

Murder at Zero Hour

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Chapter 1

Everyone at the hospital was very kind, but the guard at my door was a constant reminder that I was still considered a criminal. In my condition, the military police weren't expecting me to actually run away, but it was a matter of regulation to keep a close eye on someone charged of striking a superior officer. From what I could tell, this place was a nobleman's house that had been requisitioned by the army. The wardroom that I had all to myself was brightly lit, and through the ornate leaded glass, I could see the well-kept lawn. Since I was two stories up, I had no thoughts of escaping that way.

Mind you, I've heard some terrible stories about the conditions of these army hospitals, but as an officer I found the place clean enough, and it appeared to be professionally run. Again it was the case of the British and their damned class system. My soldiers would have been kept in abhorrent conditions, to the point where many refused medical care unless they no longer had a choice in the matter. My boys had their own home remedies for most of the common afflictions of the trenches.

Before I had even a chance to settle in, the military police marched into my room and began asking all the obvious questions. There were two nondescript Red-Caps doing the questioning while a third hung back to watch. He was a tall major who had the look of an old copper – the blasé face that had seen it all. I'm not sure how such work marks a man, but it was there nonetheless – glassy eyes, a worn face and a sloppy uniform that would make any drill sergeant faint. But still the eyes would glitter with curiosity, and the head would minutely jerk up when I would say something he found interesting. When the questioners were done with their interview, they packed up and left without even giving me a proper goodbye.

The major then approached the bed and I gave him a salute out of common courtesy. A closer look of the gentleman revealed nicotine-stained fingers, a badly

done shaving job and hair graying at the temples. He was a right mess. I wondered how he had received such a rank.

“Lieutenant Grant,” he started off saying, “I’m glad to see you have made yourself comfortable here.”

“It’s not too bad,” I admitted. “But I haven’t tasted the food yet.”

He didn’t even crack a smile. Instead, he went on sternly and said, “My name is Major Edwin Radford and I have been given the very special job of looking after you.”

I couldn’t do anything but shoot him a grin.

He ignored my leer and continued on, “You see, we have quite the quandary with what to do with you. By all rights you shouldn’t even be here. It should have been a quick trial and then off to be executed by a firing squad. That’s what we do for so-called gentlemen like you. But even the British Army has its humanitarian impulses and they want to see you stand unsupported before that firing squad. Whether you know it or not, you bought yourself some time with that wounded leg of yours. Now why don’t you tell me what really happened.”

“What I told your men was the truth,” I protested, but not too strongly. I had no reason to think he would believe me. Anyways, I had my dignity.

He then cocked an eyebrow in disbelief and said, “On the face of it, the story you told us seems rather implausible. If you had some real evidence, then I would be willing to pursue it further. Come now, tell me the truth. It may be the only chance you have of saving yourself.”

I let out a chuckle and said, “Let me ask you a question, Major.”

“Go ahead, Lieutenant.”

“How long have you been a copper?”

The major winced. He then took off his cap and rubbed his hand against his thinning hair. “Is it that obvious? I was on the police force for sixteen years until I was asked to join up.”

“Sir, I’ve been around and you have that look of someone who has worked a thankless job. And a major no less? That means you must have been ranked rather high as a policeman.”

“I can assure you, Lieutenant, that I am well-qualified for my job. I was a Chief Inspector for the city of Brighton. I have seen many of an investigation in my time. I’ve also seen plenty of criminals and you don’t seem to fit the mold, but they do come in all types.”

“Well then, Major Chief Inspector,” I said sharply, “I hope you will take the time to dig a little deeper into this case since I can assure you that I am telling the truth. I hope it is not below your rank to give an American cousin a little help.”

His face turned a bright shade of red and his eyebrows rose in surprise. I could see his hands shaking with anger. He spat out, “Any claims of being an American citizen were lost when you signed up with the British Army. Your citizenship with said country will certainly not buy you any sympathy with me.”

I leaned lazily back on my pillows and said, “I wish to speak to the American consul. I want to be sure that my rights are being fully protected. One cannot give up their citizenship as easily as you say.”

He replied gruffly, “I can assure you, laddie, that you rights are being observed to the full extent of the military law. I’ll admit that the only reason I have been

assigned to look into this was because you are an American. The Home Office," he used the words with reverence, "wants to be assured that no questions will arise of your guilt. It is important that we keep the United States on our side in this war. There would be senseless cries of injustice from your press unless the case against you is iron tight from the get-go. That's why I'm here, my laddie." With those words he snapped his cap back on and strode angrily out of the room.

"Thank you, Major," I shouted at his retreating back. He pretended not to hear and went on his way without a further word. With a smile at my own rudeness, I thought I just had made yet another enemy, so I felt it was high time that I had a fag. Someone had thoughtfully left my cigarette case and trench lighter on the bedside table. I lit up a smoke and took a puff. It was a damned shame that I couldn't get any Lucky Strikes on this side of the pond, but still, the chaps at Dunhill didn't make a bad cigarette.

I was about done smoking and thinking about this-and-that when a nurse burst into my room without even knocking. She was a petite, little thing, with auburn hair kept tight under her hat. Her face had that pale skin that only British girls seem to have, but any potential beauty was certainly marred by those tight, pursed lips. She was wearing the standard-issue nurse uniform, which looked like a nun's habit more than anything else.

"I'm Nurse Pennington," she said stiffly, "and I'm here to look after you." Her accent was clipped and I could detect a hint of posh there. Mind you, I'm no expert on the labyrinth of dialects that make up the English caste system. But I've heard enough officers to recognize aristocracy. They spoke in certain tones of command that were unmistakable.

"I don't need looking after," I said rudely. "And I certainly don't need a live-in jail-keeper."

She ignored me and said, "I'm usually working the wards on this floor, but you're considered a special case. Major Radford specifically asked for someone to stay with you." She sat down at the chair next to my bed and made herself comfortable. "I do have some other duties, but you are to be my main subject of interest."

I said, "Miss Pennington, right now I just wish to get some rest." I turned my face away from her and tried to fall asleep. It was tougher than I thought with someone watching you, but it had been a long day and sleep soon carried me away. I hadn't had a good rest in weeks. Even considering the circumstances, I still managed to sleep for quite some time. I had the odd dream here and there – the usual remembrances of battles past, and the soldiers that had passed on. The grim type of dreams that I imagine all soldiers are haunted by.

I awoke in a sweat. I opened my eyes, only to find that the blasted Pennington woman still there. She was hovering over me and feeling my forehead with a cool hand. She hadn't noticed yet that I was awake, and I saw at that moment that her face had lost that sour look. I realized then she was quite beautiful with large dark eyes looking ever-so concerned for my well-being.

"Why, hello there," I said in a friendly manner.

She jumped back and the old look returned to her face once again. She said hastily, "You surprised me, Lieutenant. I'm afraid you are running a bad fever. I'll

have to have the doctor in to make sure your leg hasn't taken a bad turn with an infection."

My leg did hurt badly, but I only shook my head. "Never mind that - tell me miss, what is your story?"

She frowned. "My story?" she replied innocently. Those eyes really were beautiful or else I had been in the trenches for far too long.

"That accent of yours. How did a girl like you end up working at a hospital out here in the middle of a war?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," she replied and quickly looked away to fiddle with the clipboard at the side table.

"Are you the daughter of a duke or something?"

"If you must know," she breathed at last, "My father happens to be Lord Pennington."

I reached over to my cigarette case and fished one out. I offered one to her but she merely shook her head. I lit it and said, "Lord Pennington? I've never heard of him."

She waved my smoke irritably away and said, "That's hardly surprising. We just have a small bit of land near Hallam Fields. Any money or prestige we once had was lost to the ages."

"I see," I said, even though I didn't. What did I know of the aristocracy? "Well still, a daughter of a Lord. How did you come to be here in France?"

"These are rather personal questions," she said.

"I know," I admitted, "but I'm afraid I have little to do at the moment and only a dozen bullets to look forward to. Let's make a bargain - you answer my questions and I'll answer any that you have. We have to spend a day or two here until they decide my fate. We might as well make the best of it."

Doubt crossed her eyes, but in the end she relented and said, "Very well, Lieutenant, I will help you pass the time. I left my home to help out in this war as best as I could."

"Before you continue, there is no reason for us to be so formal. My name is William Grant, but my friends call me Will."

She smiled and said, "My name is Ellen. I prefer to call you William, if you don't mind. Will seems too personal."

I shrugged. "Please continue with your story, Ellen," I said graciously.

"Very well, William," she said. "As I was saying, when the war broke out and every able-bodied man was mobilizing, I felt left out. I wanted to join in on the great adventure against the Germans. On a whim, I decided to take up nursing. I'm afraid my father is rather conservative and didn't think it was a proper profession for a young lady."

"Part of the older generation?" I offered.

"Quite," she agreed. A warm smile passed her lips and once again I was taken by her beauty. "Of course I wasn't about to listen to him, so I took what little money I had and went straight to London. I signed up for nursing school, and they took me on. I hate to admit that my father's name may have helped, but it was the only chance I had of getting in. There were plenty of other girls in line and having a titled father certainly opened a few doors."

"That is quite understandable," I said.

"I rented a small room, but I'm afraid I've spent my entire life without a clear understanding of money. I never had to work or make a budget. I never realized how expensive everyday life was, and before I knew it, I was flat broke. I didn't have enough to pay the landlord and knew I would have to return home in shame. Instead, I ended up writing to my mother, and she sent me enough funds to see me through. It wasn't a lot, but it was enough to get by."

"I'm surprised she helped you out," I commented.

Ellen made a face and replied, "Mother always had a bit of a rebellious streak in her. She worked in a flower shop before she met father, so she understands real life better than I ever could. I'm sure he gave her his blessing for sending the money, since he never tried to have me traced and returned home."

"Your life reads like a heroine in one of those dime-store adventure books. What happened after nursing school?"

"I'm afraid it hasn't been all that exciting. Once my class of girls was graduated, we were divided up and most of us were sent overseas. Ever since, I've been stuck in this hospital looking after hundreds of officers. Cleaning out bedpans and nursing the sick is not quite the glamorous life I was expecting. It is miserable place to be at times, and I've seen more than enough men die."

"I can't imagine," was all that I could say.

She then said, "Anyways, the heroine of a book would have been involved with a dashing young lieutenant and broken up a spy ring. Those types of things don't happen in real life."

"Probably not," I agreed. My hurt leg suddenly gave a painful twinge and I shifted my weight to be more comfortable. The movement caused my leg to flare up yet again with a burst of white-hot pain. I involuntarily grunted.

"Does your leg hurt that badly?" she asked with sudden concern.

"It's okay," I lied. I didn't want to give her the satisfaction of giving me any help, but in the end I didn't have much choice.

"Instead of spending all this time talking to you, I should have gotten the doctor to see to that leg of yours." Ellen stood up and rushed out of the room.

As she left, I couldn't help but watch those retreating slim ankles. As I said before, this nurse was quite the pretty girl. I normally don't go for women in uniform, but in this case I was willing to make an exception.

Before I knew it, she was back with an old doddering doctor trailing behind. I wondered where they dug up this specimen from - he looked ancient and I half-expected him to pull out some leeches from a jar to bleed me. But he seemed competent enough as he took my pulse and finally pulled back the blanket to examine my leg. He then removed the encrusted bandages to get to the wound. It was a mess with caked blood and enough gore to turn any man's stomach. But I noticed Ellen didn't shirk, but carefully followed the doctor's mumbling instructions.

"I'm afraid this wound is rather serious," the doctor finally said to me. "You're lucky that no major arteries were punctured. You would have bled to death in just a few minutes."

"Maybe that would have been for the better," I commented dryly.

"That is of no concern of mine, I just treat the wounded. Some infection is starting to take place. I'll have the nurse here clean the wound and change the

bandage. The orderlies out on the field do such a messy job. With any luck, you may survive your wound. Perhaps you would like some opium pills to take the pain away, Lieutenant?”

“Perhaps not,” I replied coldly.

“If you say so,” the doctor replied absently.

I didn't really want the effects of the opium since I was rather enjoying my time with this nurse. And I may not have much time left on this earth so why would I want to spend it in a drug-induced haze? Anyways, I've had to give opium pellets to the dying and I didn't want to think down those lines myself.

The doctor left and Ellen began to cut away the rest of the bandages. She worked efficiently with the hands of long practice. Soon the old wrappings were cleared away, and she then placed a clean white towel underneath my wounded leg. A liberal amount of alcohol was then poured over the bloody mess. I gritted my teeth as the pain shot down the length of my body. It seemed like an eternity before it receded enough where I could unclench my jaw.

“Are you alright?” she asked as she began gently probing the wound with some fiendish device.

“Never better,” I lied as I watched her work. Soon she had my leg wrapped up again, and I would honestly say she did a competent job.

After the debris had been cleared away, she sat back down on the chair next to my bed. She shook her head as I reached for my cigarette case again. “Do you always smoke so much, William? It's a filthy habit.”

“I don't think I'll have the time to break the habit,” I said as I lit up. The smoke felt good as it traveled through my lungs. I leaned wearily against the pillows.

Ellen said, “Now that I've told you everything about me, what is your story? There have been so many rumors about you that I don't know what to believe.”

“The rumors are probably true enough. But it's a long story,” I said as I flicked a smattering of ashes onto the floor.

“You said yourself that we have plenty of time. Anyways, I've never met an American before. Tell me everything from the beginning.”

So I did.

Chapter 2

I will attempt to keep the stories of my childhood short, but the following facts may explain my future temperament and actions. My father, Paul Grant, was a pastor for a small church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Though he was never a popular minister, he was certainly respected in the community. By all accounts he was a gentle man and was getting on in years when he was invited to England to be a visiting professor of theology at Cambridge. It was there that he met his wife-to-be.

Upon his arrival in England, he rented a room at a nearby home where the landlord had an unmarried daughter named Edith. She was considered an old maid at the ripe old age of twenty-seven, and it was to some surprise that she

started to show an interest in my father. One thing led to another, and they ended up getting married before his year at Cambridge was through.

I never knew if their marriage was a loveless one or not, since to my young eyes they never seemed romantically inclined towards each other. But there must have been something initially there since after they returned to America, my mother was pregnant. It must have come to a surprise to the both of them. I imagine he wanted someone to look after him in his coming years of retirement. Instead, he was busy playing father. From her point of view, she was escaping a meaningless life in Cambridge. Her parents had kept her busy about the house, and this may have been her only way of escaping the drudgery.

My childhood years seemed to be just like everyone else's – the usual fun and games with a few run-ins here and there. To tell the truth, my father was never that close to me, but more like the distant Victorian father. On the other hand, my mother kept close watch on me and filled my ears with stories of the old country. Those stories definitely had an effect on me. Growing up, I imagined England as my lost home. I had many fantasies of returning there to battle dragons and fight alongside King Arthur.

