



A First
World War
Story

*Those
Measureless
Fields*

Caroline Scott

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For Dottie and Kenneth

Chapter One

Lancashire, 1928

‘It’s from a poem,’ said Laurie. His voice was just a whisper, then. It seemed to come from far inside him and Effie had to lean in close to catch his words. He asked her to bring a book.

‘*A slumber did my spirit seal,*’ she read.

‘Please, will you carry on?’

‘No motion has she now, no force;

She neither hears nor sees;

Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,

With rocks, and stones, and trees.’

Her eyes lifted from the page and met his.

‘Can you hear the world turning?’

Effie listened. She looked down at the hands in her lap – at her hand in his – and tried to hear it all rolling round. There was just the difficult crackle of his breath.

‘All I can hear is the clock.’

When she looked up again, he’d gone.

Effie chipped a saucer, tripped on the stairs and struggled with the telephone dial. The voice in the earpiece launched into civilities. A stream of words surged from the Bakelite and seemed to rush around her. She held her breath through the doctor’s enquiries and then told him it was too late.

‘The war wreaked havoc with Laurence’s heart.’ Dr Gill shook his head in the hallway an hour on. Light cut brightly through the stained-glass sunrise behind him. ‘He suffered severe physical and psychological traumas. He was lucky to have lasted as long as he did.’

‘Lucky?’ Effie pressed her lips together. Laurie’s hat was on

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the hall stand. It suddenly struck her that he would never again require it. 'Do you think that he considered himself to be lucky?'

'I do,' replied the doctor, with a certainty that implied he could measure it medically. 'I know he did. Every extra day was precious to Laurence – and he got ten years of extra days.'

'I hope you're right.'

'You'll let his loved ones know, Euphemia?'

'I will, Dr Gill. I will.'

He offered her a smile as she handed him his coat. 'Seems a shame to pass on just as the irises are coming out.'

'It does.' Laurie had liked her to cut a bunch of irises. The leaves reminded Effie of the blades of bayonets, but Laurie would have it that they were architectural. Having once visited Paris, he understood artistic arrangement. Effie watched as the doctor walked away, along the iris-lined front path.

She paused in the doorway of the parlour, where Laurie's parents were framed, she in ocelot and he in India. Who, then, were the loved ones? Effie could recall few living relatives. The Christmas card list was mostly old comrades and contracted each year. She would write letters later, though it would require the assistance of a measure of sherry. As Laurie's housekeeper, was she also permitted a measure of sadness? Standing amongst the family portraits and handed-down sherry glasses, amongst the relics of the loved and lost, Effie, for the first time, felt uncomfortable in the house she had kept. She felt the need to retreat to station, to role, to hide in her well-ordered kitchen.

As she closed her hands around a cup, she contemplated the room in which she had chosen to occupy herself for the past ten years, since Laurie had come back from Ypres gassed, and her Joe had not come back at all. The sprigged wallpaper buzzed at her in shadowed corners. Laurie's long johns loomed, ghostly from the clothes airer overhead. Two hours earlier he had gripped

at her wrist. She could still feel the force of it. In that instant he was fiercely alive. He had quoted Wordsworth at her and told her he had always loved her. And then, with all of his rhyming schemes completed, with all of his secrets spilled out, he had lain back on the pillow and closed his eyes. Effie couldn't help but wonder: had Laurie managed to keep his secrets in, had he continued to silently contain those sentiments, would his heart have held out? Fat roses on the teapot bloomed obliviously. Effie's fingers touched Laurie's overblown roses. What would become of the teapot now, the kettle and the settle and the spoons? What would become of his hat on the hall stand? What would become of her?

Reginald scratched at the back door. She let him out and looked on as he cocked his leg on the lilac. The blossom was just breaking. Bees stirred.

'It's not a day for dying,' Effie mused in the direction of the dog. She gave him a peppermint for pity's sake. Her Joe had died in the rain, which seemed more appropriate, more considerate somehow. Laurie had ascended into cloudless skies, without a thought for his dog or his irises or the havoc unleashed from his heart.

It being Saturday, there were outlets for tea and a Dundee cake in the tin. She had let Laurie arrange the almonds in decorative circles. Effie had watched him, smiling over his symmetry.

'Do I no longer warrant marzipan?' he had teased. 'Have my comestibles ceased to deserve your adornment? Is our ardour so cooled that I've no chance of icing?'

Would he have stayed for marzipan? Would a layer of almond paste have changed his fate? Could an effort with icing have lengthened his luck? Was he, at the end, still teasing?

Effie flung a teaspoon at the sink.

She walked into town, to the Café Monika. Along the edge of

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the park there were arrangements of red, white and blue pansies. The sun shone on patriotic-coloured peace.

‘No Laurence today?’ asked Mrs Harwood.

Effie sat at their usual table by the window and took her gloves off tidily.

‘Laurie is dead,’ she said. ‘His heart gave out this morning.’

Mrs Harwood made a sharp intake of breath and said, ‘You poor love.’

Effie ate curd tart. The pastry disappointed. Laurie had always said he got better at home. She recalled him, gauchely nineteen, at the counter.

