



PART ONE
Paper Lanterns

[Art to come]



Property of Puffin Books





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I

London Docklands, 13 June 1917

Blue skies had become a curse in London.

Helen Sandford knelt to the pavement and kissed the little girl goodbye before ushering her through the gates at the Upper North Street School, near East India Dock.

‘Your mum will be along to fetch you later, Joanie.’

Joan bit her bottom lip, looking like she wanted to bolt for cover rather than join the tumble of children by the doors.

‘Don’t look so sad. It’ll be fun. You’re making lanterns today – the teacher told me yesterday.’ Joan’s glum face brightened. ‘Be good, won’t you?’

Joan gave her a shy ‘thank you’ and ran to join her fellow infants near the door to her classroom. There was little danger of Joan making any trouble in lessons, as she would barely say boo to a goose. Helen stood for a moment, thinking that she looked so achingly vulnerable with her pink cheeks and wide blue eyes, hardly ready for the rough-and-tumble of the gritty playground in the poorest part of London. Joan only came out of her shell when Kitty, her best friend, took her hand, tugging her





to sit on a bench. Helen smiled as she saw the two, heads together, exchanging the tender secrets of a five year-old. The crown of Joan's blonde head glowed in the morning sunshine like a miraculous gold coin dropped in the concrete and brick of London's grimy East End.

'She yours, love?' asked a matronly woman with the yellowed complexion of a munitions worker who handled TNT, a regular at the school gate like her. Helen had noticed she had just sent her son off with a clip round the ear for some cheek. Rough love: standard round here.

'No. She's my landlady's – second eldest of five.' Helen turned to leave for work; the woman fell into step with her, heading for the same bus stop.

The woman smiled, displaying a set of crooked teeth. 'I should've known. You look a mite young to have one of your own. My next guess was that you were her sister.' She chuckled as her son leapfrogged another boy, pushing him over. 'Can't say I'm sorry to leave mine here each morning – they run me ragged at home. I think the teachers deserve a medal putting up with them all day.'

'That they do.' Helen knew from experience how a small house in Poplar could feel like it was bursting at the seams with young ones rattling around inside. Life felt scraped to the bone with washing drying in the communal yard, shared outhouse lavatory and water tap. The air smelt of the ever-present tang of chimney smoke and too many people living too close together. Pot plants struggled on windowsills; thin, mean cats haunted the alleys. 'I take one look and envy sardines for their roomy tins.'





The woman gave her a sharp glance. 'Not from these parts, are you, love?'

Her pulse tripped over a beat; she shouldn't have tried to be witty. Ever since she had been hounded out of a military hospital for her German blood, she had hated any enquiry into her origins. She aimed for calm unconcern. This was hardly the first time she had been asked. 'That's right.'

The woman hadn't lost interest. 'Can't place the accent though.'

Helen gestured vaguely to the north, over the rooftops and curls of smoke. 'I'm from Suffolk. A country girl.'


The woman nodded but clearly she had little concept of the rest of the country beyond the end of the Central line. 'You must think me nosey. I'm Lizzie, by the way: Lizzie Morris. My old man's on the front. I think he left for a bit of peace and quiet as we've four boys at home.'

'Pleased to meet you, Mrs Morris.' Helen had got used over her months in the East End to the openness of the people there. Though the streets and docks were crowded with people, they were a close-knit society, the majority thinking everyone else's business was theirs to know and comment on freely. It was a good thing her landlady was excellent at keeping secrets. Helen's German half from her mother's side would get her in trouble in minutes.


'Whereabouts is your husband?' Helen kept the conversation focused on the chatty Lizzie and away from the minefield of her own past.

'Not sure exactly, dearie, but he's an artilleryman, near






a place called Albert last I heard.’ That was very close to Helen’s old hospital but she gave a vague smile as if all French place-names were the same to her. ‘What about your young man?’ Lizzie nudged her in the ribs. ‘I take it that a pretty little thing like you has a suitor?’ She cackled good-humouredly at Helen’s blush. ‘Thought as much.’




Helen was not sure how to answer. It always took her by surprise when someone inferred she was pretty; her heart-shaped face, heavy long brown hair and full figure seemed the epitome of ordinary to her eyes, far from the blonde fairylike waifs that were the beauties of stage and screen. And as for suitors, her relationship with Sebastian Trewby was complicated, not something for gossip. Yet to make a fuss about her reply would only make the woman even more curious and, as meetings at the school gate were a feature of her life now, she couldn’t afford to seem mysterious. ‘Oh, he was wounded last year but has gone back in service.’




‘Eager to do his bit, eh?’ The woman looked down the street as the omnibus approached; the motor vehicle was held up behind a drayman’s cart, horses’ heads hanging low in the harness as they pulled a heavy load along. ‘Mind you, these days it seems as dangerous living here as in France. Can’t stand these fine mornings.’ She scowled at the blue sky. ‘Sittin’ ducks, we are.’

The war had taken an even uglier turn of late as the Germans had developed bomber planes capable of reaching London. With no way of defending the civilians from




the airborne menace, a new front line had opened up right on the doorstep of the government. The German High Command made no secret of the fact that its intent was to demoralize the English and force them to seek a settlement to the stalemate of the trenches. And Lizzie was right to be worried. If one of the German bombs fell on her place of work, there would be no part of London that didn't hear the explosion and a family of four boys would be left without a mother.

'I wish they could do something,' Helen said, echoing the sentiment on everyone's lips. Just because all were saying it, it did not mean it was any less heartfelt.



'If they can't work out a way of defending us, there'll be a bloody revolution in the East End, you mark my words. The Tsar went pretty quick once his people set their mind on it. We're not going to put up with it much longer.' Lizzie climbed aboard the omnibus first with a cheery good morning to the woman checking tickets, her grim words left on the pavement to linger with Helen.



When Helen got off the bus, she had to run the last few streets in order to be on time for her shift. After the disaster of being expelled from France under false accusations of stealing medical supplies, she had found anonymous employment as a machinist at the factory manufacturing blouses. All her months of sewing and mending for her glamorous older sister, Flora, at the Palace Theatre, had paid off and she was already recognized as a skilled hand at the more complicated patterns.

She ducked through the door and punched her card just as the clock struck nine.

‘Cutting it fine, Miss Ford,’ called the formidable head machinist, a woman with the bearing of a drill sergeant and less compassion.