As my father got older, his theological views became more radical. This certainly didn't suit the conservative church congregation that he preached at, so we were eventually forced to move from the city. My mother took it in stride, but as the years passed by, we ended up moving from town to town with a smaller congregation at each stop. My father could only stay in one place for a while before he would have to find yet another church. This was rarely by his own will, for as I said, his views were often out of step from the majority. This eventually caused some grief with my mother, but she pretended to take it well. She was the source of the family strength, and my father never had cause to abuse her trust. About the only time I remember her getting angry was when we were forced to leave a newly bought oven behind. She was a good cook and she hated to think of that wonderful contraption in the hands of another woman.

When I was fourteen, we ended up in Olney, Illinois. It was a small town with one church, a schoolhouse, and only a handful of inhabitants. But still, it was paradise to a lad like me. The dilapidated farmhouse my father bought had a small stream in the back which provided countless hours of entertainment. Moving about as much as we did, made me somewhat of a recluse, and I really didn't need the company of others to be happy. But still, I managed to start a friendship with a local boy named Adam. We enjoyed hunting small game with our rifles, and we spent plenty of time exploring the countryside on our bicycles.

Even with all our moving, school was easy. I found myself excelling at math. The other boys in school were farmer's sons, and most of them wanted nothing to do with the son of a pastor. But bullies are in every town and even though I was taller than the most, one of them tried to pick a fight with me after school. He was a bull-necked son-of-a-gun who was always causing trouble of some sort. His friends had gathered about, and he began to taunt me. By the time I struck out at him, my face was flushed with anger. I whipped him easy. No one there ever tried to start a fight with me again. I'll admit now that I was a bit lonely with just my one friend, but I wasn't about to offer any of my friendship to those uncouth youths.

I was quite happy at Olney until one school day a note arrived for the teacher. I was notified to go home at that instant. It seems that my father had gone down to the basement to retrieve some canned goods and when he did not answer my mother's call, she went down to investigate. He was there, sprawled on the floor unable to speak. The doctor was sent for, and a stroke was the diagnosis.

That stroke changed everything. We were given enough charity to get by, but the town still needed a new pastor until my father got better. He never did get better even though my mother spent months patiently nursing him. One evening, my dad slipped away. It was only ten days after my fifteenth birthday. At the time I didn't feel that much grief, but was proud that I was now the man of the house. I expected to work to keep my mother looked after.

In the end, things didn't work out that way. My mother wrote to my father's brother Samuel. I didn't even know that my uncle even existed since my father had never even mentioned his name. In the end, we ended up moving to Chicago to be with him. I can tell you it was a shock to move to such a big city. And it was something else seeing those high buildings that seemingly touched the sky. My uncle's house was located on a little cul-de-sac in Garfield Park. It was a small place since my uncle was a frugal bachelor. But still, it was well-appointed and had more than enough room for my mother and me. I really don't know what prompted my uncle to help us, but perhaps it was because he was a good man at heart. He had never married and worked long hours as a supervisor at the Griffin Wheel Factory where they made parts for Pullman railroad cars. He was an important man there and had more than enough money to support us.

At first my uncle Samuel seemed so stern and unapproachable, but then one day he took me with to his job. I never saw anything like it in my life. The casting of the metal was fascinating to watch as the iron forges poured out red-hot molten metal. Afterwards, the parts were cleaned and assembled. My uncle listened patiently to all of my questions and answered the best he could. He had a wealth of knowledge and seemed to know everything there was to know. My questions seemed to please him, and after that trip, he started to take an active interest in me. Not only did he see that I went to the best school in town, but I also had a private tutor to hone my math and science skills.

I owe that man plenty, for he treated me like his own son and was kind to my mother too. By the time I graduated from high school, I had a small group of friends with similar interests in math and engineering. I felt at ease with myself and gladly took up the challenge of the University of Illinois. At nights I worked at the factory, checking wheel tolerances and learning the trade of mechanical engineering.

I had little free time for myself. While my other friends were out dating, I was hitting the books and working all the hours I could. I didn't want to feel obligated to anyone, not even my uncle Samuel, so I decided then that I was going to be a self-made man.

I graduated from the university in 1912 and was immediately given a promotion at the Griffin Wheel Factory. There I toiled at my drafting table with several other engineers. Not exciting work, but the pay was excellent. I continued to live with my uncle and mother until I could find more favorable living circumstances. Not that I minded living with them, but I felt it would be best to soon strike off on my own. I

craved independence and admit I was looking for some type of adventure. I began missing the feeling of freedom I had had when I was a younger. The open fields and the hidden paths of the countryside called me like a siren.

In late June of 1914, Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated by a Serbian nationalist named Gavrilo Princip. No one at the time would have guessed that his actions would lead to war. Little did we know that Europe was just a house of cards waiting for the slightest nudge to make it topple. Of course the Austrians protested and sent their impossible demands to the Serbs. Meanwhile, the Serbs had the support of Russia, while the Austrians were counting on the Germans to help them. The Germans had their own plans and by August declared war on France and Russia. As the Kaiser advanced his army towards Paris, they swept into neutral Belgium, forcing the British to join the side of the Allies.

America mostly looked at these proceedings across the ocean with distaste. It didn't make any sense to us, and the stories of German atrocities were scarcely believed. We wanted nothing to do with this war and anyways, the general feeling was it would be over soon enough. I read with interest the German march on Paris, and how they were stopped by the French and British armies. With the brave actions of Sir John French, the British Expeditionary forces stopped the German army cold and forced them to dig in for a protracted fight. My heart cried out for the British losses since I never lost my love for my adopted homeland. My mother was in tears when I read her the news stories from England, and she worried about the families she knew. My own hatred for the Kaiser and his warmongering generals grew and grew with each passing day. I began to obsess over the war and wanted to help to put an end to it all.

Fall turned into winter, and there was still no end in sight. America went on its own way, and the people did their best to ignore the war over there. It made for good newspaper headlines but really had little impact on their daily lives. Sure, there were some shortages of imported goods, but in a country as rich as America this didn't hurt anyone but the most affluent.

I still remember a conversation that I had with my uncle where he explained his feelings on the war. We had been talking after supper and discussing the general European situation. I was heady with the need to help the British people, but he only made me angrier by shaking his head like he was lecturing a child.

"America is a nation of immigrants," he said. "We left Europe to rid ourselves of the wars that plagued that continent. Why should we intervene and help the British or the French? Or for that matter the Russian Czar?"

"They're fighting for freedom," I said proudly. I could feel my temper rising even though I never had much reason to argue with my uncle before.

"Freedom?" my uncle chuckled. "Britain and France have colonies all over the world, and they keep them rich by exploiting the less fortunate. The Russians are even worse with an economy built on slave labor. They are all fighting to keep themselves in power. The Germans would like to get their hands on those resources. Now you have to agree that is a foolish thing to be involved with."

I admit that my uncle was a bit of a socialist in his kinder moods. "But look at the atrocities the Germans have committed," I replied testily.

“Propaganda is a tool both sides use,” he said judiciously. “I’m sure the British have their own number of incidents they won’t bother reporting to their press. That is, if there is any freedom of the press left over there.”

I knew it was no use arguing with my uncle any further, so I gave up at that point. Even the sinking of Lusitania did not budge him from his views on the war. But it certainly made up my mind. For some months I had grown dissatisfied with my boring job and was thinking of leaving Chicago to go and fight against the Germans. The drowning of those innocent victims on that helpless ship was the final straw. If I could join the British Army, then I would have the adventure I craved.

I went ahead and made my plans in secret. The next day, after work, I went to the bank and withdrew the several hundred dollars I had saved over the years. The bank teller gave me an odd look, for I was well-known for depositing my substantial leftover earnings. After checking the train schedules, I then spent the night packing a small leather suitcase and writing a rather sentimental letter to my mother. I won’t go in the details of my message, except it really was written with the true love a son has for his mother. I had never been parted from her before and I feared she would be most upset by my leaving. But she was in good stead with my uncle, and she had no fears of the future. I wondered how my uncle would handle the news and thought he would probably wash his hands of me.

Early the next morning, I left before anyone else was up. It was my habit to leave early for work, so I did not expect them to be suspicious of my absence. I knew I wouldn’t be missed until that evening and by that time, I would be far away.

As usual, the train station was busy with morning travelers. I bought a ticket for a sleeper car to New York City. It was more expensive to travel this way, but I wanted the privacy to fully appreciate my little adventure. I had plenty of money tucked away in my wallet, and I wanted to thoroughly enjoy myself. The train pulled out in time and I felt a rush of excitement as my journey started. At this point, I’ll admit I had some misgivings, but they were quickly overcome as I watched the scenery blur by as the train picked up speed. We went past the Indiana steel mills and were soon eating up the miles of Ohio. The May weather was beautiful, and the smell of spring was in the air. The new leaves were green, and it only added to the sensation of being free from all responsibility.

I took my lunch and dinner in the dining car, watching my fellow travelers with great interest. It wasn’t long before evening came, and I was lying in my bed listening to the rails underneath. I fell asleep to the gentle movement of the passenger cars swaying back and forth.

I woke up to the sound of the porters calling out our upcoming destination and gathering luggage. New York was only an hour away. After excitedly changing my clothes, I greedily watched out the window as we drew into the city limits. I knew New York was a big place, but even I was surprised by the large number of people and buildings. The train chuffed into the station and stopped in a gush of steam. I gripped my leather suitcase and jumped down to the platform. Though I was used to city life, the amount of sheer humanity in Grand Central Station overwhelmed me at first.

A man suddenly went sprawling against me. As I helped to pick him up, he apologized profusely. He was a rat-faced little man with suspicious eyes. He quickly tipped his dilapidated hat in thanks and disappeared into the teeming crowd.

I shrugged it off, continued on and fought my way to the 42nd Street exit. It was teeming with people of all walks of life, and I managed to catch a cab to the Waldorf hotel. I was living high on the hog, but the experience of spending money so wantonly was quite enjoyable. I never had the inclination to spend so frivolously, and it felt good to enjoy the best things in life.

When we reached the hotel, I stepped down from the taxi and the cabbie handed my suitcase over. I reached for my wallet to pay the fare and found it was missing. I had been robbed.

At this point I didn't show any panic, even though I could feel my heart beating hard against my chest. I still had some change in my pocket which was just enough to pay for my fare. I handed over the money to the cabbie and felt bad that I couldn't give the poor fellow a decent tip. I knew right away that my wallet had been stolen at the Grand Central Station by that rat-faced man. Now it was clear that it had been no accident. I had been the victim of a professional pickpocket looking for easy pickings. I must have looked naïve enough for him to take the chance. There was no reason to summon the police, since by now I couldn't even clearly remember the thief's face. Even if the police investigated, it would be a long time before I would see that money again. There I was, stranded in New York City, with not even enough money for a flophouse.

I had been planning that afternoon to go down to the passenger ship offices in order to book a second class cabin to England. I could have waited a few days for the ship to leave, spending my time taking in the sights of New York City. Now I had to think fast and find another way overseas. I was too proud to wire my uncle for help, so instead, I started heading towards the direction of the waterfront. Perhaps I could steal aboard a ship or find work on a steamer.

After asking for directions, I took a long walk towards the offices of several shipping lines. I found a city teeming with different languages and men of the sort I had never seen before. Chicago was large, but I had to admit it did not approach the majesty of New York City. I only wished I had more time for seeing it before I made my journey across the ocean.

I found the White Star Lines and checked the schedules posted outside. I found that a ship called the HMS ADRIATIC was leaving that very night for a seven day trip to Liverpool. After noting down the wharf it was berthed at, I started towards the docks. It was some time and a few wrong turns before I finally made it to the wharf. The sea had a distinctly fishy smell, not at all what I expected from my readings as a boy. I wrinkled my nose as I looked down the line of docked ships.

Still carrying my suitcase, which seemed heavier than when I left the train station, I found the ADRIATIC. She was a big two funnel ship – much bigger than I expected. There was a flurry of activity around it. Luggage was being loaded, and there was a line of passengers moving up the gangplank where their tickets were being checked. A separate gangplank was being used by the crew, and some sailor was guarding the entrance against possible stowaways. I couldn't see any way on

the ship unless I could bluff my way through the lines of passengers. Surely visitors would be on board to say their last goodbyes.

I wandered up and down the dock, looking for any other way to gain access into the ship. I stopped and considered climbing up the mooring lines, but feared I had neither the strength nor the courage to do so. Anyways, I could have been spotted and that would be the end of that. I decided then to walk straight on board and take a chance I wouldn't be questioned due to my fine clothes. It was an odd shot, but at this point I couldn't think of any other way onboard.

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't notice the man standing next to me until he tugged on my sleeve. I took a step back in surprise and saw an older gentleman who had a stoop. He wore a grimy coverall and a grease-stained flat cap popular with the working class. His hands were well-worn with work and blackened with coal dust. He said something to me, but I couldn't make out what it was.

He saw my confusion and slowly repeated the words again, "She's a fine ship," was what I finally heard. Mind you, I've only heard my mother's cultured British accent, and back then I couldn't easily recognize the distortions of the Cockney.

"Yes, she is," I commented amiably enough. I continued staring at the ship wistfully.

"Do you have friends on board or are you waiting for someone?" As he spoke, his words slowly became more understandable and I didn't need to strain my ears as much. His accent had a pleasant rolling lilt that I found enjoyable to listen to - little did I know the wide variety of accents I was about to encounter in the future.

I said cautiously, "I'm looking for a way to get to England so I can join the army over there, but I'm afraid my money was stolen when I got here to New York."

"Stolen?" he asked kindly. "Well, you are dressed like a gentleman if I do say so myself. Why don't you head on over to the bank and get some more money?"

I shook my head. "I'm not that much of a gentleman. I'm a stranger here and don't expect my uncle back in Chicago would like to know where I am going."

"Ah, I see - you're a runaway. I did the same thing myself when I was a boy. But I was a wee younger than you are. Tell me, can you do some hard work?"

"What are you suggesting?"

"You see, I'm on the stoking crew of the ADRIATIC. I must admit that I'm getting on in years. This is supposed to be my last trip across. I can't do the work I once did, but if you help me out, I'll get you onboard."

This was definitely a stroke of luck. I asked cautiously, "If I could inquire, what exactly are your duties?"

"I shovel coal," he said proudly. "And then I shovel some more until they tell me to stop shoveling. We have to keep boilers going to keep the steam up if the ship wants to go anywhere."

I was familiar with the operation of steam since we used various steam-powered machines at our shop to lathe and turn the wheels as they were being manufactured. We used an enormous amount of coal to keep the boilers going. I've watched the men laboring to keep the furnaces going. It was grueling work, and only the most unskilled were put into that job. "It's hard work," I said uneasily.

"Aye, it is at that. But at least it is honest work. Anyways, it will build you up for the army."

I hesitated only a moment before saying, "I'll take your offer. My name is William Grant." I offered my hand.

He reached out a calloused hand and we shook. "My name is Isaac Mills," he said with a grin. "It is a pleasure to meet you. Now we must hurry and get on board before we are left behind."