Effie had started out at the Café Monika, in the back at first, on parkin, tea loaf and coconut rocks. It was more ladylike than mill work, her mother had said. She had an aptitude for sugar paste and piping. Mr Schumann, the then owner, was of Austrian extraction (though sachertorte and strudel and the story of his grandmother’s girlhood in Vienna had long since been deleted from the menu), and liked to think himself a cut above commonplace baked goods. Over the door the Monika declared itself *High-Class Confectioners and Continental Café*.

Laurie’s mother had sent him in for macaroons, soon after they had moved from Leeds. He had nice vowels and a clean handkerchief.

‘His father is in fuses and his mother is genteel,’ Elsie Buckley had nodded after Laurie. ‘He’s at university, you know.’

They had cooed approval, Effie remembered.

‘It’s a shame about his eyes.’ Mrs Harwood had smiled compassionately.

Laurie’s green-grey eyes, even then, were framed in heavy horn-rimmed spectacles. The lenses magnified Laurie’s eyes, so that he always seemed to stare. When Effie later imagined the gas, it was the colour of Laurie’s lens-exaggerated eyes.

‘Don’t you go making eyes at what you can’t afford,’ Mrs Moorcroft had twinkled behind a cup of Ceylon.

Effie hadn’t. Not like that. And besides, she was spoken for. Joe was well-scrubbed and had prospects and an upright piano. More to the point, he had asked. Joseph Young, they said, was steady. They offered it to Effie as a compliment, his steadiness. She had sometimes wished that he might be a little less steady. But he brought her soft fruit from his father’s allotment and, in return, she made him palmiers – pastry hearts joined with raspberry jam.

They had been in the Pals together; Laurie, with his grammar school education, a captain and Joe, of course, a private. They were there together at Ypres. It was a comfort to Effie that they had been there for each other.

The shop bell brought her back and brought with it Lily Holt, who knew of Laurie’s leave-taking from Dr Gill.

Mrs Holt hugged her tearily. ‘Oh Effie, what will you do now?’

‘I have no-one to cook for,’ she replied.

She bought a box of macaroons, from habit, and a sugar mouse for Reginald and would walk home through the park.

‘It was a horrible thing, the mustard gas,’ said Mrs Holt, over the menu, as Effie put on her coat.

‘It was,’ she agreed.

There were daffodils still in the municipal gardens. He had been quoting Wordsworth at them too just a week earlier. Yellow trumpets now blared Laurie’s absence. With that recalled image of him, reciting at the spring planting schemes, Effie had to take to a bench for a moment. She shut her eyes and tried to see Laurie spinning fearlessly and forever round with the rocks and stones and trees.

Effie sat in his chair in the front parlour. She had never done

so before and wasn't quite sure why she felt the need now. The velvet had worn thin on the arms. She wondered if she should maybe have noticed this before, pondered whether reupholstering might somehow have helped sustain Laurie's flagging heart. Her own twin chair faced her. They took toasted teacakes here of an evening, while she read Hardy aloud. In return for *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Laurie would tell her about Joe dying heroically. Who would cry for poor Tess now?

The mantelpiece mirror reflected the polished facets of cut glass. Effie considered whether she had perhaps been over-attentive to polishing. Had she, when their twin-chaired companionship reflected in the mirror, not seen beyond the shine? Had she been more attentive to her seeing, had she actually *looked* in the looking glass, would she have divined signs in the violet creams, the literary quotes and his praise for her good hot dinners? A vase of tulips drooped. The carpets would need cleaning if there was to be a funeral tea. She fed Reginald a macaroon and decided to look at Laurie.

When her father died they had said his expression was peaceful, that he had the appearance of being asleep. Laurie did not look asleep. He looked vacated. Dr Gill had crossed Laurie's hands over his chest, as one must do with the dead. Effie didn't like to see Laurie in the pose of a dead man. She found herself wanting to un-cross his arms, to break him out of the pose that made him so definitely dead. She touched his hand. She did not like the texture of his vacated skin.

'I am not sure what to say to you,' she said. 'I do wish you'd said something sooner to me.'

On the dressing table were flints and fossils and himself, Laurie at twenty-two, in photographic pose with his mother, whole and healthy in uniform. Effie supposed that he might have been called handsome, only there was something shy about the way his fringe fell. Could he really have been so very shy?

‘You are a fool, Euphemia,’ she told her reflection. In the mirror Effie Shaw was thirty-one, red-eyed and had no role. She saw herself framed in portrait against wisteria-pattern wallpaper that wasn’t her own. The portrait was a melancholy composition.

She angled Laurie-in-uniform next to Joe on her bedside table and looked at them, side-by-side in sepia. She transferred their soldierly poses to an imagined trench, with poetic mud and a percussion of guns. Was that really how it had been? Did Laurie have all of those secrets inside him even then? There suddenly seemed to have been so much going on behind Captain Laurence Greene’s glasses. Could it truly have been the case that he and Joe had stood side-by-side in a trench? She took off her perpetual engagement ring – an eternity of patience in opal – and placed it in-between them.

‘Why could you not have told me?’ she’d asked Laurie that morning.

‘I had my reasons. In time you’ll realise why,’ he had replied.

Effie curled in her patchwork quilt. She tried to picture Laurie being received by gentle Jesus, in a pastel-tinted afterlife, where there would always be kindness and irises and a marzipan layer. But something in Laurie’s ‘in time’ was insistent. Something in the tone of his exiting tenderness cast a strange light over her happy hereafter imaginings. Effie turned to the wall. She concentrated on the tidy rhymes of prayers to cut out the discordant questions.