‘Good morning, Mrs Hopper.’ *Mrs Hopper kept them on the hop* – that was what the women said about her behind her back. Helen hung her hat on a peg and stripped off her cotton gloves. Around her, six other women were already bent over their work, crouched over the machines like machine-gunners, doing their bit for the war effort on fabric rather than the fields of Flanders.

‘Finish the batch for the Red Cross, then start on the mechanics.’

‘Yes, Mrs Hopper.’ Helen picked up where she had left off at the end of her last shift. The cavernous factory that had once fashioned silk and fine linen blouses for ladies was fully occupied providing uniform shirts for women who had taken over the roles formerly done by men in many of the support services.

The working day under way, the normal chatter ebbed and flowed in the rows of women between the more intense moments of machining. Helen let the patchwork of voices roll past her; the hands knew better than to try and include her, accepting that she was reserved, not quite one of them.

‘Daylight robbery, it is: mutton, twenty-one shillings a pound, an’ that only scrag end that’s barely fit to eat! Nobody round here can afford that.’

‘Can’t believe there’s nothing the government can do to stop these raids. If it was Mayfair being targeted, they’d do something at the double.’

‘Bloody shambles, the whole thing.’

‘That Mrs Thomas won’t keep the blackout curtains closed – leaves us exposed with her house like a bloomin’ lighthouse. The police have had words with her but no good – she’s gone daft since her sons died.’

‘Six mistakes, Miss King. Undo the whole seam. You can stay late to make up. There is a war on, you know!’

Then one conversation bubbled up from the mass, making everyone else fall silent. Nelly Carpenter, a stout woman from Hoxton who sat two places over from Helen, had a voice that could gut fish. Each sentence was punctuated by the clatter of the machine or the snip-snap of scissors.

‘She was walking out with a chap called Jan Kleine.’ *Brrrrrrr*. ‘Well, we got suspicious, as you would. Laid down the law to her, we did.’ *Brrrrrrr*. ‘Finish with him or you’re out. So, to her credit, she did.’ *Snip*. ‘Couldn’t leave it there though. The boys took Herr Kleine behind the pub and taught him a lesson in the King’s English,’ *brrrrrrr*, ‘of knuckles and fists. He got the message that we don’t want Germans on our patch.’ *Snap-snap*.

‘But, Nelly, I thought you said before that your sister’s man was from Belgium?’ said her neighbour, a slight woman with the bulky name of Bernadette O’Callaghan. She shook out the blouse she was working on like a flag of surrender.

‘That’s what he *said*.’

‘Oh, I see.’

‘Sent him packing, we did.’

‘Good for you.’

Nelly chuckled. ‘They turned him away at the hospital when they heard his name.’

‘So they should.’ Bernadette rethreaded her machine. ‘Those beds are for us – too many of us, thanks to the bombs. Did you hear what happened at Folkestone? Ninety-five dead – old men, women and children. Devil take the Kaiser and roast him in the hottest fires of Hell, I say.’

‘Give him a taste of his own medicine: drop one of his bombs on him in his palace.’

‘As much as I admire your sentiments, ladies, can we have less chat and more work, please?’ interrupted Mrs Hopper.

Helen sat over her machine, chilled to the core, her fingers locked on the controls but the orders from her brain to press the pedal weren’t reaching her foot.

‘Something the matter with your machine, Miss Ford?’

‘No.’ She pushed her toes down. The machine began to eat up the fabric. ‘Did it not matter that he might’ve been Belgian? I thought we went into the war to save “plucky” Belgium?’ At least that was what the papers had claimed a few years ago.

Nelly looked up. ‘Are you talking to me?’

‘I was just asking a question. Your Mr Kleine could’ve been one of the refugees.’

‘With a name like that?’ scoffed Nelly.

‘I’m *under the impression* that is a common name in Belgium as well as Germany.’ Helen could tell her words were falling on hostile ground but she had to put down a little marker for the truth or feel ashamed for remaining silent.

‘Exactly, so he could hide among us.’

‘And I’m under the impression, Miss Ford, that you are here to work, not debate matters which are far above your understanding,’ cut in Mrs Hopper. ‘When I was eighteen, I didn’t question my elders.’

The women nodded in agreement. Helen was by far the youngest among them and her skill had gained her tolerance but few friends.

Helen could not risk sounding too sympathetic to anyone German in case her own origins were examined. ‘I’m sorry, Mrs Hopper, I was just curious.’

The overseer walked on to examine the work going on at the far end of the room. Nelly chucked a finished garment on the pile next to her chair. ‘You’re right, my girl. Could’ve been a mistake, I suppose, but better safe than sorry, eh?’ Nelly wasn’t a bad sort under normal circumstances but the bombing campaign had made all the East End virulent haters of anything Germanic.

Bernadette chuckled. ‘Good point. There’s a war on, you know!’ She parroted Mrs Hopper’s favourite saying.

Helen looked down at her perfect straight seam. ‘Yes, I do know.’



Above No. 46 Squadron base, France

Sebastian eased the joystick back to take his plane through a canyon between clouds, great white walls rearing up on a scale larger than anything the land could offer. It was like Jack and the Beanstalk: the cloudland being on giant scale compared to what lay below. He smiled with satisfaction as the aircraft responded to the least nudge of the steering column. These new Sopwith Pups were a huge improvement on the Rumpties and Hunguffins he had trained on; those crates at the flying schools in England had been already-outdated pre-war models that needed more nursing than a new-born to keep in the air. The Pup, by contrast, practically flew itself.

Tipping his wing, he looked over the side. Two other pilots from his squadron circled under him, the perspective like swimming in deep clear water and seeing fish swimming below, the bubbling clouds the river channel.

A splatter of castor oil smeared his goggles. He used the end of his scarf to wipe it away. The sun came out, ricocheting off the fuselage in spikes of light. Cheeks chilled by the breeze, lips numbed, body shaken by the vibration from the engine, Sebastian had never felt more alive or closer to death, not even on the battlefield of the Somme. In the trenches last year, he had thought the airmen looping above were like Icarus – their fall significant and poetic compared to the maggot existence of the common soldier. It had been a large factor in his decision to re-enlist as a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps





rather than resume his place in his regiment. The other had been his desire to do something when he had been stuck in misery, unable to find Helen. Now, up at five thousand feet, he knew he had been right. He was born for this. The pilots all knew they faced a short life expectancy but were buoyed by the optimism that it would be the other chap who bought it; pilots reached a state of acceptance of their fate that was pretty much religious.