With those words, Isaac hurried up the crew's gangplank with me in tow and nodded to the man standing guard. The man was a big burly brute, but he merely stared at me before letting us pass. My new friend then led me to an iron wrought stairway which we took down. We descended further into the deeper levels of the ship, each step echoing against the metal walls. After an interminable distance, we arrived at the bottom of the stairs.

We walked awhile longer on a suspended catwalk, my head ducking past a maze of pipes. I was in the bowels of the ship, and the hum of the engines was growing louder with each step. The great boilers that ran the propellers loomed ahead – they were massive. I could only whistle in appreciation as I looked up at them through the dim carbon lights.

"She's a good ship," Isaac said proudly. "She can do up to eighteen knots if we put our back into it."

I didn't know enough about ships to comment intelligently so I merely nodded. "Is it safe to be down here?" I asked. I was feeling claustrophobic with the iron weight of the ship above me. If this ship was to sink, this was clearly the most dangerous place to be. How much time did the stokers in the Lusitania have to get to the top? It wasn't a pleasant thought.

He laughed and said, "You'll get used to the feeling soon enough."

We went past the boilers and I could hear the scrape of the shovel against iron. A knot of men were laboring in front of the open furnace door, shoveling in masses of coal. Coal was piled up everywhere on the bottom of the deck. I watched them work until the mighty door of the furnace shut with a clang. I wondered again what kind of situation I had gotten myself into.

"Hello gents," Isaac called out to his fellow workers.

When they saw me, they came over. Their faces were streaked black with coal, and in the gloom I could barely make out their features. They looked much like devils working over the furnaces of hell.

"This here is William," my friend said, pointing at me. "He needs some help."

"Hello everyone," I mumbled. Toothy smiles flashed through their soot-stained faces. I shook hands with everyone and cringed at the thought of the future of the fine clothes I was wearing. This was going to be some dirty work.

"This Yank wants to go and fight the Hun," Isaac added. This brought some further words of encouragement from the assembled men. They now seemed quite keen to help me out.

"Now, son," one of the men warned, "Keep your head down and don't pay attention to anyone. The lieutenant in charge here wouldn't recognize any of us in broad daylight, so I'm sure he will just ignore you if you stay quiet enough."

"I can handle that," I replied since at this point I had nothing to lose. A shovel was then placed into my hands, and I took off my jacket to help with the shoveling. It was harder work than I imagined. The men sang some songs to pass the time. At that time I couldn't figure out the unfamiliar words, so I just hummed

along as I scooped coal into the open furnaces. Isaac stood to the side without working and offered me words of encouragement. He soon told me the ship was about to make steam and leave the confines of the harbor.

Suddenly, I could feel movement under my feet. Within a few minutes, the ship began to sway and roll violently. Even living in Chicago near Lake Michigan, I admit I have had little experience with boats. While I fought to keep my footing, I noticed the other workers glancing towards me with a keen interest. Fighting the urge to sit down and rest, I kept on working even though I felt sick to my stomach. As long as I kept concentrating at the task at hand, I could keep my last meal down.

“How are you feeling?” Isaac asked as he slapped me hard on the back. My stomach gurgled uncomfortably. My last meal seemed like a long time ago, but something was bound to come up if the rolling of the ship did not cease.

“Fine,” I gulped. “Tell me, does the ship always move in such a fashion?”

He laughed and said, “I can tell you haven’t been to sea before. We’ve just left the safety of the harbor and entered into the sea proper. Honestly, this is nothing yet. I’ve been in some serious blows where all you can do is hold on to the deck and pray you will live to see the next day.”

“I see,” I said weakly and continued shoveling at the coal in front of me one careful scoop at a time.

“It’s about suppertime,” he added.

My stomach churned violently at the idea of eating. “I’m really not hungry right now,” I said weakly.

“Aye, you do look a little green,” he admitted. “That’s too bad. I was about to have the cook fry up some nice eggs and bacon.”

The thought of greasy food was enough to make me drop on my knees, deep in nausea. Before I knew it, I was suddenly vomiting on the floor. I could hear the laughter of the men. This was their idea of a joke and before I grew angry, I checked myself. I needed to stay on board for only a few more days and there was no reason to make enemies out of these humble men. So I blurted out between heaves, “Tell the cook that I won’t require his services as I have no need to eat right now.”

They laughed at my response.

Isaac helped me up after my heaving ceased. “I’m afraid we like to have our little jokes,” he said kindly. “Don’t take it too personally.”

“It always happens with the new man,” I said weakly. My mouth was sour with the taste of vomit and the deck continued to spin dizzily around me.

“Now, Mr. Grant, I’m afraid you will have to get some rest and get over this seasickness.” He walked me over to their sleeping quarters which seemed a long ways away. He then set me down on a moldy cot that was covered with a rough wool blanket. A nearby bucket rested on the ground and it looked like a good place to rest my head for now.

I heard him say, “All new sailors get a little seasick. You’ll get over it soon.”

I’m afraid that any of his further words were lost in a new torrent of vomiting. As he left, I decided I was really was ill. I rested uneasily as the ground swayed up and down. This was hardly the position I expected myself to be in and I reflected deeply on my own state of misery. At this point the thrill of the adventure was

beginning to lose its sheen. I don't remember how many hours passed, but the clatter of footsteps past the sleeping quarters reminded me that men were still at work. Eventually I had the strength to pull myself up on the cot and fall into a fitful sleep.

In what seemed like a minute, hands shook me awake. I wiped at my encrusted eyes. Looking at Isaac standing above me, it took me a moment to realize where I was. "How long have I been asleep?" I grunted.

"All night," he answered back kindly. "I have some beef broth and water for you."

"Food doesn't seem particularly inviting right now," I admitted.

"The wind has died down a bit, and it has been smoother going. You may want to try some food if you are to be feeling any better."

The motion of the ship had lessened. Swinging my legs down to the floor, my stomach didn't feel quite so shaky. The smell of the broth was good, so I reached out and took a tentative sip. It stayed down, so I took another. I realized I was thirsty so I took the tin cup from his hand and tried some water. It was cold and felt good against my ravaged throat.

"You are looking better," Isaac said as he watched me finish the broth. "Definitely a bit of color has returned to your cheeks."

Perhaps I did feel a bit better, but I was still awfully weak. "I'm not sure I can take your place at the furnace today," I said cautiously.

"That's alright, William. But I expect you will be better by tomorrow. I remember the first day I went out to sea. I was just a farm lad and had swum in nothing but a river before. Once the boat left port, I was just as sick as you are – maybe even a little sicker. The men on board found it amusing to see a landlubber losing his lunch. I suppose us old sailors are all the same in the end."

I gave him a weak smile and said, "I haven't been in anything bigger than a rowboat before. And that was just in Lake Michigan. I never knew how much the ocean tosses these boats about. At least it was never mentioned in the books I read."

"You'll learn that there is a big difference between real life and anything you read in those books of yours."

With those words he left me to attend to his duties. I felt bad letting him take my place at work, but I felt too weak to do anything else. The day went slowly as I had nothing to occupy my time but my own thoughts. I admit I thought of my poor mother and how my uncle must feel betrayed by my actions. But it was too late to do anything about it right now. Perhaps once I reached Liverpool, I would send them a telegram to tell them that I was safe.

By that evening I felt good enough to stand and tend to my own needs. I didn't eat in the mess for fear of being discovered by an officer. Instead, I stayed by the furnaces and talked to the men as they worked over the relentless fires. It was a good time spent since I began to clearly pick up on their different dialects. They were good fellows, each with a story to tell how they entered into the merchant navy. Many of them were too old to fight in the trenches or thought it was safer to take the chance with the German submarines prowling the Atlantic.

I broached the sinking of the LUSITANIA with them and one of them spat on the ground. He said, "That ship wasn't carrying no arms. That's German propoganda that is."

"But how could one torpedo sink an entire ship so quickly?" I asked. For the papers were full of stories of secret arm shipments being made by the British. I didn't know what to believe.

"Those Huns have secret weapons," the man said harshly. "We had better hope to God that we don't get hit with one of those special torpedoes." The other men around him mumbled in agreement before going back to their tasks.

I went to bed that night and woke feeling rested. By this time the movement of the ship didn't bother me in the slightest, and I was able to walk without feeling dizzy. I took my place near the furnace and spent the day shoveling coal. In the gloom, the few officers that came by ignored me and I was able to go through the day unnoticed. When I took a break and checked myself in the mirror, I found the reason why. I was covered in coal dust from head to foot. I don't think my own family would have recognized me.

We went on this way for four more days and I grew used to the scheduled life of the sailor. My muscles no longer ached, and I found the work easy enough, if not a little boring. That evening, I was getting off my shift and was looking forward to a good supper before turning in. I had all but forgotten of the war until alarm bells began to ring throughout our deck.

"What is it?" I asked the man nearest to me.

He shrugged and said, "Someone must have spotted a periscope. People been a little edgy since the LUSITANIA went down."

Isaac was near. He tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Let's go topside and see what's going on."

We ran up the stairs to the crew deck on top. The sudden glare of sunlight burned my eyes and it took a few moments before I could even see the ocean around us. It was a beautiful view with the sun hanging low on the sea-swept horizon. A group of passengers on the deck below were huddled together, pointing off in the distance towards the setting sun. I couldn't see what the passengers were looking at, but the captain must have taken the threat seriously since the ship began to zigzag back and forth across the waves.

"I wish I had a telescope," Isaac groaned as he shielded his eyes. "I can't see a damned thing out there."

"Do you think we're in any danger?" I asked. I continued to scan the horizon. The sun was blinding and would provide excellent cover for a submarine on the hunt.

"Nah, more than likely just some jumpy crew seeing a whale."

"It's happened before," one of the crewmen next to me muttered.

"What's that there?" I asked pointing out to sea. I had caught the glimpse of a white wake coming towards us.

"It's a torpedo!" someone shouted.

Everyone watched silently as the torpedo grew closer. I held my breath as it sped past the stern of the boat. We breathed a collective sigh of relief until a binocular-wielding officer yelled, "Tell the bridge hard to port. Here comes another one!"

The order was relayed across the ship and it swung hard to left. My eye caught the trail of the torpedo as it crossed where the prow would have been if we hadn't turned. I looked down at my hands and they were white with fear from the pressure of holding on to the railing. It was one thing to meet your opponent face-to-face and another thing to be a target for an unseen enemy. I would have done anything to have a rifle or cannon to shoot back with, but the White Star Lines had decided that submarines wouldn't prey on defenseless passenger ships. I would have like to take that damned company president of theirs and put him on this ship and ask him how it felt to be the target.

An officer above shouted at us, "Get back to work everyone. We need all the steam we can muster."

So Isaac and I hastily returned to the furnaces and began shoveling coal. I don't think I ever worked so hard or those fires were ever stoked so hot. Any extra distance we could get between us and the slower moving submarine would be a godsend.

Chapter 3

Ellen's Story.

Lieutenant Grant was beginning to look exhausted from telling his tale. I thought it was in his best interest if he took a rest. I interrupted by saying, "It is getting rather late."

With a nod, he looked out the window and looked surprised when he saw that the sun had set a long time ago. Glancing at the clock on his nightstand, he said, "You're right, Ellen, I'm afraid I've kept you up for most of the night. It is nearly one in the morning."

"Don't worry," I said graciously, "I'm used to long hours working here."

"I bet you are. Please feel free to leave me for the night. I'm sure the guards outside will see that I'm well-taken care of. They wouldn't want their prize to go and disappear on them." He said the words with little humor.

"I'm afraid you won't be going anywhere on that leg of yours," I said.

"This is just a scratch," he said bravely.

I had cleaned the wound as best as I could, but I was still afraid for his health. A bad infection could lead then to gangrene which meant the leg would have to be removed. I've seen enough wounds to know that this was a real possibility. Well, I wasn't about to mention this to him right now. He had enough worries. So instead I said, "I'm sure you'll be up on your feet soon enough, William. But for now, you'll have to let me take care of you. Don't put any undue pressure on your bad leg."

He gave me a flippant salute and said, "Very well, Nurse Pennington, I'll be entirely at your disposal."

I got up and leaned over to adjust the pillows at his back. He seemed to enjoy the attention and gave me a knowing look. I said carefully, "Now, Lieutenant, you're hardly in shape for such activities."

"I'm sorry, Ellen. I wasn't trying to shock your sensibilities by being so forward. It's just living in the trenches makes you lonely for female companionship. A great beauty like you is too much for a man of my temperament."

"I've heard all the excuses before," I said with a laugh. "You aren't the first and you won't be the last officer to make an advance on me."

He actually blushed and said, "I'm sorry, Ellen. I'm none too familiar with the fair sex."

"You never even had a girlfriend back home?" I asked, not believing a word of it.

"Oh, I've gone on a few dates, but nothing serious ever came of it."

For some reason I felt an unexpected flash of jealousy. I covered the emotion by shaking my head and saying, "Now you're having me on, William. A good-looking bloke like you must have had loads of girlfriends. I bet you really came over here because you got some girl in trouble."

He looked at me queerly and then let out a laugh, "Now you're having me on."

I smiled. "Really, I think it is best that you get some rest now," I said. I adjusted his blankets and went to draw the curtains shut. I walked over to the light switch by the door and turned it off.

"Good night, Ellen," his voice came from the darkness. "I hope you will stop by to hear the rest of my story."

"Good night, William," I said in turn. "I will be seeing you in the morning."

I quietly shut the door quiet and passed by the two sleepy-looking guards. I was about to turn down the hall towards my quarters when I saw Major Radford leaning lazily against the corridor wall. He had an impatient expression as if he had been expecting me to come by a long time ago. He motioned me over.

He looked haggard and rundown as if this war was taking a personal toll on his health. Professionally speaking, he looked as if he needed a month of bed rest. But behind his slovenliness there was a bright twinkle in his eyes. As I walked towards him, he seemed to look right through me as if he knew everything about me. It was a rather chilling sensation that I unsuccessfully tried to shake off.

"What is it?" I asked inquisitively as I tried to meet his steadfast gaze.

He looked about to see if anyone was nearby. "Shh," he hushed me in a low voice. "I wish to have a few words with you. Is there anywhere quiet we can talk?"

I led him to a nearby wardroom that was unoccupied. I turned on the overhead light and after the door was shut, he passed by me to prowl about the room. "What do you wish to discuss?" I asked shortly. I was feeling tired and just wanted to go and sleep in my little cot at the nurse's quarters.

He turned to face me and said, "This Lieutenant Grant – you seem to be getting on with him rather well."

"I suppose so," I admitted.

He nodded slowly. "It seems that he is telling you his side of the story with rather more detail than he would give us."

"Have you been eavesdropping?" I asked and remembered that the door to Grant's room had been open a crack. This detective must have had keen ears if he could overhear our conversation.

"I'm afraid I was," he admitted.

I was disgusted at learning of this breach of privacy.

He went on, "I must apologize for the ruse, but my curiosity got the better of me. I knew he would tell you things that he would never admit to me. The lieutenant seems to be telling you his whole life story from the beginning. What he had to say was rather interesting, but it still doesn't prove anything yet."