Chapter Two

Effie had hoped it would be raining by the morning, but the sun slanted callously through the parted curtains. As she examined the familiar ceiling from her bed, she realised that she regarded Everdene as her home, not her place of employment.

She pulled her dressing gown around her and decided to spy on Laurie one last time. The undertaker was due at nine. It seemed wrong somehow to take him away, to take him from home and from her, from the comforts of familiarity and family heirlooms, and put him in the cold unfriendly soil.

It was not a surprise that the gas had finally got the better of Laurie. He had once shown her the white ring that circled his arm, where his wristwatch had spared his skin. 'I am shackled to the gas,' he had smiled. Certainly no amount of camphor and eucalyptus had ever let him shake off that cough. It would overcome him, his eyes would stream and he would apologise into his handkerchief. There were always a lot of handkerchiefs to launder. Effie saw the gas as a green blur around Laurie, like the glow that signifies saints in old paintings. She wondered if she would have wanted Joe back, if he'd had to have Laurie's lungs, if it were just to have ten years of his dying. She thought that perhaps she might.

Effie willed Laurie's eyes to flick open again. She willed his chest to heave, his lips to gasp, his heart to re-start and splutter him back into life. But, looking at Laurie's face, she knew he had gone. There was nothing of Laurie left. No prayers, however nicely rhymed, however intently entreated, would open Laurie's eyes now. Effie heard her own lips gasp.

Laurie's face now was not his. He'd had a kind face, an amiable face; it might not be dashing or fashionable or finely sculpted, but it was a face that found a smile easily. Without animation, without a smile, Effie was no longer certain she knew him.

He hadn't smiled much at first, though. When he had first come staggering back they had whispered him a drunk. But it was his injuries. That was all. As she had placed buttered toast before him, Effie had told Laurie that she was glad to see him returned. He had taken to calling in the café with a book.

'I've read that one,' she had said, leaning in with tea, as she spied Sergeant Troy's swordplay over Captain Greene's shoulder. 'I think Bathsheba Everdene is rather fabulous.'

'My house is called Everdene.' Then Laurie had smiled. Thus they had taken to talking Thomas Hardy.

One day he had grasped her hand and, with a startling abruptness, said: 'Miss Shaw, I need help.'

She was accustomed, by then, to the strangeness of returning soldiers, and so, calmly, quietly, she had pulled out the opposite chair.

'Captain Greene?'

He seemed to be considering his face in the bowl of his teaspoon. His spectacles glinted.

'Miss Shaw – I... as you may know, my parents are dead and I now find myself in awkward circumstances.' He had fussed with his napkin as if to illustrate the awkwardness. 'Mrs Brown feels it is time to retire, and so I must, it seems, hire a new housekeeper. Your name was mentioned to me. And, well, epic poems have been inspired by lesser subjects than your Bakewell tart.'

Effie had blushed and flustered.

'Oh heavens, have I been inappropriate?' Laurie slopped lapsang souchong.

'No, not at all.' She sought a response from the table top. 'It's just most unexpected.'

'I'm not asking you to marry me,' said Laurie, and they had laughed. She had henceforth never considered him in those terms. There had been no complicated pull in their proximity, or

at least not so that she'd noticed. They had shared a roof, a sweet tooth and a taste for pastoral romances, but propriety prescribed that their sharing end there. If there had been signs, Effie hadn't seen them.

After the undertaker had taken Laurie away, she seemed to spend a long time frozen in indecision with a duster in her hand. Effie watched her hand hesitate. It dithered between earthenware and ormolu. It wavered between porcelain and silver plate. She no longer knew what she must make it do. Eventually she sat in the front parlour and applied her hesitating hand to knitting, but realised that she was dropping stitches for dead soldiers and there was no longer any need. Effie stared at the unneeded hands in her lap.

Stuffed stoats blinked at her with glass eyes. Laurie had a weakness of anthropomorphic taxidermy dioramas. The house was full of marrying mice, stoats cheating at cards and cigar-smoking piebald rats. Effie had always worried that they could have mites, but she saw an amicable sadness in the glass eyes now. It wouldn't surprise her if Laurie's funereal arrangements stipulated that he himself must be stuffed. She wound the clockwork canary. It warbled through something by Strauss before seizing in a mechanical wheeze.

For lunch she ate the last of Laurie's potted shrimps and took a bottle of his stout. He had sat across the table from her, two days earlier, and helped with the shelling. They had talked about the café going up for sale and he had encouraged her with the cayenne.

'I do like a nice potted shrimp,' she said to Laurie's absence across the table. 'And I find I'm not averse to the stout. I may take to drink now.'

It was then that she had seen it. Her eye, through the open pantry door, fixed on the alien object. Quite certain that it hadn't been there earlier, Effie looked curiously down at Reginald and

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then, accusingly, at the bottle of stout. It wasn't, in fairness, a pot of gold or a unicorn, but it was sufficiently out-of-place that it might well have been the work of fairies. It was a brown Manila envelope and it was propped against the jar of glacé cherries. The chair scraped back loudly as Effie stood.

It was addressed in his handwriting, that much was familiar. The shapes that his letters formed, however, were strange.