So *Carpe Diem* – seize the day.

Sebastian laughed. It was a ridiculous sensation, the exhilaration of flight; he marvelled at the impossible physics that allowed him to soar at a hundred miles an hour in a craft made of little more than piano wire, wood, linen, paint, and engine. Flying a plane made travelling by express train seem dull sport. The double wings stretched out either side of him, extensions of his own limbs, shuddering slightly in the flex of the wind. The propeller in front was just a blur, invisible while rotating at top speed. Few men had been granted this godlike view on the world. Even the war, grinding away on the ground a few miles away, seemed very distant. In the trenches the shells had deafened him; up here there was no sound but the hum of the engine and the roar of the wind. He could set his nose in any direction and keep on flying if he so wished – until his fuel ran out. Freedom was absolute.

The illusion of it, at least. He was still tied to the earth by his bonds of duty and love. By happy chance he was facing England. If he carried on flying, he could cross the Channel and drop in to find Helen in an hour.



And be court-martialled for dereliction of duty.

Sebastian turned his joystick to bank to the left, putting temptation behind him. He had a job to do and, now the clouds were breaking up, he should have decent visibility to complete the mission over German lines. Now he had gained the right altitude, he had to join his flight and give protection for the two-seater craft whose observers were to photograph the lines. The enemy had to be mapped for the artillery; targets located and destroyed. No time to think about them as men – they were wiggles of fortifications in farmland; scratches of railways; veins of canals; scars of roads; puffs of anti-aircraft fire. These used to be solo missions but since the Germans gained air superiority over winter with their flying circus under Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron, the British had started sending their planes out in groups for mutual defence.

Sebastian tilted his wings and slipped into his position at the end of the left flank of planes, like the last goose in the migration. Time to fight a war.



East End of London, 13 June 1917, 10.45 a.m.

Helen took her break in the sunshine and sat on the steps outside the factory. Brick walls loomed around her; nothing grew in this space, no birds visited, no insects buzzed. It was the opposite of everything she loved. She leant back on her hands and turned her face to the light, feeling the cramp in her back unknot. She sensed rather than saw someone come and sit beside her.

‘You all right, love?’ It was Nelly.

‘Yes, thank you.’

‘I hope I didn’t upset you earlier with what I said about that German bloke.’

She had, but there was no point in admitting it. ‘I’m fine. Don’t worry about me.’

‘You’re too young to know what’s what. I expect you think the best of everyone but I’ve learned to be suspicious.’

‘I see.’

‘We know the Germans have spies here so we have to be wary of outsiders.’

Such attitudes had cost Helen her profession. She hated





the casual prejudice. 'I would've thought spies might hide better than that man you mentioned.' The remark skated on the edge of what was safe to say; this had been the very assumption made by the army doctors – that her hidden origin made her guilty.

'Maybe. But his loyalty was suspect, wasn't it?' The fact that Nelly hadn't let the subject drop suggested she wasn't entirely at ease with what she and her neighbours had done.

'Isn't it better to judge people by what they do rather than what they are?'

Nelly offered her a cigarette. Helen shook her head.

'You're an odd fish, aren't you, dear?'

'We're all odd in Suffolk.'

Nelly laughed, inspecting her chilblained fingers. 'What are you doing down here with German bombs falling on your head when you could be up there safe at home?'

Helen shrugged. 'My bit, I suppose. I've friends here, none left where I grew up.' And home wasn't always safe.

'I can't help wondering if there'll be any of us left when this war finishes.' Nelly chucked her cigarette butt on the pavement. 'Still, no rest for the wicked, eh?' With a heave on the iron banister, she got up and returned to her machine. Helen snatched a second's more peace, following the progress of a wisp of white cloud, winding like a silken Chinese dragon over the chimney-pots. Her hand clenched the silver locket she wore, a curl of hair and a photograph kept close at all times. She didn't have to open





it to see in her imagination Sebastian's poet's face, sensitive mouth and dark expressive eyes, crop of chestnut hair, and stubborn jaw gazing back at her with a hint of a smile. She had been apart from Sebastian too long. She missed him so much it hurt; it felt like a void in her chest, a pebble of compressed nothingness right under her ribs. The last time she had felt this alone was when she had run out of his family home in October, having failed to get through the wall of relatives and friends keeping their boy from the disgraced nurse. It wasn't hard to conjure up the memory of that scared girl who had ended up homeless, friendless and adrift at the railway station. She never really left Helen, no matter how many people surrounded her now.




Paddington Station, London, 22 October 1916, 7 a.m.



Helen perched on her suitcase in a corner of the station watching the country milk being unloaded from the early train, a clank of metal canisters and harried deliverymen. Soldiers in khaki milled about, some asleep on their kitbags, many still daubed with the mud of France. A couple of Tommies had approached her but she had deterred them by keeping her eyes down and her knees primly together, handbag on her lap – respectable lady rather than girl of easy virtue. Yet she couldn't sit here much longer. The porters had noticed her and very soon someone would ask her to move along.


Her problem was that she had no idea to where she






could move. She was paralysed by indecision, frantic with terror that her identity would out. She had advanced as far as Sebastian's family home before his honour guard of relatives and friends had ejected her. No one wanted a scandalous nurse anywhere near their decorated army officer. She didn't want to be near herself either. If only it were possible, she would leave her brittle shell of a body and fly somewhere much more hospitable, like a butterfly leaving behind its cocoon.

Stupid thought.



Restlessly, she smoothed the fabric of her sensible skirt. She had little money, no job, and no friends who would want to know her now. Her only relative who would welcome her, her sister Flora, was in New York, all her attention on her baby, a little boy born a year ago. Her mother was blockaded by her U-boat father who would blast Helen out of the water if she dared venture into home waters. She had no raft to cling to, no lifeboat rowing into view.



And this was all because her friend at the front, Reg Cook, had liberated a few pills from the medical cabinet to ensure he never had to face the trenches without an emergency exit, a parachute into the next life if his suffering became unbearable.

Even struggling as she was, she understood his reasons. It didn't stop her being livid; she had no idea what she would say to him if she ever saw him again. He had not considered how his action would rebound on her. News would have reached him by now and he would be sorry,



she was sure of that, but there was no way back for her even if he confessed, as the incident had brought her German mother to the attention of the authorities. She was lucky not to be interned, though it had been touch-and-go for a few minutes during that devastating interview in the matron's office. The doctors had considered it enough to pack her off to England to let the press crucify her on the front pages. Reg would be furious with himself when he discovered the chain of events his action had set running. He would want to put things right but there was precious little he could do.