I sighed. "You'll find that many of the boys who come here have to talk. They have all of those memories and emotions from the front lines tied up inside. They want to talk to someone, and with a shortage of good vicars, who has a better ear than a nurse?"

"And a pretty one at that," he said blandly as if it was an obvious thing to say.

"I wouldn't quite say that."

"I can tell that Lieutenant Grant would agree with me. He seems to have taken quite the interest in you. I want you to keep on getting his story out of him since I'm very interested in what he has to say."

"You mean he may be innocent?" I asked hopefully.

"I didn't say anything of the sort," Radford replied sternly. He puckered his lips and blew through his mustache. "As I said, I'm just curious. The story he told us seemed so fantastic, I could scarcely believe my ears. Does Lieutenant Grant seem like a liar to you?"

"No," I said truthfully.

He started pacing back and forth along the room and suddenly stopped in front of the curtains. With a quick sweep of his hand he yanked them open and looked to the grounds below like he expected we were being observed. I said nothing, but instead just watched him with amazement. I couldn't decide if the man was crazy or just seized with unbridled energy.

"Well, I don't think he is a liar either," he finally said. "I've met a few con men in my time, and Grant just doesn't seem the type. I want to see justice done and hope that you will help me."

I said, "I'll do as you ask."

"Good. I'll try to stay out of the way as much as I can. It would be good if we can meet here every night, so you can pass his story on to me as you remember it. I will be doing some further investigation and will not always be available to personally listen to his words. Do you think you could remember clearly what he has told you?"

"I will try."

"Good."

I stifled a sudden yawn and said, "If you don't need me anymore, sir, I think I will retire for the evening."

Without replying, he suddenly reached out to grab my shoulder. His grip was surprisingly strong. "Just make sure you don't tell anyone what you are doing on my behalf. For now, this is just between you and me."

"Very good, Major," I said and pulled away from him. As I left the room I could feel his eyes on my back. This had been an interesting day.

Chapter 4

We arrived at Liverpool in the morning. It was with some regret that I left the HMS ADRIATIC. I had grown to like the sea and the solitary feeling one gets hundreds of miles from land. I said my goodbyes to the men I had worked with and agreed to come back to visit when I had the chance. After I had washed off what grime I could and changed into my last good set of clothes, Isaac led me down the crew's gangplank.

"It was good to meet you," I said and clapped him heartily on the shoulder.

"The boys and I had a whip-around for you," he said shyly. "I thought you would need some traveling money to see you to London." He dropped some loose change into my hands. "This should be enough to get you there."

I tried to refuse the money, but the old sailor pushed it back my hands. With some resignation, I slipped the coins into my pockets and said, "I'll make sure to write and let you know how it works out."

"I've heard that the 61st Regiment is recruiting," he said. "Some new thing that the government thought of - it seems they are putting together a regiment of malcontents and beggars who weren't accepted elsewhere. They might even take an American if they're desperate enough."

"I would hardly consider myself a malcontent."

"It is just something to consider if some other regiment doesn't take you on. At my age, the only reason that I've still been able to sail on the Adriatic is because the shortage of men. On the last voyage, a few of the older chaps decided they wanted to have a go at the Hun and signed up. These were old sailors who were turned down by other recruiting agents, but the 61st found a place for them with no questions asked."

"Well, I'll look into it when I get to London," I said gratefully as I left. I just assumed anyone would take a fit man like me, but only now did I consider the issue of my nationality. Perhaps they weren't desperate enough to take Americans into the army yet. There was only one way to find out.

Following the directions I was given, I walked to the train station and bought a third class ticket. I handed over the requested amount and received some change back. I wasn't quite sure if it was even the right amount, for the British currency is certainly archaic by any stretch of the imagination.

Soon enough I was on the packed train, trundling towards London. I spent the time looking out the window and thinking that the plan I had in Chicago had grown more complicated than expected. I'd been planning for everything to turn out perfectly - the trip over, arrival at a recruitment station, and getting a uniform on my back - all seemed so easy to me back then. Now my money was gone, and I was now left wondering if they would let an American join up. I had little prospects if I was not accepted into the army. Well, there was nothing to do now but to give it a try. The worse thing that could happen would be telegraphing my uncle and then waiting for some money to be wired to me. I would certainly hate to go that route and, as frustrating as the change in my plans had been, I tried to remain hopeful for the future.

Pushing those thoughts out of my head, I instead turned my attention to the landscape rushing by the train. When one lives in America you forget how small the European countries are. In the cities, people and houses were crammed ever

so closely together. It was some surprise that it was only going to be a few hours to get to London, much like travelling from Chicago to Detroit. But still, outside Liverpool, the rolling countryside was beautiful. The small farms were busy and the green hedges and freshly dug field zipped by. In my youthful fancy, I was proud with the idea of fighting for my mother's home country. Here was a tiny country being attacked by the great powers of Germany.

As the train stopped at various stations, it suddenly occurred to me that there was a shortage of men about. Oh sure, there were men – but the majority of them were middle aged or older. My own youth was drawing uncomfortable attention from the women sitting around me. I realized that the great call for soldiers had been answered, but little did I guess on the impact on society. My fellow passengers must have been kept busy guessing why I hadn't joined up yet. Well, if they gave me the chance, I surely would.

After I had a light lunch from the passing trolley, the train arrived in London that afternoon. I really had no clear idea where to go at this time, so I spent some of my remaining funds on an issue of the London Times. Skimming past the front page news, I found a large ad with the local recruiting stations listed. I took special notice of the Royal Fusiliers and the London Rifle Brigade. I knew little of them, but the names piqued my interest.

After flagging down a fellow pedestrian, I was able to get directions to the nearest recruiter of note – the Royal Fusiliers. In a few minutes, I was standing in front of the brick recruiting building, feeling quite accomplished that I had made it this far on my wits alone. However, as soon as I saw the officers inside, I was rejected as soon as I spoke. They knew I was an American and didn't want to have anything to do with me. An hour later, and I had made my way to see the London Rifles. The results were the same. At this point I was feeling disheartened until I remembered Isaac's recommendation of the 61st Regiment. I dug out the newspaper and found their advertisement inside. A few directions from a passerby, and I was on my way.

It was getting on in the day. I needed to get in to see them before they closed. I didn't have enough money left over to spend the night anywhere decent or even buy a good meal. So I brushed off my wrinkled coat and walked into the tiny building only to find only one civilian waiting before a scarred oak table. Sitting on the other side was a man in army uniform with a pile of papers in front of him. Behind him were four desks with clerks toiling away at mountains of paperwork. I couldn't help but overhear the conversation he was having with the would-be soldier in front of me.

"Name?" the uniformed clerk barked.

"Timothy Cooper," the man mumbled in front of me. He was shabbily dressed, very short, and played nervously with the dirty brown cap held in his hand.

"Age?"

"Twenty-two, sir".

"Occupation?"

"Street sweeper," Cooper answered as if ashamed of his job.

"Any health problems?"

"No, sir."

The clerk nodded and pointed to the table to the left. "Go to the clerk over there and welcome to the army, Private Cooper."

The man shuffled away. I steeled myself for failure since it was now my turn to stand before the desk. I stood straight as the clerk looked me up and down. I must have looked like a giant compared to the previous applicant. Standing closer to the clerk, I saw that he was older than I thought. There were touches of white in his hair, and he had deep wrinkles about his mouth. Obviously not cut out for the battlefield, he had been shuttled back to handle recruiting. I almost felt sorry for him.

"Name?" he barked out in the same manner he had used on poor Timothy Cooper.

"William Samuel Grant," I replied quickly and with as much confidence as I could muster.

Instead of asking my age, he paused and looked up at me in surprise. My Midwestern accent must have thrown him off. After a moment that set my heart racing, he asked, "Are you English?"

"My mother is," I replied.

"And where was she from?"

"Cambridge. That's where she married my father."

"But were you born in England?" he asked, watching me closely.

"Not exactly," I muttered. I got a sinking feeling deep in my stomach.

There was a sudden commotion behind the clerk that caused him to quickly turn his head. Some type of officer walked in the room and everyone jumped up to attention. This officer was followed by another man who stayed at his elbow. The clerk I was with saluted.

"Once you're done there, Rogers," the man said, "We can pack it in for the night."

"Very well, Colonel," the clerk said and saluted again. I noted that the British had an odd looking salute with an open palm, faced forward.

The colonel stood and watched me with interest as the clerk sat down and continued to query me.

"Now where were we? Oh yes, your mother. Were you born in England or not?"

"I'm afraid I was born in America," I admitted. "Does it really make a difference?" I started to get that empty pit feeling in my stomach again. That telegram to my uncle was beginning to look like a sure thing.

"I'm afraid it does. Unless you can prove otherwise, I'm afraid we can't accept you into the regiment."

My face must have looked crestfallen, for the clerk said with pity, "I'm really sorry."

The colonel strode up. He was a short, balding man who had a neatly trimmed set of whiskers and an immaculate uniform. He eyed me up and down for a moment before he finally asked, "You say you're from America?"

"Yes," I answered.

"How did you get here?"

I told him the short version of my travels to England and I was often interrupted by him saying, "Extraordinary" or "I say." On the other hand, the other officer standing next to him merely scowled.

"I must say that this is all very interesting," the colonel finally said when I had finished. He began stroking his mustache as if he was deep in thought. His toady follower whispered something in his ear, but he waved him away. "You said you came all the way over here to fight the Hun?"

"Yes, sir," I answered again.

He spoke to the man next to him, "You know, Captain, I have an idea for this young gentleman here."

"What is it?" the captain asked stiffly as if he really didn't care to hear any idea that the colonel offered. He was a skinny runt, with a shock of brown hair covering one eye. But his uniform was neatly pressed, and he looked as if he was working hard at being respected.

"Perhaps we should let this man join up with us," the colonel said.

"Why, sir?" his companion asked coldly.

"Think of the news stories, my man. Young man leaves the safety of America to fight against the evil of the advancing German Army. It would be a good bit of propaganda and get some other recruits over here to join our regiment. I mean what could be a better reason than that?"

My heart began to swell as I heard the colonel say those words. This man here was willing to give me a chance. Those thoughts were dashed as the captain spoke.

"I can't recommend it, sir. Think of the bad press the Americans would generate if he was to be killed." He paused and then added acidly, "And I hardly think one man in one regiment will open a floodgate of recruits to the 61st."

The colonel looked deep in thought and then asked me, "Tell me, you look fairly well-off. What was your occupation in America?"

"I was a mechanical engineer for a firm in Chicago where we made train parts."

"So you are an educated man. Well, that does make a difference. I'm short of officers at the moment, and I need intelligent men to lead my troops in the face of the enemy."

"An officer?" the captain asked incredulously. "What will the other officers think if this American here is given a commission? It's hardly fair to them." He looked at me and asked, "Do you have any military training at all?"

"I'm afraid not," I admitted. "I however am a good shot with the rifle and I've done a bit of boxing in my time."

"He does look rather fit," the colonel said. "He's just the type of man who can look after himself in a scrap. I think we should give him a commission and send him off to officer's school."

His companion merely shrugged and said, "If you say so, sir, but I do think it is a mistake."

His face red with anger, the colonel said, "Yes, I do say so. I don't mind hearing your opinion, even if I didn't ask for it. You're my secretary and don't you forget it." He then turned to me and said, "By the way, I'm afraid I didn't catch your name."

"William," I grinned. "William Grant." I felt happy as I could possibly be. Me, an officer? I could hardly believe it. I had expected to be an enlisted man, but now I was going to lead troops into battle.

"Mr. Grant, welcome to the 1st Division of the 61st Battalion. I'm Colonel Smythe, your commanding officer as of now. I must say you are lucky that I came

back here to check on the status of our recruiting efforts, otherwise no one else may have taken you. It's a pleasure to have you with us." He reached out his hand, a warm smile spreading across his face.

I gratefully pumped his hand and said, "I promise I won't let you down, sir."

"I shall hope not. Just report here in the morning and we'll get you all sorted out. It will take a bit of paperwork, but I think I can get you into the Wrexham with some of the other newly commissioned officers."

I had no idea where that was but I asked, "If it is possible, I am in need of a place to sleep for the night. As I told you, my money was stolen when I was in New York. I'm afraid I'm practically penniless."

Smythe said, "Captain Wodenhill, see that he has a place to stay. I'll cover his costs until we can get him sent him off for his training."

"Yes, sir," Wodenhill replied woodenly.

"Thank you, sir," I added gratefully.

Wodenhill then took me outside and quickly hailed a taxi. He handed me a few pound notes and then stuffed me inside the cab. "Cabbie, take him to the Strand Hotel." After paying the cabbie, he then turned to me and said through the window, "Remember, we shall expect to see you here in the morning."

"Don't worry, Captain, I will be here."

He merely stared at me as the cab drew away. This Wodenhill character certainly wasn't a likable fellow, but any thought of him faded away as I thought of my unexpected triumph. I was going to be an officer. That colonel seemed like a fine soldier indeed. For him to offer me this chance was simply amazing.

I arrived at the hotel, took my room, and had all of my clothes sent off to be cleaned. In the meanwhile, I took a hot bath, ordered room service and thoroughly enjoyed the sensation of finally being alone. A week out to sea certainly had offered little in that regard. I went to bed early. I was keyed up enough that it took me quite a long time to fall asleep. Tomorrow was going to be the beginning of a new life.

I woke up that morning with the bellhop knocking at my door. He had my newly cleaned and pressed suit, so I quickly dressed and went down to pay for my room. After that, I caught a cab and was brought to the recruiting station where Captain Wodenhill was waiting for me. Mind you, he looked none too pleased to see me. Perhaps he had expected me to be a common criminal and take the money without coming back.

He snarled, "I'm afraid the colonel is indisposed at the moment. He is rather a busy at this time and is too important of a man to take care of you like a wet-nurse. I'll also add that you are extremely lucky that he saw you yesterday and has taken such an interest in your plight."

"Yes, I am lucky," I agreed.

"Colonel Smythe went against my wishes on this matter, but still, he is the commanding officer. He also agreed to pay for your uniform and initial mess fees until you receive your first pay. Personally, I don't think you will make a good officer," he said bluntly.

I could only give him an icy smile as I said, "I think you will be proven wrong, Captain."

"I certainly hope so," he said haughtily.

We went in, and I signed a mountain of paperwork. I was given a letter of introduction, and before I knew it, I was off to the train station to make my journey to Wrexham. Traveling on Smythe's expense, I was, of course, booked third class.

Perhaps the less I speak of my time at Wrexham, the better. The instructors were crass and didn't care much for the new recruits coming into their school. They were used to the proper public-school gentleman and didn't care for these clerks, tradesmen and bankers becoming officers in Kitchener's so-called 'New Army'. As an American, I was treated with even more scorn than usual, and on countless times I was used as an example of being a poor officer. It seemed unfair, but I had the good sense of keeping my mouth shut since I did not want to prove Captain Wodenhill right in any regard. I wanted to give in to my temper more than a few times, so I suppose I should have been grateful to him for giving me something to live up to.

