; his fingers touch a body in an odd caress. The earth explodes around them, but on McAlister's neck is a pulse, warm and vibrant, and somehow he gets the man back.

He lies on the sunken road and sobs for the fact that he cared so little, that he had almost thrown everything away. But the tears are strange: they hurt; they are sweet; soft tears that speak of pain, of life, of once upon a time.

In the village, the empty branches of the tree have cast a solitary shadow in the moonlight. Jack was nowhere to be seen.

Part Three

Chapter 37

Jack

When the doctor reached the wall around the *château*, he turned down a lane which led to the marshland behind. A rivulet separated the pasture where the sports had taken place that afternoon from the sodden ground beyond. He stood on the stone bridge, catching his breath, while the water roared past below, tumbling and churning.

The path, which at first was straight and well-lit by the moon, began to twist and turn and the bushes cast it in shadow. His coat, long and heavy, caught in the prickles and he stopped to untangle himself. On a little wooden structure traversing the stream, a nail caught in the heel of his boot, but he yanked it free, loosening a board.

He started to jog, trying to forget what had happened at Bullecourt. Had he seen that bush before, that tree? Would he go around in circles forever? He ran but the memories of the battlefield stuck with him.

There was Pat pulling him from the dried mud, the earth wobbling beneath him, the batman slapping him hard across the cheek so Jack might steady himself. He was unsure what was real: the daylight streaming into his eyes, his moving limbs, or the mud depths into which he had dreamed of being released. Pat was steady and stuck by him; he would not leave the post in the counterattacks. He showed courage, like every man out there in those ruined fields.

Why did Jack run out in that gunfire? Any one of those bullets whipping through the air could have finished him. Moments before, his boots had seemed stuck to the ground, his body rigid. He wanted to live. He had lasted this long, why wreck things now? But

Dodd crying out from no-man's-land could have been his brother waving at the country station as Jack headed off to school in the city. The words unsaid, don't leave me behind.

He tried to retrace his steps, relive the moment he had seen the bearers fall, recover what he had been thinking. It made no sense, for he was not a person who took risks. He was methodical, rigorous; he stuck by the rules. Why would he run out, when so much was at stake – his ability to work, his future with Georgette?

But he knew how to run. That surprised them in no-man's-land. Not Pat, who said, "You ran like the clappers at Bullecourt, Sir".

At home he would run along the beach for miles and miles. Not in the city. He had put his studies first, though his benefactor had told him to make friends, have fun, that he was only young once. Jack skipped that stage; one minute he was a child reading with his mother, the next an adult at work. With nothing in between.

He was running now.

A large explosion came from across the river in the direction of Villers-Bretonneux. The bombardments had been going on for days. Vercy lights lit up the sky, for a second brighter than the stars. Would Georgette be looking from her window right now ... looking for him?

At work in the trenches, he did not seem to hear the shells any more. He had learned to block things out a long time ago. When his mother died, he had pulled out a book and started reading. Beryl had put her arm around his shoulders but he pretended not to notice her. Later, when he was sent to school in the city, he would concentrate so deeply on his work that he would fall in his bed at night to a dreamless sleep. He had no time to think about the remnants of his life back in the little town, or his mother gone, or the strain

on his brothers' faces as they left for work in the mine. Work became as comforting as the old teddy bear he had hidden in his drawer at school. He won prizes. He drew attention to himself without wanting to.

In the trenches work absorbed him. No time to question, like some of the men did, the point of the war. The waste of men. Leaving a man to die. Stop it, squash it down, think of something else: Georgette's fair hair, her eyes ... anything. Suited to fieldwork. Yes, he was. He could shut things out. Work he could do.

But at night when he lay still that whizzing sound would come back, louder and louder as if this was the one which would send him flying, drop him sprawling into a living grave. Like at Bullecourt. And that smell of warm flesh stuffed up his nose came back now in the marshes as he peered down at the rotting carcass of a wild pheasant on the path, half eaten by rats. "Conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty." He followed orders; he did what needed to be done. Tell him what to do and he would do it. Which hymn to sing in the church, when to stand, when to sit. He had always done what was expected of him: in church, in the hospital, in the war. Suited to field work ... yes he was, if that was what it meant.

Pat knew him best.

They had been friends back home, not Sir, this, Major that. Boys playing games in deserted mines. Nothing more serious. No shells or bullets puncturing a stomach, blood turning black. Just like home, Pat would say if Jack shared a glass of sherry or a piece of Beryl's fruitcake in his quarters late at night when they were too tired to sleep. But in the lonely marshland, home seemed faraway, shrivelled.