Miss Euphemia Shaw
Hotel Univers
Ypres, Belgium

Having never visited, nor having any intention of visiting Belgium, Miss Euphemia Shaw stared at the cryptic envelope. Ought she to open it? Did he mean her to open it? Could Laurie possibly have been conducting a continental correspondence with another Miss Shaw? She shook her head at the possibility and took the envelope in her hands. A book slid onto the counter. It was bound in slightly battered green cardboard. *Laurence Greene's Green Diary*, he had inked, in a youthful, though identifiable hand.

Fortified with a mouthful of stout, Effie opened the cover. Inside she found Laurie being a sentimental shepherd. He had copied a poem onto the first page. *Come live with me and be my love*, curled Laurie's adolescent letters, *and we will all the pleasures prove*.

And I will make thee beds of roses
And a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle.

She blushing turned the page on his pastoral fantasies. The

chapters beyond were crowded. His words seemed to be cramped within the page. Her flicking eye also noted the deleted words. He crossed through and re-selected sentences, as if it mattered to him to get it right, to be precise, to tell the truth. There were sketches too, swarmed around with script, and prints in spilled ink. Effie touched poor Laurie's long-ago fingerprints. It felt like stretching across a gulf.

A week earlier she had caught those same fingers dipping in the jar of glacé cherries. She had smacked the back of his hand and told him he'd spoil his supper.

'Oh, indulge me,' he had said, leaning back against the counter. 'I'm thinking about telling you a secret.' There had been an odd expression on his face as he said this last. For an instant he didn't quite seem like himself. She had chased him out of the pantry with a broom.

Was this, then, Laurie's book of secrets? On the first page of the diary it was March 1915. As she read the first line, she saw him put the pencil pensively to his tongue, as so inclined at the start of a sentence. *It begins with sportsmanship and rules*, his pencil commenced. *We are sent to the seaside to learn to be soldiers...*

Effie stared at her well-stocked shelves, at the orderly labelled lines of jams and pickles and chutneys. Had she made Laurie adequately happy with her bottling and baking? Had her curing and preserving been enough? She looked at the jars of crystallised fruit and thought them more beautiful than gemstones. She looked at her hands that had cooked and laundered and scoured and sewn and shooed him away. She looked out towards his unoccupied chair at the kitchen table.

Effie sank down onto the pantry tiles. She didn't quite recognise the sound that came from her own mouth.

Chapter Three

Morecambe, March 1915

A cry came up from the bay. Laurence ran to the railings.

‘Is it sinking?’

The wagon that was collecting up the firing targets appeared to have got stuck in the wet sand. Laurence could see the driver waving his arms. The men had abandoned their game of football and were heading down the beach to assist.

‘Pull it from the front. Don’t get behind it.’ He shouted but the wind seemed to take his voice away.

After some commotion the wheels lurched forward and the driver’s arms were now applauding. The men gave a cheer and began to walk back towards the scuffed-up area of sand that was presently serving as the field of play. Their feet made meandering patterns up the beach.

‘They call it the Naples of the North, you know,’ said Laurence. ‘I saw it on a poster.’ They continued their stroll along the promenade. An ice-cream cart was jangling out something appropriately Italianate. Three waitresses were sharing a bench and a bag of chips.

‘The Neapolitan likenesses are slightly lost on me. They also call it Bradford-by-the-Sea, I believe. But this is agreeable, isn’t it?’ Alexander Allerton leaned on the balustrade and touched his hat to the girls on the bench. ‘Somewhat bracing but certainly agreeable.’

Laurence watched as seagulls bent on the wind. He could hear the waitresses laughing behind. ‘I recall that you used exactly those same terms to describe our Mrs Johnson.’

‘I can put up with the Rupert Brooke recitations in return for the steamed puddings and the way that she spills out of that corset.’ Allerton flicked his cigarette end down onto the sand. ‘Definite bit of luck there, eh? A most fortuitous billeting. I may

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beguile my way to second helpings.'

Laurence couldn't recall Allerton being a beguiler at school. He remembered a boy who liked books about pirates and treasure maps. Allerton's future, even then, had been all mapped out in the family law firm. Laurence wondered at what stage the Turkish cigarettes, the moustache and the monocle had arrived. There was something rather deliberate, Laurence thought, about this collection of facial furnishings. It was as if Allerton had decided to take on a part. He recently looked rather like he had decided to take on the part of a blackguard in a play.

'I take it that you mean to beguile your way to somewhat more than just the odd extra bacon rasher?'

'The good woman is intent on keeping up morale. If she wishes to boost mine, I wouldn't be so cruel as to frustrate her patriotic efforts.'

'She makes excellent custard,' Laurence conceded.

Allerton rolled his eyes.

Fitton kicked the ball out and it bounced against the sea wall.

'What's the score?' Laurence shouted down.

'Seven-four. But they've got Arthur Midgely. He had a trial for Oldham.'

'They've rather more enthusiasm for football than they have for drill,' Allerton observed.

'Is that a scrum?' asked Laurence. They watched Fitton run back.

'No, it's a scrap.'

'See, the fighting spirit of the troops *is* excellent. Only I'm not sure that they really ought to be fighting each other.'

The men had spent the morning practising an attack with broomsticks. Major Bramhope, looking on as they pointed, jabbed and parried, had queried the vigour of their offensive spirit. He had given them a lecture about Agincourt in the afternoon, illustrated with photographs from his walking holidays

through the Pas-de-Calais. '*Where are our uniforms? Far, far away,*' the men had sung as they were marched back to billets. '*When will our rifles come? P'haps, p'haps some day.*' School children skipped alongside.