I will admit I knew nothing of soldiering and initially found the whole thing rather confusing. I often saluted the wrong people, found the heavy wool uniform tiresome to march in, and asked far too many questions to the instructors. But I was good at marksmanship, and I was in better shape than the others there. I could march for hours without rest and hustled through the courses faster than anyone else.

One would think the staff would have preferred to throw me out of that school, but as I kept on, I detected the not so subtle hand of Colonel Smythe in the background. The London Times even ran a story about me, and it was widely read at Wrexham. I was treated with a little more respect after that article, but at the same time I also started to excel in my classes. We learned all sorts of things that were worthless to the civilian – marching, military law, bugle calls, signals, and infantry tactics that would ultimately prove to be useless in the trenches. But nonetheless, instead of being used as the poor class example, I began to thrive in this new foreign career.

Thankfully, it was all over soon enough. Afterward, I was given the rank of second lieutenant. I was to command a company over in France and was ordered to join them on the front lines.

The ship we took over was called HMS Fortitude, and it had little to do with its given name. The ship was a rusting hulk and was crammed to the gills with troops and war material. There was a constant lookout for submarines, and so we were escorted by several destroyers of dubious age. I was more worried about the state of the ship than any submarine, for it creaked unceasingly as we passed over the choppy waves of the English Channel.

We landed without incident at a small port and I was quickly ordered onto a third-class rail carriage with some other officers. It was better than the common soldier, who was forced into cramped forty-and-eight boxcars – good for forty men or eight horses. I felt sorry for them, but they accepted their condition without complaint – or at least as far as I could tell. At that time, I still had plenty to learn about what makes a soldier tick.

The train started to chug along and I watched the French landscape with wondering eyes. It was June now, and it had turned out to be a beautiful summer. I could see the peasants working the fields of the ancient farms, looking as if they

didn't have a care in the world. It looked quite peaceful. I wondered how it could be that thousands were dying just a few miles away.

"You're the American," a lieutenant across from me said. He looked rather young, and his foot was busy tapping the floor in a nervous manner.

"Yes," I said cautiously.

"I hate to interrupt, but I wanted your opinion on something. My name is David. I read that article about you in the Times. I just wanted to shake your hand and thank you for coming over."

He reached over and we shook hands.

"My name is William. I'm just glad to help out," I said.

He pursed his lips and asked quietly, "Tell me, are you afraid of doing this?"

I've often noticed that complete strangers will open up to each other in ways that even family or friends never do. "Doing what?" I asked.

He hesitated a moment before continuing. "You see, my brother Robert came home some five months ago. He's a lieutenant with the 1st Hertfordshire. It took some time, but I managed to coax out of him what was really happening out in the trenches. You know the sort of things that the censors won't let anyone write in a letter or publish in the papers."

"Like what?" I asked, filled with interest.

"I can't describe it well, but it sounds bloody awful. How the shells come screaming down from nowhere, and how bad the conditions really are. He told me about the high casualty numbers and the awful food." He looked about, as if he was afraid of being overheard. "I went through officer school hoping I wouldn't be on the front lines. But it turns out I'm headed towards a bad sector. I don't know what to do."

"I'm afraid I can't offer you much advice."

He lapsed into silence and turned to watch the landscape. The reflection on the window showed a grim, frightened face. I began to wonder what kind of trouble I had gotten myself into.

The towns we passed through were beautiful, and when we stopped to coal the train, the cars were mobbed by the villagers. They sold tea, coffee and pastries to us through the open windows. Many of the townspeople spoke atrocious English, if at all. I could hear the soldiers in the cars whistling and cat-calling at the prettier girls. What else can you expect from a soldier?

"Bloody fools," David said to no one in particular.

"They're just soldiers," I said.

"They're all going to be dead," he said darkly and went back to his own thoughts. He did not say anything further, and I was glad when he kept his mouth shut. I didn't need his gloominess intruding on my thoughts, so I moved to another seat across the way.

After sleeping through the most of night uncomfortably on the hard bench, the train steamed into the village of Deveaux. The town was near the valley of the River Somme. Checking my watch, I saw it was nearly four in the morning. After saying a hearty farewell to David, I was dropped off with a handful of other soldiers and we watched as the train pulled away. I saw David staring at me through his window, his sad eyes staring at me. I never heard of him again, and I still wonder how he made out.

After the train was gone, I was suddenly conscious of rumbling thunder in the distance. I looked in the direction of the sound and saw flashes off in the horizon. I thought it was odd since we hadn't seen a cloud all day.

"It is artillery, sir," a gruff voice said at my elbow.

I turned, and in the dim light of the station lamps, saw a man of medium height with three bars on his sleeve. That would make him a sergeant - one with a shabby uniform and mud-splattered boots. He gave me a sloppy salute and said, "Sergeant Owens, sir. I was ordered to take you lot to the Battalion Headquarters to be sorted out with the other men."

"How do you know you have the right man?" I smiled.

"That's easy enough, sir, you're the only lieutenant here."

"True enough, Sergeant, I'm Lieutenant Grant."

"Very good, sir." He suppressed a quick grin. "I'm with your company, and I was told to look after you while you are here."

"I see," I said. I certainly wasn't used to having anyone look after me. "Is there any reason why they have decided to give you that task?"

"Just normal procedure, sir - too many officers getting killed right away. There's a right shortage of them right now, so they're all very precious to the colonel."

Now it was my turn to smile. I shrugged and asked, "How far away do we have to go?"

"Nine kilometers, sir."

I did the conversion to miles in my head and said, "That's an awfully long way to walk from here."

"Well, sir, the Hun's artillery can strike pretty deep into our territory. I'm thinking they want to keep this rail line open. It is our only link with the outside world."

"I can see I have a lot to learn, Sergeant. I suggest you get these soldiers together and lead the way."

"Yes, sir," he replied without haste. He barked out a few commands and the men quickly got sorted out in marching order. They did look a bit nervous as they picked up their packs and stepped in line behind Owens. I carried my own heavy pack, walking with him and listening to him prattle on.

"This is a pretty quiet sector, sir. The Germans don't bother us too much. You just have to make sure you keep your head down when you're in the trenches. Lots of artillery and shrapnel about, so be careful there. Of course the errant whiz-bang can come along and take you out in a flash. But most of their shells go too far over or else they're busy trading fire with our own artillery batteries."

I nodded if I understood what he was talking about. In the distance, I could see that we were approaching the dark shadows of buildings. They looked deserted since I did not see a single light shining from the windows. "Is that the village of Deveaux?" I ventured.

"Yes, sir," Owens replied.

"But where are all the people?"

"Most of them are gone, sir, but some still remain living in what remains. The Germans had possession of this town, and then we captured it a few months ago. We used to be up there on that ridge." He pointed vaguely in the dark behind us. "We shelled them out of the town and took it for ourselves. I guess the Frenchies

don't care to be around in case the Huns take it over again. There will be plenty of time to look it over since we're billeted there when we're not on the front. A few shells come this way, but it's mostly safe."

He stopped talking as the sound of artillery grew louder. The guns were our own, and they were firing salvos towards the east. The flash of the muzzles was becoming blinding. I suddenly felt sick to my stomach with nerves. We trudged on. After a bit of marching, we passed the village, and came to the first line of artillery guns. They were pointed at the sky and really going at it. The gunners were busy loading and firing, hunched over the great metal monsters that belched out smoke and noise. The ground shook underneath our feet.

The Sergeant tugged on my sleeve and then pushed me hard down to the ground. A salvo from what I presumed was from the German side, struck not thirty yards away. The sound was deafening. I felt the ground shake as dirt was thrown high into the air. There was a curious whistling in the air, and I heard a man behind us give a sudden shriek. It was piece of shrapnel that must have gone by me and into one of the soldiers.

"German coal boxes, sir." Owens grunted. "You'll get used to the sound of the five-nine shells." He went over to the wounded man to make sure he did not require medical care.

The man just had a small wound in his arm. He said nervously, "I'll be alright, sir. I wasn't expecting to get hurt without shooting a Hun first."

The rest of the men laughed at this, and at my urging we moved at a quick double-time march.

The next salvo of what the sergeant had called five-nines, landed eighty yards behind us in a crash. Except for Owens, we all reflexively threw ourselves to the ground. He remained standing and helped me up.

"Don't worry, sir, soon enough you'll get to know where the shells are dropping by the sound. It doesn't take that much practice to know the difference."

My knees were shaking, and I could barely stand as the adrenaline left my body in a sickening wave. "Is it always like this?" I asked him as calmly as I could.

In the pale morning light, I could see a hint of a smile. "No, sir, some nights are even worse."

"I can't imagine," I admitted.

Owens dropped into a lower voice and said, "Don't worry, you'll get through this just fine. Just use your wits and be careful. I've heard you Americans are clever with this sort of thing."

"How did you know that I'm from the States?"

"To be honest, I've never met a Yank before. But your accent is a dead giveaway, sir. And the fact I was ordered to look for an American officer named Grant at the station."

"So Colonel Smythe told everyone of my coming?"

"Yes. And I can tell you it caused some stir among the men. They're not sure what to expect from you. But you seem like an alright chap."

"Thank you, Sergeant," was all I could say. "I can assure you that I'm here to do the best job I can."

"You just worry about staying alive right now," he said. "Then you can worry about the heroics later."

We stepped off the main road and began following a rut leading off into the weeds. If it wasn't for the booming of the guns in the distance, we could be out on a Boy Scout outing. The sun was just beginning to peek out from the eastern horizon. I looked behind me and saw the men straggling behind. They had a worn, shocked look on their faces, and I assumed I must look the same way. This wasn't quite the introduction to war that I expected.

As the dawn light grew, in the distance I saw a ragged scar across the landscape. This was the front line – part of the battle line that stretched across Europe and divided France into two. I stood on my tip-toes to look at the cratered surface. Some three hundred yards away, I saw this line as nothing but churned up dirt and mud.

Owens pulled down on my sleeve and said, “Beg my pardon, sir, but you have to be careful how high you put your head, or you might get a bit of a haircut. Though the Huns are far away, bullets can still find their way - even here. Best you keep your head down until I get you safely into the reserve trench. If you had looked quickly enough, you would have seen our front lines behind the first bunch of barbed wire. If that front line is broken, then we have the reserve lines as a place to fall back to.”

“Heads down everyone,” I snapped to the men behind me. They nodded and walked in the funny pose that was soon to be familiar to me. It was the hunkered look of a wary man afraid his head was about to be shot off.

We entered the trenches. It was amazing there were any trees or wooden buildings left in France – it seemed as though they'd all been used to make the walls. My engineer-trained eyes roamed over the construction. Some of the walls were built well with planks sawn from wide tree trunks, while other sections looked hastily constructed with twigs and small branches not much bigger than my thumb. I wondered how much time I'd be spending fixing these walls.

“Tell me, Owens,” I said as we dropped down into a trench running away at ninety degrees from the reserve trench, “What did you do for a living before you came here?”

He very nearly blushed and said, “I was what you call a hunter, sir. Of course the magistrate didn't quite see it that way. He called it poaching and gave me a choice – prison or joining up. Well, I'm a fair shot so I thought why not? But to be honest, prison might have been a better choice.”

“A poacher, eh? Well, a good shot will come in handy in this business, Sergeant. I've done a bit of hunting myself, though I think I would prefer my Winchester right about now. Maybe we can get some hunting in someday. “

“As you say, sir.”

The trench wall here was nothing but packed dirt, held in place by weather-stained wooden slats. A layer of sandbags ran along the top. The muddy bottom was wet, but our feet were kept dry by a wooden duckboard that ran the length of all the trenches. Underneath, I could hear the scurrying of what I assumed were rats or mice. We passed some tired-looking soldiers who were even dirtier than Owens. They looked at us with some interest, for what reason I could only guess. Perhaps because we were still clean, or they wanted to check out the new cannon fodder. Well, new men get rough treatment the world over. Only when you earn the veterans' trust will they accept you.

A crack rang over our head. I looked around in surprise, wondering what new terror was about to strike.

"Bullet, sir," Owens replied calmly and went on guiding us forward.

"Are the Germans shooting at us?"

"They can't see us back here even at this time of the day, but bullets often come this way. Plenty of head injuries to go about. During the day, we both mark out places to shoot at during the night. Sometimes they get lucky and kill someone."

I grunted in answer. It was one thing to be shelled and another thing to be shot at. Bullets seemed that much more personal than the seemingly random fall of a shell.

Ahead of us was a squat dugout buried at level to the trench walls. On top it was covered with a layer of sandbags and a wan light came out of the doorway bottom.

"Here we are," Owens said. "Colonel Smythe should be breakfasting at headquarters by now."

"Thank you, Sergeant," I said. "You will see that the men make it to their appropriate companies?"

"Yes, sir," he said and gave me a smart-looking salute this time. But before leaving, I saw him hesitate. "I know it isn't my place to tell you how to do your job."

"Go ahead, Owens. I'm new here and will take any advice that I can."

"It's like this, sir. The boys don't like it when the officers are too friendly with them. I can see that you are a rather friendly chap yourself. Perhaps you may want to stay a bit above the enlisted men and act like a proper officer. They like the father-like figure more than anything else. Don't get me wrong, sir, us Welsh will do anything you ask of us, if you're willing to pitch in and help."

"Thank you for your words of advice. I will keep it in mind."

"Very well, sir. I look forward to working under your command. I will be seeing you soon enough."

I gave him a salute and sent him on his way. I didn't know what to make of this business. Sergeant Owens seemed like a right fellow, so I thought it best if I heeded his advice until I grew accustomed to my new surroundings.

Entering the dugout, I was surprised to see a linen-covered table with the scraps of breakfast resting on fine china. By the newspaper accounts one expected rats and mud, not a breakfast table. Off to the side, an electric light stood, along with a low desk with papers scattered about. Captain Wodenhill was sitting there, and he looked at me grimly. Smythe was in his shirttails and was busy shaving in front of a mirror. He caught me out of the corner of his eye and turned as I came in. Shaving cream was still stuck to his jaw.

"Lieutenant Grant reporting for duty, sir," I snapped and saluted as well as I could. I was proud to have made it through officer training and wanted to impress the colonel.

"Yes. Very good, Lieutenant." His face was friendly enough but his eyes were ringed with exhaustion. "Sit down for a moment, Grant, and I'll fill you in on what we are doing here."

"Yes, sir," I said and sat at the desk across from Wodenhill who read the papers in front of him. He was doing his best to ignore me.

Smythe faced the mirror again and continued shaving. As he slid the razor down his chin, he said, "It's good to have you here. I was told you did rather well at Wrexham. We're still rather short of officers, and I need all the help I can get. We will soon be part of some upcoming attacks, and you're the kind of officer the men need."

"Anything I can do to help," I said.

"Any chance more of you Yanks will be coming over to help?" he asked as he washed the remaining shaving cream off of his face.

"It's only a matter of time," I assured him.