Screwing her eyes shut, Helen banged her fists on her knees, squeezing tight on a knot of raw feelings – angry at Reg, at the hospital, at everyone – but there was nothing – nothing she could do. The pain reached into her numbness and wrung her out like washing through a mangle.

I have to stop or they'll lock me away as a madwoman, she thought.

Then the first glimmer of an idea came to her: Reg's family in the East End. She had their address. No one would look for her there, and his wife might welcome news from someone who had seen him recently. Going by the generosity of her spouse, Mrs Cook may well be minded to help her find work and a place to stay. It was the poorest part of London, cheap lodgings and an anonymous crowd for Helen to hide in: ideal for her needs.

A plan. A reason to keep going. Helen stood up and buttoned her coat.





‘Want some company, sweetheart?’ asked a sailor, tipping his cap to her.

‘No thank you. I’m not that sort of girl,’ she said, face fiery with embarrassment.

‘Now that is a shame.’ He grinned unapologetically before moving on to the next female prospect.

She really couldn’t stay here a moment longer. Picking up her suitcase, she headed for the Underground.

It took Helen an hour to find the right house in the tangled streets of Poplar. They clustered around the docks beyond the Tower of London, providing cramped housing for the workers who kept the port running, ships coming and going at all hours depending on the tide. The area had one foot firmly in the urban world of pavements and bricks, the other bobbing on the Thames, ruled by the natural rhythm of ebb and flow that had made this landscape long before the city arrived. When she found the right house – Number 15, Saltwell Street – she could see that the family were at home as the front door was open, children sitting on the step in the Sunday sunshine. It was a narrow two-storey property: one door, one window. You stepped immediately into the front room, went through to the kitchen and then out the back to the yard. Blink as you walked past it and you’d miss this tiny piece of London housing.

She paused by the two children, little girls of about five and seven. ‘Is your mum in?’

The eldest nodded. The younger stuck her thumb in her mouth.



‘Can I speak to her?’

The elder leaned back into the house and shouted:

‘Mummy, there’s a lady to see you!’

A baby wailed inside and Helen could hear a woman soothing it.

‘Mummy!’

‘Ask her in, Maddie. I’ll be down in a second or two,’ a woman answered from upstairs.

A trusting place, the East End, at least on sunny mornings.

Maddie got up and gestured for Helen to follow her. The front room was tidy despite the number of children Helen knew lived here from Reg’s fond tales of home. Two armchairs flanked a little fireplace. A deal table occupied most of the space, a jam jar of wild flowers on a lace doily in the centre. The table did not look as though it got much use; Helen guessed it was kept for best, like her parents’ front parlour. Just inside the door, two pairs of shoes waited. The children went bare-foot most of the year, but now autumn was under way the ones who attended school got to wear the hand-me-downs. It brought home to her how many rungs above true poverty she had always been in Suffolk. She was slipping right down the ladder now; below this was destitution.

The stairs creaked and a woman appeared on the steep treads, carrying a baby on her shoulder. She was a pretty blonde in her late thirties, eyes tired but with a cheerful face and sprightly manner. She looked an excellent match

for her indomitable husband, who had been the life and soul of his unit.

‘Can I help you?’ Mrs Cook asked, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

‘I’m sorry to bother you on a Sunday.’ Helen felt eyes studying her from the kitchen – two little faces peered round the doorway.

‘Oh, that’s no trouble, I assure you. Maddie, put on the kettle for our visitor.’

The capable eldest trotted through to the kitchen, followed by her golden-haired sister still sucking her thumb.

Helen twisted her handbag strap in her fingers. ‘My name is Helen Sandford. I met your husband in France.’

‘*Nurse Sandford?*’

Helen nodded.

‘Yes, we’ve heard all about you!’ The woman’s face broke into a genuine smile of welcome. ‘Reg has mentioned you in his letters. He knows your young man, doesn’t he? Lieutenant Trewby?’

Her young man no longer. Helen had just been ejected from his life and was still struggling to accept that this was the best thing for him. She already knew it was a disaster for herself. ‘Yes, that’s right, Mrs Cook.’

‘Do call me Elsie. I feel I already know you, thanks to Reg’s letters.’

‘Then you must call me Helen, as he does.’

‘Please, sit down. Maddie, send Joan in with the biscuit tin.’



The fair-haired girl entered with a tin cradled in her arms, trailed by two boys, puppies sniffing after a treat.

‘Our twins,’ said Elsie in explanation. ‘They’re two and a half.’ She levered the lid off the tin to reveal a small selection of plain biscuits. The boys watched her every move. ‘Please, help yourself.’

Helen hadn’t had breakfast. Feeling guilty to eat in front of the hungry twins, she took a broken one. Their eyes followed every motion of hand to mouth. Maddie tottered in, balancing a cup and saucer, the family’s best, in her hands. Only a little tea had slopped over the side.

Helen took it from her. ‘Thank you, Maddie.’

Elsie tugged her daughter to her side. ‘Well done, love. This young lady here knows your dad.’ The children all perked up at that; even the baby stirred and tugged at its mother’s hair. ‘How’s Reg?’

Last time Helen saw him, he had been desperate but by now she hoped he had a cushy job back at the hospital organizing first-aid courses; that was one of the main reasons she had kept to herself her suspicions as to his theft and shouldered the blame. She hadn’t wanted to spoil his chances of escaping the inferno of the front line. Now she saw all those who depended on his survival, she felt much better about her choice.

‘He’s well. Fully recovered from his injuries and ended up practically running the place.’

‘That’s my Reg.’

‘He is a credit to you, Elsie.’ Helen felt a smile curve her lips, her first since France, as she recalled Reg’s



bright-eyed, battered face with those prominent ears. He wouldn't win any prizes for beauty but he beat the competition hands down when it came to spirit. 'Everyone at the hospital thought him quite the best fixer in Flanders.'

Maddie re-entered with a chipped cup of tea for her mother and put it down with a triumphant air.

'Thank you, darling.'

'Shall I take the baby, Mum?' Maddie held out her arms for the youngest.

'Take her to visit Grandma Betts.' Maddie marched out, baby in arms, Joan trailing. 'My little helper, that one. Gets it from her father.'

'She's lovely. All your children are lovely. Reg never stops talking about them.'