One day Pat asked him, what will you do after the war? Jack had everything planned: his specialty studies in England, a practice in the suburbs, the large house he would build.

All he said was, marry her.

Pat had to think about it. Prob'ly work with my Dad, he said finally. And now he was dead.

The wind picked up and Jack slowed to a walk. He tried to recall his last conversation with Pat, not the gabbled sounds he had heard at the mill, but when they last talked man to man. He remembered writing a letter in his tent and Pat solemnly handing him a telegram.

Jack read the message, folded it and placed it carefully in his pocket.

“Sir,” Pat had said, blocking his way, grinning, as if he were a boy back in the mining town, a cheeky friend, thrilled to bits. It was a moment to extend a hand, to shake it, hard. If one could to a superior.

“Sir, I just wanted to say ...” and here Pat hesitated and Jack, in the marshland, his heart heavy with the time lost between them, wondered what his friend had in mind. Why had the war come between them? Or was it Jack – had he been the one to stand back?

Jack remembered Pat clearing his throat. His formal nod.

“Congratulations ... Major.”

And that was the end of it – his friend’s kind words to him – that the new major had done well.

Major Brown picked up a stone and, like a boy, flicked it across the water. It bounced once then sank without a splash.

Where had Georgette been in that? Had he even thought of her? Or had God steered him out through the bullets? He had long since wondered where the Almighty's place was in the war. At the dinner Father Paul had sensed it; he had tried to convince Jack to come to the mass later, but the doctor had held back. He had wanted only to look at Georgette, her beauty like a beacon guiding him through.

The war had been on her doorstep from the beginning and yet it had not thrown her. That day she knocked at his door with the coffee, the first time he kissed her under the tree ... those memories now seemed unreal, glimpses of the life of another man, more worthy, with whom she had fallen in love.

The day he knelt before her and said, his voice as clear as he ever had heard it, will you marry me, darling, she said, you are perfect. Maybe that person was, with his shiny boots and heart full of hope. In her presence, his reticence became manners; his neatness, elegance. When he thought something ridiculous, he would see the corners of her lips upturn and everything seemed lighter; they would smile and laugh.

When he left for the Somme that first time, his heart sang. The memories of their meeting, of her agreement to marry him, softened him as he trod his way down a trench to a post or sawed through a man's leg and discarded it on a pile of dead flesh. Stood at the post, watching the bearers knocked down. He was tossed from one field to another and the method was always the same: choose the men you can help and leave the rest. How those men haunted him, the ones put aside. His brother at the station. The honour in his own soul, that best man he had found, seemed to fade, then dull; disappear altogether. He struggled to be silent when men returned from leave with venereal disease. To not think of the families of others without faces or legs, who had lost their dignity. But then he would imagine her

standing in a clearing in a clinging gown that would make him shudder. You are perfect, she said, and he wanted to be.

What had he been thinking as he watched the two bearers fall in no-man's-land? He remembered the dust in the air slowly descending around them, as if time stretched out, giving him the chance to decide. Just one more decision in a long stream of them – life or death for this one or that – meaningless in itself, for there would always be another man dying. Yet he was given the chance to reflect, as if God was signalling that this was the moment He had been waiting for to see what Jack would do – would he go out in it? Pat, too, a few yards behind, and Dodd, lying crying in front. Even the fire shooting across the air seemed to hesitate; the sounds petered out, leaving a quietness that didn't fit in with the clouds of dust from the shells and the bodies scattered in heaps.

In a flash, he saw his lover on a hot summer's day, sitting on a deck chair in a garden with a brush fence like they have at home. Her legs were long, one folded casually over the other. He could see the beginnings of wrinkles around her mouth, lines of smiles, so that she was more beautiful than he had ever seen her. She leaned out as if to whisper secrets in his ear, her hand almost touching his. Were there others around her he could not see: children, even, or a dog? Had it been worth it, leaving her home for him?

He ran.

Georgette and her family in the *château* knew nothing of that day in Bullecourt. But this woman-child who sat on a deck chair in a garden in another place and time, her eyes sparkling with life, did she?

The path he had followed through the marshes had led him around in a full circle. The white structure of the *château* loomed behind a pond which he had not seen before, the

water still and heavy. A cloud moved across the moon and its pale reflection on the water vanished like a ghost.

Chapter 38***Le château, Sunday, 21 April 1918, late***

Later in the *château* he sat on the curve of the stairs, in a spot lit only by moonlight through a window. The awful vision had come back to him of Pat with froth curdling from his blue lips. In his mind he ran over the conversation of the day before, first one way, then another with the words slightly changed, so that this time he stood by his guns and said he needed his batman at the sports day and someone else could take the supplies; he told Pat simply, no, you cannot go to your brother. It would have been hard on the fellow, a faithful assistant ... a friend ... but what is a quick jolt to the heart, soon over, compared with the man gasping in the mill, his lungs filled with poison.