'Fitton is Young's brother-in-law, isn't he?' Allerton asked. 'Have I got it right?'

'Almost. Imminently. Young is engaged to Euphemia Shaw. Fitton is married to her sister, Grace.'

'Of course.'

Allerton seemed to smirk. Laurence wasn't sure whether he had asked the question as a provocation.

'Goodness, isn't it complicated?' The provocative one went on. 'They really ought to have given us some sort of diagram. I feel conspicuously lacking in cousins-of-cousins and soon-to-be siblings.'

'My Uncle Herbert is being recalled. Mother says that Auntie Cissy is in a fluster about it.'

'*We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.*'

'Uncle Herbert has got gout. It makes him terribly short tempered. I think that, if I were Auntie Cissy, I might be glad to have him out of the house.'

'*And gentlemen in England now a-bed shall think themselves accursed they were not here.*' Allerton's fist made actorly emphases on the railings. He turned towards Laurence and laughed.

'Rushton is talking of organising a performance of *Henry V*. He wants to hire the Alhambra. Do I take it that you'll be auditioning?'

'What? God, no. There are amenable girls available for waltzing; why would I want to spend my evenings thee-ing and thou-ing?'

'Brooker has put his name down to play Katherine.'

'Quite.'

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Laurence looked out across the bay. The far-off figures of the cocklers doubled in reflection. He was painting a series of wet-skied watercolours. Morecambe Bay was oyster grey, umbers and rose and a shifting liquid landscape.

‘Full time.’ Allerton nodded towards the sands. The men were coming back up the beach. Laurence waved towards them.

‘Seven-five,’ Fitton shouted.

The sea was taking back the trenches that they’d dug that morning. Laurence shut his eyes into the wind. He could hear the lines of bunting straining above. There was something about this saline wind that made him feel intensely alive.

‘Alfie, you can’t shoot me, you bugger. You’re already dead.’

Laurence opened his eyes. A gang of children were playing Red Indians around the bathing machines. They whooped, sniped and gleefully scalped one another.

‘Dancing,’ said Allerton.

They walked up towards the Winter Gardens. Allerton was whistling *Wine, Women and Song*. He waltzed an invisible partner up the promenade.

‘I’ve just signed up for French evening classes,’ said Laurence. ‘Did I tell you? I need to polish up my French verbs.’

Allerton held the door for a girl in sage-green satin and bowed with theatrical gallantry.

‘As far as I’m concerned, French grammar can remain firmly in the past tense,’ he said. ‘I don’t intend to be parted from Morecambe.’

Chapter Four

Lancashire, 1928

Effie handed her sister a tin of cake. ‘Genoa cake, with glacé cherries,’ she said. ‘I have no-one to bake for now. I am a housekeeper with no-one to keep house for. I am as vacated as Laurie.’

Her sister gave her a humouring hug.

Grace still lived in the house in which they had grown up. Comparison with Everdene was not complimentary. Number 14 Jubilee Street was full of steam and the green sharpness of detergent; Grace took in washing and spewed out babies. Effie wondered how she could bear to with Frank, who drank most of his wages and offered no compensatory kindness. Frank Fitton had come back from the war, but he had come back a bastard. Sometimes Effie wished he had not come back at all. ‘He needs to let off steam,’ Grace repeated with measured patience. Effie thought that Frank looked like a boiler about to blow. She tried to imagine him as that young man in the diary, looking brightly up from a wind-blown beach. She found that she couldn’t place Frank’s face in the picture.

Effie was never sure that she liked Edward being here, in the midst of all of the steam and Frank’s swearing and strangers’ smalls. Edward remained on the sideboard, where he had been on the day that their mother was taken away – Edward in his sweet celluloid smile and Sunday tie, draped in mourning crepe. He was their younger brother, lost on the Somme. It had put an end to their mother’s sanity. Margaret Shaw wore a curl of her son’s mid-brown hair in her locket. It looked like a comma. ‘It should have been a full stop,’ Effie had once said to Grace. They called it a state of ‘mental derangement’. Effie adjusted Edward’s black ribbons. Either side of the framed photograph were a whalebone corset and a jar of fish paste. She vowed that she

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wouldn't let Laurie be so untidily memorialised.

Effie seated herself at the kitchen table while Grace shifted piles of folded whites away. The table top was stained with sauce bottle rings.

'Mind out.'

Grace straightened clean newspaper over the breakfast crumbs and they passed the teapot between them. A baby squalled in a bedroom above, children thundered on the stairs. Effie didn't understand why her sister stayed here, how she could make do with just making do, with frugality and Frank, with hands that smelled of carbolic, a stained table top and a teapot that poured so unsatisfactorily.

'It's too hot in here.'

They took chairs out into the back yard and sat between the lines of flapping bed sheets.

'Like sails,' said Effie. 'All at sea.'

Grace lit a cigarette. 'So what happens now?' She blew smoke at a forget-me-not blue sky.

'The funeral is set for Friday, at Saint James'. I'd started baking for a tea, but Laurie had pre-booked the Apollo – not knowing if the Monika would still be functioning for a function.'

'It was considerate of Laurence to spare you the effort,' said Grace, pulling a strand of tobacco from the corner of her mouth.