'Oh, how we miss him!' Elsie sipped her tea, turning her thoughts to her visitor. 'So, are you on leave, Helen?'

'No. No, not quite. I was let go.' Helen blew on her drink, not meeting Elsie's gaze.

'They can't get rid of nurses! You're like gold dust.'

Helen gave an awkward shrug, caught unawares by the tears pooling in her eyes.

Elsie got up and shepherded the twins to the front door. 'Boys, go see Grandma Betts with your sisters.'

The twins gave a last hopeful look at their family biscuit tin, then toddled out the door together, two identical little ragamuffins. Elsie waited until they had gone, then put her hand on Helen's shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze.

'You're not just here to pass on love from Reg, are you?'



Helen shook her head, throat too choked to be able to speak.

‘Does whatever it is involve Reg?’

Helen nodded.

‘Is he really well or did you just say that in front of the children?’

Helen had to say something; she couldn’t let Elsie worry. ‘He’s fine, really he is. It was just some nasty business – at the hospital.’

‘What kind of nastiness?’

‘He . . . I’m not sure but I think he . . . um . . . removed some morphine capsules from the nurses’ store before he went back to the front. You have to understand – it’s hell out there and he needs to know he can help the wounded. Only the officers have them, you see – the pills, I mean – and they aren’t always around when you need them.’ She neglected to mention that it was also a sure way of ending suffering when it became unendurable; Elsie didn’t need to know that, though she might guess.

‘Oh, Reg!’ Elsie did not seem surprised to hear about her husband’s light fingers. ‘I take it they don’t exactly allow that kind of thing?’

‘No.’

‘Did he get caught? Is he in trouble?’

‘No.’ Helen took a gulp of tea.

‘So what happened?’

‘He didn’t mean it to go like this, but I . . . I got the blame. I was on duty, you see, and it looked bad.’ As much as she loved Reg, she hated what he had done to her. She



wished he were here so she could shake him, shout at him, but there was only his innocent family and she needed them.

‘But you didn’t have them – how could they say it was you?’

‘It all got rather tangled up with something else. The matron discovered my private correspondence with my mother.’ Helen gathered her courage. ‘She’s German.’ She darted a glance at Elsie, but she did not appear appalled by the admission. ‘We communicate in her language as her English is a bit shaky. They thought . . . I’m not sure what they thought, but I suppose they imagined I was working for the Kaiser, emptying bedpans with evil intent.’

‘Fools. So they kicked you out.’ Elsie nodded sagely. ‘Why didn’t Reg put in a good word for you? Take the blame? He can talk his way out of anything.’

‘He had already left.’

‘He’s back at the front?’ Elsie paled, a betraying tremor in her hands making her cup rattle.

‘I’m hopeful he won’t be there for long. A doctor had plans to use him for duties around the hospital. There’s no point Reg owning up as the real problem was my family, not the theft.’

‘That’s a parcel of news, and no mistake.’ The two young women sat drinking their tea in thoughtful silence. The sound outside of children playing made a comforting background. Helen thought of all the newspapers scat-

tered around the country declaring her guilt to all and sundry. A few would doubtless make their way here too. They added to her sense of being hunted, each paperboy a beater trying to flush her from the undergrowth.

‘Would you like me to leave?’ Helen asked when she put down her empty cup.

‘Leave?’ Elsie appeared shocked by the question. ‘Do you have somewhere to go then?’

That question brought on a further round of swallowing to suppress tears. ‘Actually, no.’

‘Then you stay here.’ Elsie said it with such certainty, like it had already been discussed and agreed. ‘My Reg got you in this fix, so his family will be the ones to get you out. It’s what he’d expect and what I want to do.’

Helen was deeply touched by Elsie’s acceptance. ‘Thank you.’ Old tear tracks crinkled on her cheeks as they dried. ‘You don’t mind me being half German?’

‘What a foolish question! You’re Reg’s friend, Helen; who your parents are is of no matter. You’ll have a home here as long as you need it.’ Elsie’s pale blue eyes were fierce as she announced this. ‘But we’d best keep it our secret. Not everyone round these parts is as fair as they might be when it comes to nationality.’

‘Who am I to be, then?’ Helen mopped her face, annoyed at her tears. She was stronger than this – she had to be – but she was so very scared.

‘My second cousin from Hereford, come to help with the children. Helen Ford. There – that’s a nice unremarkable

name. And I certainly need the help.’ Elsie smiled wryly, a little chip in her front tooth adding to her mischievous charm.

It was a huge relief to have a path laid out before her when she had felt so very recently as if she was teetering on a cliff edge. ‘Thank you, Elsie.’

‘No need to thank me, love. You helped my Reg when he needed it, so it’s only right that we do the same for you. Now, if I might be so bold, you look all in. I suggest you go and lie on my bed for a few hours, and we can discuss this afternoon what we can do to sort your situation out. We’ll squeeze you in somehow.’ Elsie crinkled her brow. ‘With the older girls, I think.’

‘That sounds like heaven. I haven’t slept well since it all happened.’

‘I’m not surprised. You’ve had a shock.’ Elsie led the way upstairs to the tiny front bedroom. A baby’s bed was made up in the lowest drawer of the chest. She smoothed the covers on the big mattress that took up the room. ‘Use my bed for the moment. Lie down and rest. It’ll all look better once you’ve had a chance to have a nap. You won’t be disturbed.’

‘I’m so grateful.’ Helen kicked off her shoes.

Elsie hovered at the door. ‘I hope you don’t mind me asking, but what did Lieutenant Trewby say to all this? Does he know – about Reg and the pills and whatnot? Reg does admire him so and would hate to lose his good opinion.’

Helen rubbed her arms, skin stippled with goose

bumps. ‘No, Sebastian doesn’t know. I never got a chance to see him. He won’t want to be associated with me – it would ruin him.’

Elsie frowned, a little crease forming between her brows. ‘Are you sure about that?’ She closed the bedroom door softly behind her.



3

Paddington Station, London, 22 October 1916, 9 a.m.

Sebastian alighted from the early train from Somerset and stepped into the confusion of rush-hour Paddington. He wished he had a bloodhound's nose. Helen had been through here only a few hours before, having taken the last train up the line, but it was unlikely she was still here. The possibilities were daunting in their variety: she could have boarded another train, walked out, caught a taxi, or taken the Underground. She was now one tiny needle in London's huge haystack. He had to narrow his options somehow.