"I should hope so," he said. Pulling his jacket off of a chair, he began putting it on. "What did you think of that Sergeant Owens?"

"He seems like a good man, sir," I replied honestly.

"Well, he's a bit of a scoundrel, but he's the best damn shot in the regiment. Hard to keep a man like that down, eh? I told him to look after you while you had a chance to learn the ropes. I'm putting you into B Company. You will be reporting to Captain Meadows. He's a good enough officer if not a little zealous."

"Good, sir."

He frowned at me and said, "I don't want you to do anything foolish, so make sure you listen closely to Meadows. The Germans are a crafty lot and have a few tricks up their sleeves. If you do as ordered, you will have chance to get out of this war alive."

"I shall do my best," I said.

"Give me one more moment here, and I will find my servant Reese to bring you to your company."

Chapter 5

Smythe's servant was a big corporal named Reese. He was a short man, but his size did nothing to hide his strength. He was bullnecked and had long gorilla-like arms that hung loosely on his sides. His face was craggy, and his lids hung over his eyes like slits. As we walked along the communication trench, he showed little consideration for my rank – perhaps he had a dislike for Americans. Or perhaps he'd taken airs as a result of being in the service of the colonel. Who knew? I just did my best to keep up with him.

While we crossed over the various hazards of the trench, he warned, "Telephone line low" or "Watch your step." He left me at the B Company HQ, and I was glad to be rid of him. The headquarters itself was a low, log structure built deeply into the side of the trench wall. After pausing for a moment to gather my thoughts, I straightened my cap and pushed aside the black curtain covering the entrance.

Around a wooden table, four men were sitting and talking over cups of tea. As they turned to face me, I took in the new surroundings. The room was small with greasy oil lamps lighting the dark interior. The floor was caked with mud with heavy boot prints. Through a short passageway, I could see into a smaller room where a line of four cots were shoved together.

"You must be Grant," the captain said to me. "I'm Meadows." He got up to shake my hand. He was a tall man, with a stern face and a neatly trimmed moustache. His black hair was tinged with grey. The eyes were circles of exhaustion which seemed to be the case for everyone else here.

"Glad to meet you," I replied.

He pointed to the other men at the table and said, "These three gentlemen are Lyons, Carter, and Prentice. You will be working with them closely, so you will get to know them well."

"Yes, sir," I replied with a salute.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see the three other lieutenants frown.

With a shake of his head, Meadows said, "I have to tell you that discipline is a little more lax here in the trenches. While you're here, forget everything you learned at officer school. When addressing fellow officers, you can use their names. Save the spit n' polish for the parade grounds."

I nodded, already feeling out of place.

"You already met your Sergeant Owens at the train station," Meadows went on. "He was looking after your platoon until you came along. You're replacing Lieutenant Billings who was killed here last month. I'm afraid that is fairly common around here."

"I shall do my best to stay alive," I said.

He put his arm on my shoulder and led me to the table. "Have a seat and I'll make the introductions."

I took one of the chairs and sat down. It was an old rickety thing and felt as if it was going to give way under my weight.

Meadows remained standing. He said, "This here is Lyons."

Lyons was a strong-looking chap with light hair, the pale British skin that was so common, and an open honest face. He beamed at me and said, "Good to meet you."

"And this here is Lieutenant Carter," the captain said.

Carter was a fine-looking gent with youthful features. He couldn't have been more than eighteen years. His voice squeaked out, "Hello, Grant." We shook hands and his grip was weak. He certainly wasn't the type to inspire confidence.

"And finally Prentice," Meadows added.

The remaining lieutenant nodded in my direction. He had dark, slicked-back hair and an aristocratic sneer. He would have made an excellent villain for any play or movie. With a dismissive nod in my direction, he lit a cigarette.

"Don't mind old Prentice," Lyons added. "He doesn't talk to anyone unless they are royalty or rich enough to buy themselves into royalty."

Prentice snorted and Carter watched the two with a grin.

Lyons laughed, "Funny thing is I'm the second son of a duke while Prentice here comes from the merchant class. It all sounds rather common to me."

Prentice's face turned a deep red, and he inhaled his cigarette vigorously. "I would have you know that my father is rather wealthy and could buy your whole postage stamp-sized estate without even breaking a sweat."

"I'm sure he could," Lyons laughed. I noticed Carter was quick to join him.

"Settle down boys," the captain interrupted sharply.

Lyons smiled. "You know as well as I do, Captain, that is an old argument. This is the most awfully boring job at times, but we shouldn't make a bad impression on our new lieutenant here. How about you, Grant? Any skeletons in the closet you want to tell us about? Around here, we're always interested in hearing something new."

"There's really not much to say," I admitted. "I used to work in Chicago. I have a degree in engineering, but it hardly made me any money."

"No rich father?" Lyons asked.

The ever-present sound of falling shells suddenly grew louder, and to my ears, seemed to come closer to our dugout with every passing second. The other men didn't appear to notice, so I went on and replied, "I'm afraid my father left me nothing. He died a few years ago and left us penniless. My uncle took mother in and sent me off to school."

"Ah, the rich uncle," Lyons said to no one in particular.

"Well, I for one am glad that you're here," Meadowes said. He took off his cap and brushed his thinning hair back. "This may be considered a quiet zone by some, but the Germans still keep us busy. As I said, you're a replacement for Lieutenant Billings, who got the top of his skull removed by a sniper. I don't want the same to happen to you, so listen to Lyons and Prentice here. They're both experienced men."

"I will," I said. What other choice did I have?

Now the impact of the exploding shells was maddeningly loud, and we had to shout to be heard.

"I can help too," Carter added over the din.

Lyons punched the young man in shoulder here and shouted, "Carter here is our newest lad. Just been here three months, so don't listen to anything he has to say."

The lad shot him a dirty look.

The shells had passed over us, but still continued to fall unceasingly. But now they were just muffled sounds in the distance.

Meadowes said, "Also make sure you learn what you can from your Sergeant Owens. He can show you the ropes better than any other."

"He seems like a fine man," I said truthfully. "But I don't want to be treated any differently than anyone else. I'll take the risks like any other officer here."

"You have the right spirit, Grant. Don't worry, I will have use for you here no matter what Colonel Smythe may have ordered me to do. There are soldiers to be led and things to be done."

I nodded. Since the short time I had met him I was beginning to like this Captain Meadowes. He had a straight forward manner and seemed to act like quite the professional.

He said to everyone, "Prentice and Carter, I suggest you go about your duties for the morning shift. I have to go meet with Smythe at headquarters and won't be back until two. Lyons here will show our new lieutenant around and inform him of his duties. For now, I've decided to put them on the night watch, so they had better get some sleep."

Prentice nodded and left with Carter in tow. The captain poured himself another cup of tea before leaving the dugout.

Lyons nodded at me and stood up. He had an athletic build, and he had to lean forward in order not to crack his head on the low ceiling. "Well, Grant, I'm surprised."

"Surprised by what?"

"Talk is that the Americans are too cowardly to fight the Boche. I'm glad to see that it is just talk."

"I'm not sure about my countrymen, but I was willing to come over and lend a hand."

Lyons shook his head. He said, "You may be changing your mind sooner rather than later. Let me show you the trenches and a thing or two to keep you alive."

We walked out of the dugout. I followed this veteran's example as he walked towards the front line in a crouched position. We went over the squeaky duckboards, passing a group of soldiers who smiled readily at Lyons. He gave the men a hearty wave. We soon stopped when we came to the end of the communication trench. We were right on the front.

The front lines were dug deeply, with wooden slats on the bottom and wooden supports on the sides to hold the sodden dirt back. Taken from a nook, the lieutenant handed me a periscope that was bent at ninety-degrees and was designed to look over the side of the parapet. I gingerly edged it over the side. Across the desolate landscape, I could just make out the German line in the distance. It looked much like ours, with stacked sandbags and wooden posts. Smoke from the cooking breakfast slowly curled up into the sky. Like ours, rolls of barbed wire lay in front of the line. To my eyes, the defenses looked quite impenetrable. I shifted the periscope and took a closer look at the land between the two lines.

This was No Man's Land. It was a scarred jumble of stumps, shell holes and what looked to be piles of rags. A closer look revealed that they were rotting bodies. The ground itself had been churned up by countless shells and had turned into brown mud. A few scraggly weeds poked through the dirt. I thought the whole thing was the most disturbing sight I had ever seen, and it wasn't at all what I expected from the newspaper accounts. Not a single movement could be seen, except for the buzzing of the countless flies.

"What about those men out there?" I asked Lyons.

"What men?" he asked.

"I mean, their bodies are there..." my thoughts trailed off, and I gestured toward No Man's Land.

He shrugged. "I'd like to get all of them out of there," he said, and looked away. "But we can't get to all of them."

"But how did they get out there?"

"Some are Germans, and some are ours. They were killed while out on night patrol. It's dangerous out there which is something you will learn soon enough."

A bullet cracked over my head and made me jump. I nearly dropped the periscope in surprise.

Lyons smiled and said, "The Germans know we're here now. Best move along before they call in some artillery and drop some whiz-bangs in our direction."

We began walking back along the communication trench.

"Have you killed any Huns yet?" I ventured to ask.

He nodded. "I've been in this war for quite a while." He laughed and went on, "They say I'm blessed with nine lives, but let me tell you it has been sheer luck that I'm still here. I'll warn you that this may be called a quiet sector, but we see our own bit of trouble every night. We dig further in, fill hundreds of sandbags and go out on patrol to see what they are up to. Fritz does the same thing. Sometimes we meet, and that can be a spot of trouble.

"When we first dug in here at Deveaux, no one expected the war would last so long. We had no idea we would be living inside the trenches day after day. We've been learning as we go along. The French and German trenches are much better than ours, but the British Army can still hold a defensive position like no one else."

He offered me a cigarette which I took gratefully. I never smoked that much before, but after these sights, I thought it was a good time to start upping my intake.

Lyons said, "Tonight I'll give you the guided tour. I suggest we go back and get some sleep until then. We're billeted in an old house in the village. The family left a long time ago, so it's a bit of a mess right now."

That night, while we took our nightly shift, Lyons took me under his wing. I also met the company that would be under my command and learned their names as well as I could. They were mostly Welshmen, but we had a mixed lot of new recruits. Our regiment was receiving replacements from Kitchener's 'New Army'. They were a good group of men – dedicated even in these bleak circumstances. Perhaps it was the daily ration of rum since the men were always singing old songs and cracking jokes about the strangest of things. I found that living in the trenches requires some sense of humor just to survive.

After we had made our rounds that night, Lyons warned me about one of the soldiers. He said, "Keep an eye on Corporal Childs there. He's a bit of a shirker."

And the lieutenant was right in that regard. As the nights went on, I saw that John Childs never seemed to lift a finger to help out. Some other man always did his work. Some childhood illness had scarred his face and his dark eyes had nothing but hatred for officers.

"Then why keep him a corporal?" I had finally asked Lyons.

He shrugged and said, "Well, he's right popular with the men since he gets them the little things that they need. And his little cronies make sure he doesn't work. Personally, I think he is a bit of a bully, but he does have certain useful contacts with the black market."

"Black market?" I asked in surprise.

"Sure, there will always be a need for the things the army can't supply us. We are always short of goods up here in the trenches. Childs has a way of getting us the things we need. That helps morale. If you ever are short of good cigarettes, just ask old John, and he'll set you up."

"I wouldn't mind getting some Lucky Strikes," I admitted.

"That may not be that big of a problem. He could probably get you a pack of German Bulgaren-Helds if you asked him."

As the days passed, Lyons taught me art of living in the trenches. That consisted of learning to build the different layers of trenches, the burying of telephone wire and building duckboards to keep our feet dry. Mud was a constant

problem - it was unsanitary, not just dirty, and made it easier for trench foot to spread. This kept us busy devising new ways of draining water out of the trenches. My engineering background was useful here, and I made sure that the future frontline trenches were arranged with sump holes to keep it as water-free as possible. Each night my company dug, laid barbed wire, built sniper loopholes, and filled sandbags. Building supplies were always a bit short, but we made do the best we could. We had to take out plenty of building materials from the broken homes of Deveaux.

The shelling seemed constant, accounting for a high number of our wounded. Luckily the Germans seemed to pull back on firing the artillery at night, saving most of their crumps for the daytime. But still, they would fire rifles at us. Lyons explained how they would cut notches on their parapets and fire at fixed locations throughout the night. It was quite random, but still, if you were at the wrong place at the wrong time you would get knocked out for good.

I remember the first death I saw. It was just two days after I had arrived and some poor squaddie named Thompson got it. A five-nine fell right into the trench and caught him in the open. When I was called in to see, there was nothing there but a few scraps of flesh. It was something else to see, but Lyons just shrugged it off. It was common for the soldiers to be fatalistic, and it was no different for the officers. When your time was up, it was up.

Each morning, after our shift was done, Lyons and I slogged back to our billet at the village. There we rested as well as we could. Our billet was a small, one-story home, and I was forever ducking my head in order to not bean myself against the beams. At least I had a room to myself, and I enjoyed the little solitude I could get. The house had a small kitchen that spilled over into the sitting room. A sink and stove were there, but the water wasn't hooked up anymore. At least the pump in the side yard still worked, and the water tasted alright, but a little mineral tang remained that was just rustic charm. There was also a small dilapidated garden out in the back. It was pleasant to sit out there. Lyons, Meadowes, Carter, and even Prentice would join me out there to smoke, have a drink, and talk of anything but the war.

I found that Captain Meadowes was a fair man and absolutely loved by the men - both officers and the ranks. He viewed the war as any professional soldier did - as a job to be done and nothing else. It turned out that he was a lifer, having been in the army for over twenty years. He looked after us rookies with a calm hand and never showed his angry side. His morale never flagged, no matter what the weather or conditions. I'm not sure how he handled the strains of his command, but he proved to be an able officer and gentleman. He formed an easy friendship with me.

At first Prentice treated me with abominable contempt, but as the days progressed, he started to slowly warm to me. I wouldn't call it friendship, but he started to remark to me on the weather or the conditions of the trenches. To him it was just a professional relationship, but it certainly beat the icy stares of the past.

Carter acted most childlike and was treated accordingly. However, he never shirked his duties and did as instructed. He needed constant supervision which could grow tiresome. The ranks still loved him like some long-lost son.

Lyons was the best of all. He was always cheerful and patiently explained my duties to me. He was never condescending, and his friendly smile made him popular amongst the troops. Within just a few days, I felt as if I had a comrade-in-arms who would stick with me through thick and thin. I never had a brother or sister when I was growing up, and few close friends due to moving around as we had when I was young, so it was strange to feel such things towards what was once a complete stranger. They say soldiers grow closer than brothers, and I'm inclined to agree.

As we sat around the billet, I learned much about his family. I never met an aristocrat before and Lyons certainly tempered my initial judgment of them. Though his father was a duke, they were always short of money. It seemed some ancestor had gambled it all away, leaving only the family home and a mountain of debt. Being the second son had given him little for future prospects, and I think he relished the war since it gave him a chance to prove himself. At least out here he was being useful, instead of idling his hours away dreaming of ways to make it rich. In the trenches, one didn't think of money - one thought of girls, food and perhaps a moment of silence.