'If will be a finger buffet. I would rather have had the effort.'

Grace put her cup down on the flags. 'Have they told you when you'll have to be out of the house?'

'The solicitor told me not to fret about it until after the funeral. I'm not permitted to fret until Friday. He told me to keep my fretting on ice. Only I don't seem to be able to.'

She had spent the previous evening studying one of Laurie's family photographs. A collection of Greenes and Gatesgarths were arranged either side of an embarrassed-looking bride. Effie's finger had moved over maiden aunts and

southern-counties cousins. Which one of them did her polished mirrors belong to now? Whose reflection would they next present? Who would inherit her stainless table top, her tidy range and her well-stocked pantry? Who now owned the stuffed stoats, Mrs Greene in ocelot and her narrow attic bed? Who had Laurie left *her* to?

‘You do know that you might not be able to stay there, don’t you? You know that you might have to move on, don’t you, Effie?’

‘Of course,’ Effie nodded at her tea. She knew it, though she didn’t enjoy the knowing. There were bluebells on the teacup that she gripped and contemplated. The teacups had once been her grandmother’s. Her mother’s mother had been in service and rather too generous with her own services. Effie knew very little about her maternal grandmother, other than her commitment to service and the pattern of her china. When she imagined the woman who had chosen the bluebell teacups she saw flashes of ankles on attic stairs and a smile that stepped back into alcoves. Perhaps, Effie considered, she had been a little too conservative in her own commitment. She thought about Alexander Allerton, the aforesaid solicitor, smirking in Morecambe at the mention of soon-to-be sisters-in-law. Did that smirk equate to some assumption of impropriety? She put down the too-hot tea.

‘I do worry what will become of poor Reginald.’

‘I worry what will become of poor bleeding me,’ said Frank from the doorway. He wiped grease from his hands on a grey cloth.

‘Frank,’ acknowledged Effie.

‘You can’t come mopesing back here now that your fancy man is finally gone, you know.’

‘Don’t speak ill of the dead.’ Grace flicked cigarette ash in the direction of her husband.

‘I’d never consider seeking your charity,’ said Effie, not

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liking the ‘fancy man’ or the tapping toe of ‘finally’. Frank believed Effie to be above her station. She had heard it said once, second hand. Effie wasn’t really certain of her appointed station, which perhaps explained why she wasn’t clear as to when she had over-shot it. She did know, though, that she could never come back to Jubilee Street.

‘Well, you may take my *Gazette* with you for your studies,’ said Frank. ‘You’ll find Situations Vacant on page sixteen.’

‘Frank, don’t be so ruddy rude,’ said Grace. ‘Effie brought us a cake.’

‘And she’ll keep on arriving with cakes when her wages stop? I have enough mouths to feed.’

Effie wanted to advise him that the mouths might be minimised if he could keep it in his trousers, but she finished her tea instead.

‘Your husband is uncouth,’ she whispered to Grace as she left.

‘Your sister is unhinged,’ pronounced Frank on the close of the door. ‘And I’ll not make houseroom for Laurence Greene’s leftovers.’

Chapter Five

It was agreed that Reverend Brierley did a fine service. There were telegraphed testimonials from top-brass, a nicely-enunciated poem and a vigorous rendition of *Jerusalem*. It was as green and pleasant as a funeral could be and the goodly show of medals compensated for the small number of family members.

It had felt odd to hear her name listed amongst the bereaved; Effie wasn't certain it was entirely right. She tried to remember Joe's memorial service, at which she did have the right to mourn, at which it was correct that she should cry, but could recall only fragments and a confusion of feelings. There were white roses on Laurie's coffin. She thought of his tea service and blinked away tears.

Afterwards, they moved on to the Café Apollo. Effie had always considered the Apollo to be a second-best establishment, but she conceded the effort made in serviettes and table centrepieces. The trays of savouries were emptying rapidly. She worried whether sufficient effort had been applied to the provision of sandwiches. Albert McGrath told her, between potted-beef triangles, about his planned cycling tour of The Lakes. She asked him what it felt like to be gassed.

'There was a gas rattle,' he said, 'like at the football. Laurence spent four weeks under a propped-up sheet. He shouldn't have survived at all. He cheated ten years from death.'

There was a snow globe somewhere in the house – a long-ago Morecambe souvenir. Laurie had shaken it for her once and shown her how it flurried over the pier and promenade. Suddenly Effie wanted to put a glass dome over Laurie and keep him there in 1915 with his watercolours and amateur dramatics. She didn't want what had happened next to happen, for it all to turn to gas and ghastliness and him being under a propped-up sheet. The voice in the diary was unmistakably his; this faraway, ink-evoked

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voice was the one that twinned with her own across the table top. Hearing it again, having got him back, she didn't want to let him go. She stared at Albert McGrath's black armband.

'It made your brass buttons go all green, you know,' said Albert.

Mr Allerton, who had done the nice enunciation, and who would now execute the not-so-nice legalities, cornered her by the aspidistra. She was expecting it, but did not want it.

'Miss Shaw, would it be convenient if I were to escort you to my office afterwards?'

'Of course', said Effie, her hand extending towards a passing tray of sherry glasses.