A billow of smoke and steam gulped from the train's stack, rising to mingle with the other clouds in the arched roof. The once-brilliant iron-and-glass canopy was smeared with soot, blackened to a perpetual twilight. Pigeons hobnobbed on the platform.

'Can I help you, Lieutenant?' An elderly porter wheeled his trolley over, having taken note of Sebastian's uniform, valise and his walking stick.

'I hope so.' Sebastian reached in his pocket for the portrait of Helen he had drawn only last year. 'I'm





looking for a young lady who came through here late last night.'

The porter squinted at the picture, wild white eyebrows twitching. 'Well now, maybe I see her, maybe I don't. Can't be sure. So many people come through here, you understand.'

Sebastian pressed a shilling into the man's palm. 'Does that improve your memory?'

The coin disappeared into a pocket. 'That it does. She was sitting over by the ticket office. Looked a bit lost, to tell the truth, sir. Might still be there for all I know.'

Sebastian felt a surge of hope. 'Show me, please!'

The porter hefted his valise on to his trolley and led the way to the main concourse. Sebastian's officer's uniform gave him more respect than his injury – wounded men were all too common. Soldiers on leave moved out of his way. One touched his cap. Had they served together? Sebastian was in too much of a rush to check. His mind was consumed by the thought that Helen might still be here. He imagined catching her in his arms and scolding her for having had so little faith in him that she hadn't shared her troubles. Then he would kiss her, take her home and put right every little thing that harmed her. He had no doubts that she was innocent, so all it would take would be finding out who the real thief was and clearing her name.

The porter stopped by a patch of pavement on the far side of the station. He scratched his head, dislodging his cap. His expression told Sebastian he was disappointed



that he would not now get the generous tip for reuniting the lieutenant with his girl. 'That was where she was, sir, but she's gone.'

With his spirits in a sickening free fall from hope to hopelessness, Sebastian gave the man another shilling. 'Thank you. There are more like that if you can find anyone who saw her leave.'

'Very good, sir.' The man tapped the peak of his cap.

Sebastian stood beside his case, wondering what he should do next. He did his own surveillance, asking himself who might have been lingering long enough to see Helen. A couple of soldiers were sitting with their backs propped up on kitbags. They looked as though they had been there a while and were likely to have noticed a pretty girl.

'Excuse me.'

The men looked up from their cigarettes, saw the uniform and got to their feet with weary discipline. 'Sir?'

'Have you seen this girl at the station?' He handed over his precious drawing, feeling uncomfortable to have Helen's image passed from hand to hand like a banknote. 'The porter told me she rested a while by the wall, but I'm trying to find out what happened next. It would have been last night, or early this morning.'

'Sorry, sir, I was asleep,' said the first man.

The other one took a longer moment to study the picture. 'I think I might've seen her, sir, about two hours ago. Yes, I remember because she looked respectable, not the sort to sit waiting for customers. She turned away



a sailor who couldn't tell his bints apart. I could've told him he was sniffing around the wrong bit of skirt –' the Tommy suddenly remembered who he was talking to – 'begging your pardon, sir.'

'And did you see where she went?'

'To the Underground. I'm sure of it – I watched her, considering if I should offer to carry her case, but decided against it. She seemed the sort to want to be alone, if you know what I mean.'

Like she did not want to flirt with a fresh lad on leave. 'Thank you, private.' No money for the men, but Sebastian offered them the pick of his cigarette case instead. 'How long are you here?'

'Our train leaves at eleven, sir.'

'Would you be so kind as to watch my case while I ask at the ticket office?'

'Of course, sir.'

Sebastian limped away, leaning heavily on his stick. He had not done so much walking since he'd been carried off the battlefield, but he guessed the soldiers would know that too, experienced as they all had become in deaths and injuries. He would be thought one of the lucky ones: invalided out of service but with all his limbs and faculties intact.

Fearing he was reaching the end of his trail before it ran cold, Sebastian waited in line and then thrust the picture at the ticket seller. 'Excuse me, sir. Have you seen this lady this morning, about two hours ago?'

The clerk gave a bored glance down at the picture, but



then his eyes lit up. 'I did, Lieutenant. An early customer. Very polite.'

'Do you remember where she went?'


'She was heading east, that was all she said.' The clerk's gaze went to the long queue behind him. 'If you don't mind, sir, I have to get on.'

'Yes, thank you for your time.' Sebastian drew back the picture and stepped away from the window. His gaze fell on the newspaper seller waving the latest edition for the commuters to pluck from his fingers. Helen's name was stamped on every front page, but the girl herself had vanished. Gone east.

He took some encouragement from that. 'Gone west' was slang in the trenches for death in battle; going east sounded somehow hopeful, towards the rising sun. He would find lodgings at his club, then visit her old haunts. Helen could not literally vanish. She would have to have somewhere to live, somewhere to work. He would simply keep looking until he found her.


Over German lines, France, 13 June 1917, noon

Thoughts of a quiet morning of surveillance disappeared when Sebastian scanned the skies and spotted the V-formation heading for his flight. Three aircraft, coming from the east to attack. He and another scout peeled off from the observation mission to intercept, a third plane joining them to even up the numbers. A second V appeared just behind the first. Not so good – they had




stumbled upon a German patrol and they were currently over the enemy's lines. Bursts of Archie, as pilots called the anti-aircraft fire, rocked his Pup as the ground forces took a bead on the British encroachers. They hadn't yet found their range; Sebastian's plane was buffeted in the eddies of the explosions.

Now was not the time to remember that the average life expectancy of a pilot on the front was three weeks. Sebastian had already survived far beyond his allotment.




Still, his role was to counter-attack, not run. The photographers in the other two-seater planes had to get their intelligence back to headquarters. As the Germans came closer, they opened fire. Sebastian picked his target – the one in the middle – and dived at it head on, squeezing the trigger of his machine-gun as he approached. The Pup was equipped with the new synchronized mechanism that allowed him to shoot through the propeller, a huge tactical advantage on the old machines. His daring attack – a mad kind of 'chicken' game to see who would give way first – caused the middle plane to push his nose down and pass underneath, while the two on the outside fanned sideways and climbed, making Sebastian's Pup the filling in this particular German sandwich.




Not a good tactical position.