I almost make my stay at Deveaux seem idyllic, but I can't even begin to tell you the horrors I witnessed. Every day the German shells fell heavily on our position, trying to kill anyone in the lines. Luckily, we designed our trenches to be dug at odd angles, limiting the amount of area the shrapnel could spread. Of course the Huns were constructing their own lines the same way. Even worse were their trench mortars, for these were aimed by the enemy directly across from us. Somehow it seemed more personal than the seemingly random lobbing of artillery.

But still the rifle seemed the most dangerous to the average soldier. The crack of a bullet passing over the trench was unnerving. The enemy seemed to have excellent optics for their snipers while we had none. During the days, their snipers were kept busy shooting at anything that peeked over our trench walls. The rattling of the bullet against the barb wire was a constant reminder to the soldiers that they were under fire. The only safe way to look over the lines was to use a periscope, but it was great sport for the Germans to try to even shoot those. A good sniper could even hit the mirror of a periscope, frightening the user beyond belief.

So with all that going on, it was no wonder that the rank-and-file were of the nervous sort. All types of good luck charms were worn, and many a man had a small talisman hidden away on his person. But nothing seemed to help. Every week we had a steady stream of casualties. They were mostly head wounds, and the occasional hand being blown off. Anything that poked above the trenches was fair game.

One's senses become acute in the environment of the trenches. The thunder of artillery was ignored, but a sudden noise would have you dropping flat as a whiz-bang came too close for comfort. There was also the fear of the Germans using gas. We had some wretched gas masks that leaked terribly. I decided the best defense against a gas attack was to run for it. It wasn't cowardice since I had heard enough terrible stories about blindness, damaged lungs, and skin lesions.

Before I forget, I shall have to mention the loyalty of Owens. He followed me every night and saw that I was well provided for. I began to trust the man

implicitly and his stolid presence was a comfort in the most trying of circumstances. He was also one hell of a shot with his Lee-Enfield rifle and spent his few moments of free time sighting it in.

The sergeant also had plenty of stories to tell of his village and how he would poach right under the gamekeeper's eyes. The way he told it was always amusing, and it certainly sounded like a peaceful life compared to the mud and blood we dealt with every day. Owens also told me that hills behind Deveaux were teeming with game and offered to take me up there in the future. It seemed like an interesting idea, but it was sometime before we were able to do it.

The sniping was becoming a constant problem and damaging the morale of my boys. So one day, on my own initiative, I decided to do something about it. When I used to hunt, I would build blinds so the deer would not see me. Perhaps we could do the same here. I told Owens of my idea, and he readily agreed to help out. During the night, using a deep crater halfway inside No Man's Land, we constructed a hidden sniping location some two-hundred yards away from our line. From there, we quietly built a steel firing loop, using dirt and wood to camouflage the position. When we were done, I cautiously crawled over to look at it from the German side. The firing loop seemed well-hidden, but only time would tell if I was right.

We left the newly dug position to go back to our lines and watched to see if the enemy had noticed our improved shell hole. The next night, when it seemed our work had gone undetected, we cautiously returned to our blind and settled in for a long evening. Owens was a hunter and knew the importance of being quiet. We spoke no words to each other that night but just spent times taking turns resting and listening. I was fearful of a German patrol coming our way and did not want to be surprised.

Night in No Man's Land is an eerie experience. One's nerves are as tight as a violin string. From a distance, a dark patch of earth becomes a moving man. The eerie shadows from the German star shells would randomly spring up, adding to the strangeness of our surroundings. It was unnerving, and when it was my turn to sleep, I just fidgeted. My ears played tricks on me. In my fevered imagination, distant artillery became footsteps. So I let Owens sleep again. He nodded at me in the gloom and seemed to drop off right away. He wasn't about to lose any sleep.

When dawn came, I shook the sergeant awake, and we looked uneasily at each other. Now we were going to get some real work done. After a quick breakfast of iron rations and warm water from our canteens, I took up position in the blind. I inched my way slowly to the top and cautiously looked through the small rifle opening I had made. With my field glasses, I peered through the firing loop and looked across to the Hun line.

For the first time, I could see the enemy closely. Their cooking fires were smoking, and here and there, a helmet could be seen bobbing up and down. They appeared to be changing the watch, shuttling the night troops away to the rear for a rest.

A single enemy soldier lifted his head over the trench and looked over the line with a scoped rifle. It was one of their snipers looking to see what our side was up to. I motioned for Owens to hand me my Lee-Enfield. The gun stock felt sweaty in my hands, and I steadied myself with a deep breath. I slowly eased the rifle barrel

into the loop. I sighted down the stock and felt my heart thudding heavily as I found the target. The enemy looked sure of himself and completely unaware that he was being watched. I slowly squeezed the trigger and the rifle discharged with a sudden bang. The shot felt true, and I saw the distant head snap back from the impact.

I slid slowly back into our shell hole, feeling sick to my stomach. I didn't meet Owens's stare.

"Did you hit him?" he asked in the faintest of whispers.

I nodded. I had never killed a man before, and at first the feeling overwhelmed me. But then I realized that this was war. I had to fight in order to survive. Given the circumstances, that German sniper would have easily pulled the trigger if I was out in the open. But I will admit that I had to hand the next shot over to my sergeant until I could regain my composure.

We spent the rest of the day in that hole and took turns firing on the Germans. I don't think they ever figured out where those shots were coming from, since we kept our shots sporadically timed. I would pass by some targets and wait before shooting again. I'm not proud when I say that I may have killed four men that day, but Owens claimed at least five. I will admit that I was relieved when darkness finally came, and we were able to safely sneak back to our own lines.

Our little experiment with sniping brought me much favor with the ranks. They were tired of having the Boche snipers given free rein and were happy to see the tables turned on the most hated of the enemy. Owens and I were willing to sally forth again, but the Germans must have finally sorted out where we shooting from since that very night our blind was destroyed by a barrage of artillery. The shells swept No Man's Land, changing the old landscape into something new.

The word of our accomplishment must have finally made it to Colonel Smythe since I received an invitation to visit him the next morning. After my breakfast, I went and found him there sitting at his table with Wodenhill, who had a faint smile on his face. I admit that toothy grin made me a bit nervous. Anything that he found enjoyable must not be a good sign. Reese was there too, sorting through some papers. He looked repugnant as before and glared at me before continuing his work.

The colonel and captain were both drinking tea and had jam and toast on their plates. My company had rancid Bully Beef for breakfast and seeing those two enjoy their laid-out meal sickened me. At least Smythe still had the decency to look exhausted by the experience of living in the trenches. After I saluted, he motioned me to sit down at the table.

"Have some toast?" he asked. A scrape of jelly was clinging to his cheek.

The food in the trenches had been unusually poor lately, so I gladly took this invitation. I slathered on a thick helping of jam and proceeded to eat without any tableside manners.

"We heard about your sniping. Using a shell hole in No Man's Land as camouflage was a fine idea."

"Thank you, sir," I replied with a voice muffled by the hard toast. It was damn good jelly. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Wodenhill's face crack into a malicious grin. I didn't understand why until Smythe spoke again.

“Though I respect your initiative, I won’t have you take any unnecessary chances anymore. Before you take any such future endeavors, they must be approved by me.” By the time he had finished, his face was glowing red with anger.

I came here expecting praise, and not to be thrown on the mat. “But sir,” I protested after I swallowed, “I came here to fight.”

“And fight you shall,” he replied, “but only when you are ready. You are important in other ways than you think. You are an important recruiting tool to me.”

“But sir, I came over here to fight,” I repeated myself.

“In due time,” he said irritably. “But this is a dangerous place for a new officer. You must think of that before you take such risks.”

I doubted he had such concerns for the rest of the officers underneath him. I didn’t think I could be all that important to him, but what did I know of the politics of recruiting? I gave him a shrug and said coldly, “Very well, sir. You are in command. I shall do as you request.”

His face softened and he said, “It’s good to see such fighting spirit. Tell me, how are you getting along with your fellow officers?”

“Lieutenant Lyons and Prentice are very capable,” I replied honestly. “They have allowed Carter and me to survive. And I certainly couldn’t ask for a better commanding officer than Captain Meadows.”

“Meadowes,” Wodenhill said softly with a sneer in his voice.

“The captain may be a good front line officer, but he can also be a royal pain,” Smythe said to no one in particular. “I’m about to issue him an important order. You can carry it to him.”

I was surprised with the general venom directed to Meadows. He seemed like a fine man to me, but I knew staff and field officers often had disagreements. I nodded. “I shall gladly take him the orders,” I said.

“You can tell your captain that I want a heavy patrol sent over to the German lines. There may be a big push coming soon, and I’ve been told that the planning staff wants to know how many Huns are directly across from us. Have him send Prentice over with a few men and take a look.”

Wodenhill slid the typed orders over to my hand. I took a quick look at it before folding it into my breast pocket.

Smythe said, “And one more thing, Lieutenant – I don’t want you going along with Prentice. Remember what I said about not taking any risks.”

“Yes, sir,” I stiffly answered back. I took another piece of toast, wiped some jelly on it and folded it in half. Perhaps Lyons would like to have an extra bite to eat.

“That is all,” Smythe said with a wave of his hand.

I stood up, saluted and hurried off to find Captain Meadows. I found him at the Company HQ, digging through a sheaf of papers.

He glanced up at me and scowled. “Saw our Colonel Smythe, did we?”

I handed over the orders and said, “Yes, Captain.”

“I don’t know how we run this war with officers like him and that cretin Wodenhill.”

I had never heard Meadows speak ill of the colonel before so I merely nodded and said, “I wouldn’t know, sir.”

He read through the orders and made a face. "This will be dangerous work. I would rather have Lyons do it. He's the more experienced man."

"Smythe did specify Prentice," I reminded him. In all honesty, I would rather have seen Prentice get a German bullet than my best friend. I know it was a petty thought, but Lyons was the only true friend that I had, other than Owens, in this forsaken place. It would be rough going if I had to go on without him.

"Orders are orders," Meadows grunted and put the paper down. "Go get Lyons, Carter, and Prentice. We'll have a little talk on the best way to approach this fool idea."

"Yes, sir," I answered back and left the headquarters to round everyone up. I found Prentice doing his morning duty at the front outposts and sent him on his way without telling him anything. I had to go back to our billet to find Lyons. He was in his bedroom, reading through some moldy magazine. I handed him the bit of toast I had tucked away in my pocket.

He pulled a bit of lint off and said, "Toast eh? A spot of tea would be nice but I don't suppose Colonel Smythe would oblige." He ate the bread greedily.

As we walked back to the HQ, I filled him in on my meeting with the colonel and the orders I had delivered.

"Our Prentice out in No Man's Land? Sounds like a bit of fun. We will give the Boche a little surprise. But you say that the colonel wouldn't let you go?"

"Yes, he's rather strange about the whole thing," I replied testily.

"Hmm, perhaps you remind him of his son or something like that."

"I think the colonel would shove his own son into the front lines if it would get him a promotion. He doesn't strike me as the sentimental type."

He nodded sagely. "Then he really must want to keep you around for the war recruiting effort. Those American boys won't be joining up if they found out you died here in just a few days. That's hardly enough time to do something heroic."

"I haven't done anything brave," I said.

"My best advice for you is to stay alive. You still need to learn that."

We walked into the communication trench leading to the headquarters. We found Carter there talking to some of his men. I acknowledged the greetings of the soldiers, and then we hustled him to the HQ. There, Prentice was already poring over the maps with the captain. They were both speaking in those hushed tones of the professional soldier.

"Very good, gentleman," Meadows said. "Have a seat and we will discuss the best way for Prentice to go forward with this damned patrol."

Prentice looked a little sick to his stomach.

The captain tapped the paper in front of him and said, "I've read over Smythe's orders here and though it's a fool idea, we may be able to pull it off if we're careful. The Germans think of this area as a quiet zone. Sure, we've sent out a few patrols at night, but we've never broached their lines before. This should be a big surprise since they do not think we have the capacity to do that kind of work. Their sentries may be bored enough not to notice us sneaking up on them.

Lyons slowly shook his head. "The Boche have more Star Shells than we do. They're always shooting them off at night. It would take Prentice hours to crawl over there unseen."

“True enough,” Meadows admitted. “But do you have any better ideas? I would hate to have his men under their guns for that long of a time.”

“Perhaps we can rush the line before the Germans know it,” Carter exclaimed but was ignored.

I was still angry by Colonel Smythe’s rebuke. I wanted to carry my weight in this regiment. “Perhaps we need a diversion,” I blurted out. I felt their eyes turn on me so I went on and said, “Sergeant Owens and I kept them busy the day before with our sniping.”

“And a good show that was,” the captain admitted.

“They might be suspecting us to pull the same trick on them again. If I make myself seen on their extreme right, then Prentice can go to the left with his men.” It was a foolish idea, I admit, but as I said, I was feeling angry being ordered not to take any chances.

“It would be awfully dangerous,” Meadows said sternly, but I could see he was considering my suggestion. “It would only take a few moments before they would call artillery down on you and blow you to hell and back.” He was a man who rarely swore, and his words caught me by surprise.

Lyons looked over the map and pointed to the rightmost post on the line. “I think Grant here has a germ of an idea. Perhaps the two of us can make it work. We’ll have to let the Middlesex boys next door know or else they’ll get caught up in the fun. I’ll set up a Lewis gun here and call down some artillery to cut the wire across the way. Afterwards, we’ll rake their lines with the gun to keep the Hun’s heads down. We’ll throw enough Mills bombs and launch enough trench mortars to keep them interested in us. If we keep up enough firepower, they will think a full scale assault is going on from our side of the trench. With a little luck, Grant and I can keep the Germans occupied long enough for Prentice to get through on his side.”

“It may work,” Prentice agreed uncertainly.

“It is worth a try,” Meadows said. “Let’s go over the timing and your needs.”

We talked the plan through, made a few calls, pored over our inaccurate maps and made up the roster of men to go with Prentice. Lyons suggested that Corporal Childs go with him.

He was obviously nervous as he paced the mud-caked floor. “I’m not so sure about taking that infernal corporal. He never seems to pull his own weight.”

Meadows grunted. “He’s a shirker alright, but he’s up for a turn on a patrol. If he doesn’t do his duty, then you have my permission to shoot him.”

Lyons laughed and said, “But just shoot him in the leg and make sure to bring him back in one piece - he has good taste in tobacco.”

Prentice nodded grimly as if he hadn’t even heard the words. He said, “If you don’t mind, sir, I think I will get some sleep until midnight. I expect the others will be at their post in time for my performance.”

“They will,” the captain said tersely.

With those words, Prentice took off to and didn’t even spare us a look back. His shoulders looked as if he was carrying the weight of the world.

Lyons shrugged his shoulders and left the headquarters.