Mrs Turner. Why did he have to write to her? Perhaps if he waited a day, someone else might tell her the lie that her son – sons – had died quickly, peacefully. She could never place posies on their resting place, shed tears on a cold slab with them lying beneath. For her there would be no trace left of them that she could touch or smell, only memories. Why didn't Jack refuse his request? It was easy with the other men: no, you cannot go back to your battalion; yes, you must. How hard would it have been to say no, Pat, you cannot help your brother crumbling on the line so that at this moment his friend might be putting away a doctor's uniform, brushing a fleck of dust from its lapels, snoring soundly in his bed in the outhouse. Or dancing in the moonlight with a lovely girl. But if he had refused Pat, what else might have happened: a blast from a shell, the slightest cut from an instrument festering into an angry sore, red, then yellow and covering his arm? One could gaze upon the orange mist of dawn for a second, one's head an inch below the parapet and

misjudge, so a shot could ring out and a bullet find its mark, and it would be all over anyway.

He rested his face on his hands, but they were damp and trembling; his shoulders heaved too, until his whole body was shaking. Someone called out. Jack was back in the mill with Pat tugging at his arm and the doctor shoving him off with his elbow.

“Jack.” He was bedevilled, for the tone was tender and sweet, as if a nightingale had swept in through the open window and alighted on his arm, calling to him. He quietened. Something was calling to him from the dark, a ghostly presence, a man, a woman, enticing him with a gentle cry.

“*Chéri*,” he heard, and wraith-like arms encircled him with the fragrance of roses. He lowered his hands, saw around him a soft cloud: Georgette crouching on the stair above him, her face pale in the shadows.

He wanted to reassure her that everything was alright. That the doctor was in control and Pat was still alive and not laid out in a row with the others to be buried. She wore a nightgown with a trim of fine lace curving around her breasts, small and pointed, and he thought of tracing the lace with his fingers and burying his sodden face in the dip between – this sweet girl with a lost childhood in a village littered with corpses. He was no longer whole, just a shell washed up on the sand, abandoned. But her face was smooth, her hair streamed around her head in wavelets that glistened as she moved into a single ray of moonlight which had slinked through the window, and then his hands were on her breasts and his lips, wet and quivering, on her skin.

She was woken from her sleep by a sharp cry. One of the dogs must have injured itself and got inside. From her bedroom door, she could see a figure in a thick army coat hunched over on the stairs. His black boots, which had been so spotless at the dinner, were muddy and scratched. Jack! Georgette glanced down the landing to the last door, firmly shut and half hidden by the old divan which had been placed there for Papa to rest on. Her toes barely made a sound on the carpet. As she drew closer, she saw her lover's shoulders jolting up and down, as if he were crying. Pat was not with him.

When Private Smith brought the bad news at dinner that some Australians had been gassed in the woods, the doctor had rushed off. They all thought of the batman, who had not yet returned. Not that kind man, Élise had said, her eyes filled with tears and regret. But it was. Georgette would tell her in the morning – what was the use of waking her up now? It would not change anything for her sister.

And Jack, crumpled in a heap. Had he and Pat been that close? But of course, they were always together; they laughed like friends. They had come from the same town.

Jack was distraught.

Mon pauvre chéri.

She glanced in the direction of her mother's bedroom door, now totally obscured by the divan, but could detect no stirring apart from the soft crying in the dark corner below.

Her mother, in bed, had heard the man's tread on the stairs and the sounds of distress. Poor Élise. But she would move on, as what had it been, just a madeleine offered, a promised dance. Not a life together as she had had with Émile, and ten children. Was that the creak of a floorboard outside Georgette's room? Her daughter had pinned her hopes on that young man for almost two years. She was not yet eighteen. But a year in the war was

like ten before – tough, intense. The girl had decided on him. In a couple of days they could all be captured or dead. Solaine closed her eyes and tried to imagine that Émile was there with her. You are right, her husband whispered, his body folding into hers.

Georgette, on the stairs, hesitated. The doctor looked so wretched, dishevelled, so unlike her lover that she wondered if it could be someone else in those ruined boots, his face hidden in his hands. With each step she took towards him her heartbeat slowed, her skin cooled, until she was crouching on the stair above him, and thoughts of others in the house, even the tick of the clock on the landing, faded into nothing. She reached out to comfort him and touched the arm of his jacket, but only for a second, not because the fabric was hard and scratchy but because he pushed her aside and her hand fell away. He didn't even know she was there.