Taking a quick glance around, he saw that his two colleagues had taken on the second part of the patrol, leaving him with the front three. He couldn't let them get past him and catch up with the photography mission. Turning sharply, he came up behind the German trio,



approaching in the blind spot just under their tails but not too close to get caught in their slipstream. When he had one in his sights, he fired. A lucky burst of bullets passed through the fuselage and must have hit the pilot or a vital control because the plane veered to the left, losing formation. It peeled off and turned for German lines. One down.



Now he had their notice. The two triplane Fokkers wheeled around like vultures scenting a kill, their three-tiered wings making his little Pup look hopelessly outclassed. He wasn't sticking to a collision course this time, as that meant risking two streams of machine-gun fire. He climbed, pushing his plane to the upper ceiling of its endurance, all too aware that the triplanes were superior climbers. The temperature plunged. He flexed his fingers, frozen despite his layers of silk, leather and sheepskin. A quick look behind told him he hadn't shaken the pursuit. His Vickers gun needed a new drum of ammunition, but he had too much on his hands with the manoeuvring to risk the change-over. A sudden spray of wood chips near his left shoulder told him that one pilot at least had found his range.



Then his engine spluttered, coughed, spluttered once more and fell silent. Either the fuel had run out thanks to a hole in the tank or the line had been cut. Whichever the case, he was pretty much a lame duck with no engine. There was only one defence to that with two Germans on your tail. Sebastian closed the throttle and sent his plane into a tight vertical spin. It might look to the enemy

that they'd got him; the odds were they'd leave him to crash. Only a very careful opponent would follow him down this suicidal spiral. Thrown back in his seat by the g-force, Sebastian prayed his pursuers were of the careless inclination.


East End of London, 12.30 p.m.

Helen did not hear the warning. No one inside the factory did; the noise of the machines was far louder than the whistle of a policeman cycling by with a sign around his neck telling Londoners to take cover. Mrs Hopper, however, had posted a boy on the front steps and he rushed in, socks collapsed to his ankles in his hurry.


'Missus, missus, the Germans are coming!' he yelled.

The machines stopped abruptly and stools scraped on the floor as the women headed for the stairs to the basement. Helen grabbed her handbag and coat – it could be cold down there and it may be some time before they were given the all-clear. The first rumbles and thumps told them that the anti-aircraft batteries had opened up. As these were manned by half-blind rejects from the service in France, they were much mocked for their lack of success. As far as Helen knew, they had yet to bring a plane down. The most casualties they caused were from when the shells returned to earth and hit unsuspecting civilians with their shrapnel.


Helen chose a spot on the floor by the stairs and sat down, arms around her knees. In past raids, she had



proved cooler under fire than most of the women. Her time in France had hardened her to the risk of shells and bombs. She knew how to judge if one would fall close by, and so far all the sounds suggested action was a mile or so away. She had worked out the odds – she would have to be monumentally unlucky to be a target. Mind you, with her recent past, it could well happen. She hoped the women didn't realize this and treat her like Jonah, when he got cast over the side to be swallowed by a whale.



As during other raids, some of her colleagues were so distressed that they fainted before reaching the basement, making life even more difficult for those who had to cart them down to the shelter. Nelly had a few tart things to say about Bernadette's lack of backbone as she carried her friend down the stairs with the help of Mrs Hopper. Helen felt sad for them all. They just weren't prepared for warfare. Britain's island status had bred these people to expect to be immune from direct attack, and to find they were not was a shock that was still working through the populace of the south-east.



'How about a singsong?' suggested Nelly. Helen got the impression the woman would propose a knees-up in Hell if she came face to face with the Devil. Nelly didn't wait for agreement but struck up a rousing version of '*Pack up your troubles in your old kitbag and smile, smile, smile!*' Helen joined in, doing as the song said. What else could you do in the madness of some anonymous German pilot trying to kill you? There had been no time for singing at



the hospital in France when the guns were firing; being kept busy there had helped keep the fear at bay. Nelly's idea of going through all the popular tunes they knew collectively had the same distracting effect even if it was absurd.

'The boy I love is up in the gallery!' crooned Nelly, changing to a music-hall favourite.

Helen's voice stumbled over the words of this one. Her boy was up, not in the gallery, but in some new-fangled plane over France. She said a quick prayer for his safety. He had to be all right – had to be. She didn't think she could bear losing him; he was what made this life worth living.

Dust fell from the ceiling as vibrations rattled the earth. Buildings had not been constructed with this punishment in mind. Helen studied the cellar, trying to guess how well it had been built. She pushed away thoughts of being entombed as others had been as a result of aerial attack. Part of her preferred to take her chances out in the open, but the air would be buzzing with shrapnel so that was not a rational choice. She had to sit tight.

'The boy I love is up in the gallery, The boy I love is looking now at me,' Nelly belted out. 'There he is, can't you see, waving his handkerchief, As merry as a robin that sings on a tree.'

Helen clutched her locket and bent her head to her knees, finding her nerves were not as robust as she had thought. The pendant warmed in her palm, just the size of a robin's egg.



Junior Athenaeum Club, London, 31 October 1916, 6 p.m.

Sebastian stared unseeing at the sketchpad he held on his lap, pretending to be busy so no one would talk to him. He had reached the end of his strength. He had started off so full of hope; he'd even gone into a jeweller's and bought Helen a locket so he had a present to give her when he found her – a talisman with his picture in to remind her he would be on her side, no matter what. Having spent a week retracing all the places with which Helen had any connection, he had drawn a blank. The page below his pencil was empty, just like his search results. He couldn't blame her for not going back to any of the places he had visited; the reception had been universally hostile. Her old hospital, Queen Charlotte's, had wanted to distance themselves from 'the German nurse', as they called her. Her former matron had acted like Helen had purposely set out to hurt her with her lies about her provenance. Her shock wasn't fabricated: she really did feel aggrieved, and Sebastian's claim that Helen was a victim of false accusations had been brushed off. The fault was not the theft but the secrecy about Helen's real identity.

'What does that matter?' Sebastian had wanted to shout. 'She was a fine nurse and you know it!' But what was the point? The impression of betrayal had been stamped on Sister Hardwick and could not be rubbed away. Depressingly, he was unable to trace Molly Juniper, Helen's friend from training days: she was now deployed in France so would not have been able to help in any case.



Helen's old landlady in Whitechapel had been close-mouthed on the subject. The woman's surname of Glock had made her an object of suspicion, though the origin was Jewish, and she could not afford to advertise her link to the infamous nurse. Sebastian could tell Mrs Glock thought Helen a victim and he believed her when she said that she had not heard from her one-time tenant, but that was the end of the conversation, the door snapped shut in his face.