They walked along the edge of the park together and made safe observations on the change of seasons. Effie looked sideways at Alexander Allerton. It was a curious sensation, she found, to be intimate with the foibles of a stranger, his boyhood reading matter and the lengths that he would go to for an extra bacon rasher. She wasn't certain, what with the smirk and all, that she liked the version of Alexander Allerton that she had found in the diary, but Laurie had always called him a 'good egg'.

He pulled out a seat for her and pushed his glasses up his nose. The office smelled of leather and liquorice.

'You are no doubt wondering, Miss Shaw,' he began with inscrutable expression, 'as to what is to become of you and Everdene.'

Though unable to determinate this question or statement, Effie offered an affirmative response. 'I have, indeed, wondered, Mr Allerton.'

He smiled with a shuffle of papers. The precision of his diction made her nervous. 'Well, you must wonder no more. Or, rather, you may be permitted to wonder but with the reassurance

that your circumstances are secured.'

Accepting a proffered humbug from Mr Allerton's bonbonnière, Effie sucked on the meaning of this sentence. 'I am sorry. I'm not certain that I follow. Does that mean that I am to be retained?' She hesitated to hope.

'Exceedingly.' There was something mischievous now in Mr Allerton's demeanour. Effie felt excluded from a game. 'Your future employment is secure, on condition that you carry out certain instructions.'

'The carpets?' she queried over-keenly. 'I know that I'm behind with cleaning the carpets.'

'The carpets, dear girl, I suspect can wait.' Mr Allerton creaked back in his chair. For a second Effie's thoughts flicked to a storybook image of the Big Bad Wolf. 'Laurence left certain instructions for you. Specific instructions. If you carry them out to the letter – and I underline that word for you,' he waved a letter opener appropriately, 'you need not fret for your employment prospects.'

With a glint of an eye he flourished a key – and, from a desk drawer, presented a box. 'This, Miss Shaw, is your future.' Mr Allerton pushed the box across the desk. His fingernails, Effie noted, could have done with some attention.

It was a red satin box, and one that she recognised as having contained Christmas confectionary. She wasn't sure that she wanted to open it under Mr Allerton's lupine gaze, but, in the circumstances, she felt obliged to lift the lid.

She spied, in the white-lined interior, an envelope, bearing her name in Laurie's hand, and a jar of crystallised violets wrapped up in a five-pound note. *For the journey*, pronounced the attached luggage label.

'Like the Owl and the Pussy-Cat,' said Effie.

'They sailed away, for a year and a day...' Mr Allerton sang.

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She took the letter back to the kitchen table and braced herself with a bottle of porter. Conjured with a waft of the pen, Laurie sat opposite her. He smiled.

I'm being a bother, aren't I? I really do hate to be a bother.

'If I didn't have you to bother about, I don't know what I'd do,' said Effie to the letter. She slid off her string of pearls as she read. Laurie had once told her that pearls were made of mermaids' tears. She turned the link through her fingers and felt a brief glimmering of sympathy for inconsolable fishfolk.

Everything is going to be fine, you know. It will all come up roses. But there's something that you have to do for me first, Effie. Something that you have to do for yourself.

She nodded and contemplated what the something might be.

You often asked me about Joseph. You said that you wanted to put flowers on his grave. I, for my reasons, discouraged you. You are probably too generous to have ever noticed. I didn't want you to look for Joseph. But now I think that perhaps you ought. I think that perhaps it is time. I have dithered over this. I have altogether been undone by dithering.

Effie took a swig of stout. 'Why now?'

There are things that you should know, things that it will hurt to learn. But, well, what use is dishonest experience? I'm with Mr Nietzsche on this one: I firmly believe that what doesn't kill us makes us stronger.

Effie imagined Laurie pausing after this nod to Mr Nietzsche, taking off his glasses and rubbing his eyes. Laurie looked exposed when not viewed through a lens. He didn't look as if experience had made him strong.

To that end, you will find tickets that will take you to Ypres in this envelope, and, from there, on to Paris. I mean to show you sights. I have made financial arrangement for you, Effie, so you must not skimp. A letter awaits you in the Hotel Univers in Ypres and I trust that you will have already discovered the reading

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*material that I left you. It is my guide to Belgium, as it were.
(Perhaps it might be best saved for Belgium?) Oh, and do have
the Charlotte Russe. It is famed.*

Effie gasped.

*P.S. I loved you from the moment you first handed over my
change.*

Effie cried.

Chapter Six

Morecambe, April 1915

They were there as Laurence rounded the corner onto Regent Road. He took a step back. It was their mirror images that he saw first; the Young cousins were standing in front of the windows of a gentleman's outfitters. They turned to take in their newly uniformed reflections.

'Well, I've seen some sights!'

'This season's colour is just so soldier.' Charlie Young made a mannequin pose.

'I could do with a few more pips on my shoulder.'

'Aye, I hear that they award them for running away. I'll refuse to take an order from you, you know.'

'Then I shall have you shot for mutiny. I mean to rise to general.' Joseph Young saluted flamboyantly at his own reflection.

'Balls to that.'

'Insubordinate illiterate, I've marked your card.'

Laurence cut through towards the Clarendon. Allerton appeared from behind a newspaper headline. The front page was full of the Dardanelles. It still felt like someone else's war. With the latest news from Gallipoli, Laurence was glad for it to remain so.

'I'm not sure that they're any smarter in khaki. We do look a bit of a motley lot.'