She wanted to fold him in her arms and whisper that the night would pass; he would sleep and things would be better in the morning. Hadn't her mother always done that when she felt ill or afraid? She must do that for him.

When she placed her hands on his shoulders, the doctor looked up, stricken; she had made things worse. But this time he didn't push her away and through his thick coat the warmth of his body passed into her fingertips. His eyes followed the line of her nose to her lips and then, with no warning, down her neck to her bosom and lingered, just as the officer with the pistol had stared at her the day Papa became ill, so long ago. But when the doctor's eyes lifted to hers they were soft, the darkness melted away. He bent forward and his hands cupped one breast as he kissed the bare skin around her throat.

Georgette held him back.

"Tell me," she said, forcing him to look her way. Her eyes were lit up, fiery.

Solaine, in bed, could hear the whispering, a man's voice that went on and on. She had never heard Jack talk so much, or her daughter keep so silent. It would do them both good. She must draw out of him what he needed to say.

While he spoke, his gaze fixed on the grain of oak on the stair beneath his boots. He could see the muddy trail leading up to where he sat, the dirt and froth that had travelled with him into the *château*. His eye was drawn to the banister, the curve of its path leading down to the shadows, back to the mill and that other world where gas the colour of a daisy had turned lungs to mush. As he recounted what happened at the mill an explosion sounded off, but he wasn't sure if it came from down the river or inside his head. The sloping wooden rail seemed to beckon him to follow – the six-inch drops of the steps, their sharp edges worn smooth – but she sat quietly beside him, holding him fast. She would not let him slide away. He told her the story of Bullecourt. Once, in a pause, he saw her facing the window and the black night, her face lit by stars.

When he had finished, she turned her head back to him. What must she think of him? He had run out into no-man's-land under fire, when everything they had planned and hoped for together was at stake. Her mother had dreaded exactly what he had risked: death, maiming, a future gone.

He could see Georgette's eyes glistening, but she said nothing.

Through the window she could see the stars twinkling. She thought of that cold night Papa found her outside, up the oak tree. He had not been cross, though she had worried them all, disappearing off into the snow. You are safe, he said. He had covered her with his jacket and, lifting his arm upward pointed to a group of stars twinkling in the

darkness, some shining more brightly, others fading away. The Seven Sisters. “My girls,” he said, his arm tight around her shoulders. But then Antoinette, who wrote as well as Papa, died, and Lucie too, though not the week the Germans came and put a pistol to her head; they both died of bad lungs. Only five of the girls were left now, and no Papa.

As Jack told her what had happened at Bullecourt, the sounds of the night twisted and swooped, the blasts of guns overcome by the rustle of leaves outside the window. Each word, each awful image of Jack buried in, running out through gunfire, faded in the shine of the moonlight, the warmth of his arm under her fingers, until all the bits of the past, the future, which had seemed for an instant to form a picture, were sucked out of view, disappearing into blackness, leaving her on the stairs with him telling her everything: trusting her at last. Perhaps now what had happened to her lover might leave him alone, retreat back to the past where memories belonged.

When he had finished she waited to make sure, while the moment hung before them like a teardrop about to fall. Then she took his hand, leading him up the stairs; he followed her as one might an angel, a redeemer.

Émile, in the bedroom at the end of the landing, smothered his wife in his kisses. You will always be mine, he said.

And then, Georgette thought later, long ribbons of the future had re-twined and curled between her and Jack, as a ray of moonlight from the window in his room caught their faces in a spotlight when they moved to embrace. Everything once again grew possible, the wedding in the village church, the journey over the seas to a foreign land in which birdsong was joined by a strange tongue like pigs in a trough, so far from the

language she learned at Versailles that she would never want to master it. But that wouldn't matter, with Jack always there and, later, a child.

That day in 1918, when the Red Baron crashed to the ridge and Pat was gassed in the woods, a part of Georgette was left too in the vegetables and mud of the farm, as her family, the chickens and the donkey began to transform into distant memories. In the new land, she would not have the reminders of war at every step, a gravestone with no name or a dip in a field where a battle had been, yet it would seem a faraway, desolate place, though she never told me that. She would have Jack, whose eyes would light up, always, when she walked into the room, and the child.

And for one night in Picardy, at least around the lovers, the nightingales sang and the moonbeams danced. Maybe tomorrow the war to end all wars would be over at last.

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Author's Note

The research which led to the writing of "One Sunday in Picardy" is outlined in the exegesis presented in Volume Two of this thesis. A comprehensive list of works consulted during the writing of the creative work and exegesis is provided at the end of that volume.