At least it hadn't been slammed, as others had been.

His last port of call was the Palace Theatre. Helen's sister Flora had been part of the chorus for a year and Helen had helped out backstage. He expected a more sympathetic audience here but got only hostile stares from the girls who knew her and flirtatious invitations from the new blood. One unbent enough to inform him that Toots Bailey, the chorus member who had been closest to Flora, had left to marry a retired general; she was living in the elderly lap of luxury somewhere in the Home Counties, just as she had always hoped. Once that gentleman passed to his Maker, there would be one very lively, wealthy widow in town.

'Thank you, ladies,' said Sebastian, bowing himself out of the dressing room, as the performance was about to start.

'Catch me after the show, handsome?' called one blonde, blowing him a kiss.

Sebastian was no longer as shy as once he had been; years in the army had cured him of that. 'A lovely offer,



miss, but one, alas, I cannot take up: I'm already spoken for.'

'If it's that Helen Sandford, then she doesn't deserve you,' grumbled another, making a moue in the mirror as she touched up her lipstick.

'I assure you that it is quite the other way round.' He closed the door, relieved to be free of the perfumed and silken atmosphere.

And now he was sitting in his club, with nothing to report, no leads for him to follow. What was left? He could walk the streets looking for her, but that was futile. Where was she? He knew she would be unlikely to go home to Suffolk, not to the hammer fists of her father and cowed mother. There would be no welcome there. So how was she surviving? She had little or no money. He felt a rush of panic as he contemplated her choices. The pencil point broke under the pressure of his hand, leaving its lead buried in the paper.

Someone took the chair opposite him. Long legs crossed, settling to stay for a while. Couldn't the man see he wanted to be left in peace? Sebastian ran his finger over the broken pencil, feeling the scratch of the ragged end on the sensitive pad of his index. One of the club waiters arrived with a tray and two glasses of brandy.

'Your drinks, sir.'

The man gestured for them to be left on the table between them.

'Will that be all?'

'Yes. Thank you.'



Sebastian looked up and met his father's kind grey eyes, his tawny hair swept back from his forehead. Long-limbed like his son, he did not fit well on most chairs, this one no exception. His hands were folded together, fingers tapping in thought. He nodded to the brandy.

'For you. It looks like you need it.'

'Thanks.' Why was he here? Come to fetch the errant son home?

'How are you?'

'Leg's much better, thank you. I've been too busy to think much about my injury and have managed well with the cane you gave me.'

'I wasn't asking about your leg, though I'm pleased to hear that.'

'Do you know what I'm doing in London?' Sebastian wondered how much the ones who had confronted Helen at the ball had told his father.

'Your Aunt Gertrude told me some nonsense about your young lady being mixed up with a theft and spying for Germany. Utter rot. I assume you hared off to London to offer her your help?'

Sebastian took a sip of the brandy, conscious of his maimed hand curled around the glass. His little finger on the left was missing thanks to his experience on the battle-field of the Somme. 'Something like that. I can't find her.'

'Well, it is only human nature that she will have wanted to vanish. Lick her wounds somewhere in private.'

'I could help her.'

'Could you? She stands accused of things she cannot



defend herself against. She probably fled to spare you the mud-slinging that has come her way.'

'I'm sure she did.'

Theodore Trewby cleared his throat. 'I'm sorry to say that Jilly Glanville and your aunt were not kind to her; neither was your grandfather's butler. I took them to task for it but they admitted they had been cruel, thinking her a traitor. You mustn't blame her for running.'

Sebastian closed his eyes. 'I don't blame Helen. I blame this blasted war.'

'What are you going to do?'

Sebastian shrugged, his throat tight with emotion. 'I've looked everywhere I know to search. She would have had no welcome anywhere; every door would have been closed to her.'

'Do you think she will contact you?'

'I fear she's being the martyr – sacrificing herself for what she thinks is my benefit – but she doesn't know me very well if she expects me to let her get away with that.' It hurt that she hadn't wanted to trust him with her pain. He had thought their relationship had gone deeper than that, to a point where she knew she could bring any trouble to him and he would help her shoulder the burden.

'You can't stay here though.'

'No.'

Theo lit a cigar, the ritual buying Sebastian time to regain control of his emotions. 'Look, Seb, I know a few useful men, former Scotland Yard detectives. I've used



them to track down a client or two who have tried to run out on their responsibilities. Why don't you employ them to search for you?'

He liked the idea of the lines of enquiry spreading from his single effort to a network. 'That's a good notion. Yes, I'll do that. They mustn't scare her away, though, if they find her.'

'Naturally. Trust me: they have more discretion than that.'

Sebastian's gloom lifted a little now he had a plan. 'I'll come back with you but I think I should warn you, I've decided I'm going to return to active duty.'

Theo looked grim but resigned. 'Can't say I'm surprised. This isn't a time when young men can sit at home.'

'I'm thinking of signing on for pilot training with the Royal Flying Corps if they'll have me. This leg will slow me down in the army.'

'I can't tempt you with a back-room position, something in Whitehall perhaps?'

Sebastian shook his head. 'We have to end this thing. It isn't going to be settled by people sitting at desks.' And, he added silently, only once peace had been declared would Helen be really safe and able to come out of hiding. Whatever the personal cost, he wanted a world where she could live openly.

Theo sighed. 'What about taking on an observer's role, doing the surveillance and photography?'

His father had been dropping hints in this direction for



some time but it was no good. Nothing in war was really safe. 'I thought about it when you mentioned it the first time, but I think I'd prefer to be the one in charge of the controls. Depending on another man's skill was what got me shot.' He took a sip of brandy. 'And besides, flying a plane sounds like a challenge I'd enjoy.'

'I can understand that. It's a glamorous profession, though it gives me nothing but more grey hairs to contemplate it. I'm proud of you for being willing to do your duty when you have an excuse not to.'

'Thank you, Pa.' Theodore Trewby always supported his sons even when he would prefer another course.

'Just make sure you do your very best to survive this insanity. The war's taken Neil – that's more than enough for your mother and me to bear.'

Throat tightening again, Sebastian remembered his older brother, lost at sea. He rubbed his neck to loosen the chokehold. 'I'll try my damndest, sir.'

They spent the rest of the hour sipping the last of the club's stock of pre-war brandy, steering clear of topics to do with the conflict that raged beyond the doors of the hushed library.