'Speak for yourself,' said Allerton and smiled at the star on his shoulder. 'The chappie on the door actually bowed at me. And I swear that I've been given a better measure.'

'It does somewhat crystallise it, though, doesn't it? I mean, it's going to happen now, isn't it? We're property of the War Office.'

‘And all who sail in her.’ Allerton raised his glass.

‘But I keep looking down at my lapels and asking myself why. What qualifies me to wear them? How am I equipped for this? Aren’t you asking yourself that? Why, just because I can decline a Latin noun and understand the rules of rugby better than football, am I assumed to know how to lead men into that?’ Laurence nodded at the headlines.

‘Fritz will be scarpering back to Berlin when he gets wind of our subjunctives and our pointy balls.’

‘Really, though? Are you comfortable with it?’

Allerton shrugged. ‘We have to make the best of it, don’t we? You’ll be fine.’

‘I think that I’d rather be repeatedly kicked by a scrum-half whilst being made to recite Catullus.’

‘I’d keep that peccadillo private if I were you, Lieutenant Greene.’

Laurence made sign language at the waiter. The bar piano was playing a song about the inconsistent ardour of a girl from Paris; the next-table clatter of dominoes detracted somewhat from the Gallic lamentations.

‘Shall I go for heroic or haughty?’ asked Allerton, exhibiting attitudes. He leaned across to see. Laurence had begun drawing him in caricature in his notebook.

‘The haughty pose is less histrionic.’

Allerton had an amused mouth, Laurence thought, as he curled its line onto paper. He looked as if he was constantly savouring some private prank. There was something about his mouth that made Allerton look rather lewd. Possibly, Laurence considered, it was on account of the amount of blue jokes that issued from it.

‘Can I ask you a question, Alex?’

‘Oh dear. Not another peccadillo, is it?’

‘Well...’

‘Heavens.’ Allerton folded the Dardanelles away. He tapped

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the end of his cigarette on the table. ‘Go on, then. Fire away, old man. Though don’t necessarily expect to receive a useful answer.’

‘Have you ever wished to dislike someone?’

‘*Wished* to dislike someone? Doesn’t disliking tend to be instinctive?’ Allerton sat back with the cigarette as he considered. ‘It’s one of those things that comes from the gut, isn’t it? Not normally something that requires mental application. Oh. Let me guess: would the someone perhaps be the fiancé of a certain purveyor of pastries?’

Laurence had confided in Allerton, some weeks earlier, on the matter of innocent eyes and peony lips – and had immediately realised that to have done so was an error. Elbows now made angles at him and every item of confectionary had become a matter of mirth. He was starting to develop a dread of teashops.

‘The men call them Old Young and Younger Young, you know,’ he offered as a diversion. ‘For differentiation’s sake.’

‘I’m realising that it could be worse. My cousin has just been sent to a Welsh regiment. He’s got a dozen Joneses, an octet of Evans and a score of utterly unpronounceables.’ Allerton took a mouthful of his drink. ‘It’s Joseph, isn’t it, the elder? Are you struggling with the disliking, then?’

‘Of course. He’s appallingly personable. How can you dislike someone who collects seashells and knows all of the words to *Ragtime Cowboy Joe*?’

‘Quite easily, I would have thought. If you’re collecting flaws, I have seen him sat outside the red light.’

‘Exactly. He’s always *outside*. It’s Charlie Young that’s inside. The elder doesn’t appear to share the younger’s penchant for ladies who sell their affections by the hour.’

‘Would you have it otherwise?’

‘I don’t know. That’s just it. I suppose that I’m glad for *her* sake, but, by the same motive, there’s part of me that wishes him

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flawed.’ Laurence nodded thanks to the waiter as he delivered his pink gin. ‘I am a brute, aren’t I?’

‘I can think of another word for it,’ said Allerton.

Chapter Seven

Lancashire, 1928

‘I shall have to have a new hat,’ Effie mused, whilst practising with a Frenchified assembly of flaky pastry. She dusted crumbs from the cover of the diary. She thought, as she did so, of their faces turning in the shop window. She also thought about Laurie, struggling to drum up dislike over his pink gin. ‘I can’t see Joe without a new hat,’ she told Mrs Harwood.

Grace was late and Mrs Harwood was hovering. ‘I hear that Captain Greene has left you well provided for. I am sure that you can stretch to a new hat.’

Effie licked icing from her fingers. ‘I may venture an asymmetric brim.’

‘But are you sure that it’s safe?’ frowned Mrs Harwood.

‘An asymmetric brim?’

‘No, travelling to the Continent on your own. It just sounds like a rather perilous venture.’

‘I have never been beyond Bridlington,’ said Effie. ‘It’s about time that I got brave. And besides, I’m with Joe and Laurie.’

‘Exactly,’ said Mrs Harwood.

Grace entered in a flurry of apology and warm air. ‘I couldn’t get anyone to mind the baby.’

‘There are too many babies,’ pronounced Effie. ‘Does Frank mean to repopulate Lancashire singlehandedly?’

‘There are too many old maids,’ returned Grace.

Effie dismissed this with a flourish of her napkin. ‘So, have you heard? I’m off to see Joe.’

‘Have I heard? You’re the talk of town. Why couldn’t Laurence have had the nouse to put a ring on your finger?’

‘It’s not like that. It was never like that.’

‘You two weren’t carrying on, then?’