I tagged behind him and said, “What do you think of Prentice’s chances out there?”

Looking back at me grimly, he shook his head. He said, "I wouldn't give him much chance at all. But he has his orders and he has to follow them even if they mean his death. You and I can only do our best to give him a fighting chance."

I found Owens up front, minding my men. I ordered him to help out. We gathered up a Lewis gun and brought it into position on the rightmost firing loop. At the supply depot, I managed to source a few boxes of assembled Mills bombs. Trench mortars were always in short supply, but a dozen were found.

All the time, Owens was smiling broadly, seemingly itching for a fight. I think we all were looking forward to showing the Germans a thing or two. We've been shelled, mortared, and shot at for far too long. Now it was our turn to give some back.

By the time midnight rolled around, we were in a fine mood. Prentice stopped by to see that we were in position and ready for his patrol. His face was darkened with burnt cork and his breath reeked with rum. The drink seemed to have little effect on him since he was still wound up tight as a drum.

Lyons slapped him heartily on the back and said, "Be careful out there, old man. I would hate to have you killed – who else can I argue with?"

"Just do your job," he replied softly through his clenched teeth. "I'll be back to make sure you're kept in line."

"Don't worry," I said.

He ignored me and said to Lyons, "Now I have to go and make sure my squad isn't drunk out of their minds."

We then set our watches together and promised Prentice that we wouldn't start the show for another twenty minutes. I watched as he turned and made his way down the dark communication trench. In the gloom, he quickly receded out of sight like a spirit in the night. I shook my head at the dreadful thought. That could easily be me on that mission facing the chance of meeting my doom. There was no reason to hate any man out here in the trenches, and I felt some shame for wishing the worse for the man earlier in the day.

The relative quiet of the night was suddenly broken by the howitzers and artillery that we had ordered up earlier. Mind you, the frontline is never quiet since the sound of rifle and falling shells is always constant, but the sudden upswing in volume was startling. I looked at my watch I realized it was time for us to start soon. The shells from the British guns whistled over our heads and marched on towards the Boche trenches. Through our Lewis gun loophole, I could see the brilliant explosions. Even at this range, the sound was deafening, and underneath my feet I could feel the earth give a slight tremble. Shadows from star shells danced about, and the odd light of the exploding shells gave the trenches a surreal look. Owens was shouting in excitement and jumping up to look over the parapet to see the damage we were inflicting.

I put a hand on his shoulder and continued to watch through our loophole. The enemy's lines were getting hammered hard by the artillery boys. This went on for quite a while. I'm sure the Germans were having a rude awakening. In a few minutes, it all ended and the sudden silence was surprising.

"Get on that gun," I told Owens.

He nodded and started to squeeze out long bursts of machine gun fire over the enemy trench line. Apparently our shell fire had little effect on them since a few of

their rifles began snapping our way. Lyons then opened up a crate of Mills bombs. He grinned at me as he pulled the pin out from one. With a mighty heave, he threw it into No Man's Land. The grenade exploded with a satisfying bang. He chucked a few more over, and I joined in the fun. It was tricky throwing them – one had to be careful not to hit a length of barbed wire and have it bounce back.

We went on this way for a good thirty minutes, only taking a break to launch a few trench mortars. I hauled in more belts of machine gun ammunition and broke open another box of bombs. The Huns were certainly interested in our little display of firepower, for more and more rifle shots were coming our way. A few star shells burst over our heads, which only added to the chaos. The enemy even tried a few of their own trench mortars, but luckily the mortar is never an exact weapon. But I knew it was only a matter of time before their real artillery began. I was still surprised as the first rounds began to fall in front of us. Lyons tugged on Owen's shoulder and motioned for him to pack the Lewis gun up. It was time to get out of here before we caught a crump.

The Boche were in a fury now, and their artillery was beginning to come in thickly. The area around us was blanketed with shells as they tried to zero in our position. Shrapnel began whistling through the air above us, and I knew if I stuck my hand above the trench parapet, it would have been drilled through in a second. We lugged what we could away from the front line, staggering heavily through the communication trench. Breathing heavily, we stopped outside HQ and fell into a fit of laughter. It felt good to be alive, even with my ears ringing like hell.

Lyons recovered himself and grinned, "Well, Grant, we did the best we could for Prentice. I hope it was enough for the bastard."

I smiled. "I'm sure it will be."

We sat around at the table and waited for words of Prentice's success. We sipped some tea that Owens brewed up. I never much cared for the stuff, but the British drink it like water. I wasn't sure how much of it was actually from tea leaves or was mud. It didn't seem to matter to them since they always wanted their tea come hell or high water.

By this time the German shelling had dropped off. I could only hear the faint pop of the occasional rifle or the ringing sound a bullet makes when it strikes the barbed wire. We said little as we waited, but each moment seemed to cloud the air with anxiety. A distant machine gun began to chatter, and the rumble of German shelling started again. Had Prentice been discovered?

Lyons found my eyes and slowly shook his head in despair.

Our worst fears were realized when a grubby looking private burst into the headquarters. He was panting from exertion and blurted out, "It's Lieutenant Prentice. He's been hit out in No Man's Land."

"Is he still alive?" I asked the man.

"I think so," he answered.

"We have to help him," Lyons said. "Where is Captain Meadowes?"

The private shrugged and said, "A few minutes ago, I saw the captain at the front lines."

I pushed myself up and said, "I'll go see what I can do for Prentice. Come on, Owens."

"Good chap," Lyons said. "I'll see if I can get together some men to help out."

We parted our ways. I ran down the lines to the left side of our trenches. Coming to the front, I found the bedraggled remnants of Prentice's command. They were moaning and complaining like men in their situation do. Rifle bullets were snapping over us, and I had to shout to be heard as the shells continued to fall.

"Where is he?" I demanded.

A man I didn't recognize shook his finger in the direction of No Man's Land. "The lieutenant is back by the Boche line, sir. We couldn't make it through the German's wire because our damn artillery didn't do a thing to it. We tried to cut his way through, but it was no use. We were spotted soon enough, and they opened up on us with everything they had. Prentice got hit and told us all to go back without him."

"You should have dragged him back."

"He was too close to the lines. It was too dangerous."

"Damn it," I swore to no one in particular. I angrily stalked away from the poor beggars and carefully climbed over the parapet using the ladder that had been left there. Owens, bless his soul, followed me without comment. I think the fellow was keen on seeing that I stay alive. We crawled slowly along the open ground, taking cover inside the shell holes wherever we could find them. A few star shells went up, lighting No Man's Land with an eerie light. We jumped inside a shell hole soon enough and listened to the thrum of bullets passing overhead.

We kept crawling this way, inch-by-inch, until I could just make out the German line. In fact I could swear I could hear the guttural sounds of their language, but it was hard to tell with the sounds of battle. Bullets continued to crack around me, but it seemed that I was still hidden from view since nothing came too close. I didn't know where Prentice was, so I made my way along the Hun line and stopped to investigate every shell hole I came along. I can tell you it was a dreadful experience reaching my hand into those blackened pits. One never knew what horror was waiting inside, and I feared running my hand into a decomposed corpse since it was a popular way to quickly bury the dead.

I was glad Owens was behind me. This was a frightful position to be in. It seemed like forever when I had reached the right shell hole. I heard the click of a pistol hammer being drawn back. "Prentice?" I whispered.

"Is that you, Grant?" the voice of Prentice answered back.

"Yes," I answered back in relief.

Owens and I crawled into the shell hole with him. The three of us made for a crowded hiding place. "Where are you hit?" I asked as I put my hands on his body.

"In the thigh," he whispered back. "It hurts like hell." His voice was sounding weaker by the minute. "I'm afraid I can't walk."

"Well, you can certainly crawl," I said.

A quick search of his leg and I found the wound. The thigh was ripped open with a gaping hole, and it was wet with gore. I slipped off his belt and wrapped it tightly around the top of the leg to make a quick tourniquet. I drew it tight, and he only made a small gasp as the leather bit into his flesh.

"Now try to keep quiet," I warned him. "The sergeant and I are going to drag you back and it's going to hurt like hell. Do you understand?"

He nodded painfully.

A sudden shower of bullets passed by and another star shell lit up the landscape. How long had I been out here? I looked east, and I thought I could detect a slight lightening of the horizon. I knew we only had a little more time before the sun would rise. It was time to act fast before we were exposed since it would mean instant death. I waited until the flare was gone. I then motioned for Owens to help.

We dragged Prentice along the ground by his arms. He kept his moans to himself. With his weight, we had to stop and rest every thirty feet to catch our breath. I was amazed by our tortured progress since the enemy never seemed to see us. Perhaps they did see us but took enough pity on the wounded and let us go. The Boche could be funny that way.

I never felt any fear during this time. I know it seems hard to believe even now, but I swear I am telling you the truth. I was too busy worrying about Prentice to even consider my own mortality. Religion and patriotism become such distant ideals in the face of death. And that is how it is out here in the trenches. You fight and die for your comrades, not for anything else.

It was with great relief that we finally pulled him into our own front lines. Lyons was there and helped us prop Prentice up against the wall. Dawn had just started to break across the horizon and I could see that the wounded lieutenant had passed out somewhere along our journey. But he was still alive, for I could still hear his breath rasp slowly between his lips. Lyons had already passed the word along, and there was a waiting stretcher party of men to carry Prentice back to the medical station.

I watched him being carried away and suddenly felt faint with exhaustion. It had been a long night. I wanted nothing more than to sleep for a week. I leaned dizzily against the parapet wall and slid down to the ground in a daze. Owens remained standing. He was the sort of fellow who never seemed to tire.

“Good show, Grant,” Lyons said in a low voice.

However his voice was choked with emotion and I looked questioningly up at him. His face was gray and his lips tightly pursed together.

“What is it?” I asked when I saw his dire expression.

My friend let out a big sigh and said, “It is bad news. I'm afraid it's Captain Meadows. He's dead.”

Chapter 6

I was too stunned by this news to even speak. I merely stared at Lyons in disbelief and felt my mouth open but not make a sound. My head nodded slowly. It seemed impossible that Meadows could be dead, and the terrible events of the night only made the news worse.

Lyons eyes were misted with near tears. He explained. “He must have been hit by a German rifle bullet as he was watching Prentice move over No Man's Land. It was truly a one in a million shot.”

All I could do was nod numbly. I cleared my throat and said, "I want to see him. Let me take a look at him."

"It's not something you would want to see," he said. "It looks rather ghastly."

"I'm afraid the lieutenant is right," Owens agreed solemnly. "It would be better if you remembered the captain as he was."

"Damn it," I cried out, "don't treat me like a child. I've already seen enough dead men. What does one more matter?" Even though I was exhausted, I managed to pull myself up from the ground. I glared at the two of them and began walking.

Lyons gave me a dark look, and with Owens tagging behind, we went along the trenches to find the body of Captain Meadowes. As we went, a rifle bullet cracked over our heads and another shell exploded nearby. The Germans were still riled up.

Poor Meadowes was lying face down in the spot where had fallen. His servant, Private Hill, was standing guard and had to turn his head away in shame as we approached. In the dim dawn light there were traces of tears down his mud-encrusted face.

"Have you touched the body?" I asked him.

He was quite devoted to the old Captain and was fighting back his emotions as he spoke. "No, sir, I haven't," he replied and kept his face turned to the ground.

"Did you see him get shot?"

"No. He sent me running to headquarters to call in some more artillery support."

I flicked on my flashlight and looked over the body lying on top of the dirty duckboards. The captain's field glasses were on the ground next to him, the straps intertwined in his clutched fingers. With the beam of light I was able to see that a neat hole was drilled in the back of his head. Blood had stained the wood and dripped into a thick pool on the mud below. Crouching down on the ground, I turned over the body and looked at the staring face. There was a small scrape on the forehead and a bruised blotch on the cheek. After seeing this, I snapped the torch shut as to not attract any further attention from the Boche. They might drop a few rounds our way if they saw a glint of light shining from our trench for too long.

Lyons and Owens were looking at me expectantly.

There was a dim train of thought in my mind. It was only had a glimmer of an idea that I had. In my mind's eye, I saw Meadowes scanning No Man's Land with his field glasses. His attention would be fully on the battlefield before him, and with the sound of battle, he wouldn't be able to hear anyone coming up from behind. It would have been easy for someone to get in close and kill the unsuspecting captain. But who?

"I don't think it was a German bullet that killed him," I finally said. Even in the early morning gloom, I could see the surprise in their faces.

"What do you mean, Grant?" Lyons asked. "Are you sure this is the time and place to be playing detective?"

"I'm not playing anything. I'm serious. Look, if a German bullet blew off the back of his head, there wouldn't have been anything left of it. From the wound, it looks more likely as if it was a small caliber bullet from a pistol."

"Come on, Grant. Perhaps it was some shrapnel - plenty of shells going off tonight."

Owens got on his knees, turned the head and looked closely at the wound. "Sir, I'm afraid Lieutenant Grant is right. This is a perfectly round entrance hole, caused by a pistol fired at close range. You can even see a bit of burnt hair here. Shrapnel wouldn't have pierced his skull like that. Trust me, I've seen enough death here to know that."

Lyons looked back and forth between the two of us as if he was measuring our words and trying to find a fault in our argument.

I flicked on my torch again and motioned to the parapet wall. The torch showed a faint mark of blood on the wood supporting the parapet wall. "Look here. There is a bit of blood where his forehead must have struck when he pitched forward. Someone shot him in the back of the head while he was looking out towards the German line. It's the only way it could have happened."

"Shut that damned thing off before the Germans see us," the lieutenant said harshly.

"Very well," I said. I snapped off the light.

Owens stood there watching us. He was a smart fellow, and I was glad that he agreed with my findings. I just hoped that Lyons would agree with what I was about to say next. "I think someone in our own company must have killed the Captain."

"Like who?" he asked doubtfully. "He was a right popular man around here."

I shrugged and said, "I don't know right now, but who else could it be?"

Lyons stared at me.

I said to my sergeant, "I want you to go back to Captain Meadows' quarters and stand guard until we get there. On your way, get a stretcher party to take the body away. There is no reason for Hill to stand out here any longer and get himself killed."

"Very good, sir," Owens said. He then saluted. He was then off like a shot running down the trench lines. As I said, he was a very good man. I was glad he was here to help.

"Let's return to headquarters," I said to Lyons, and we started in that direction leaving Hill to guard the body. We both ducked our heads down as we heard a shell drop nearby. It was easy for me to forget I was in a middle of war when I had murder on my mind.

"The colonel won't be too happy on tonight's results with Prentice," my friend commented. "And the death of Captain Meadows will certainly complicate things around here. I just hope Smythe sends us a decent replacement."

"Damn the colonel and damn the replacement," I snapped back and felt a twinge of dislike for Lyons that I had never felt before. I swept back the dark curtains to our headquarters and let him step through first. He stopped short, and I heard him swear underneath his breath. When I stepped inside, I saw the reason for this exclamation. The whole place had been thoroughly ransacked from top to bottom. Papers were littering the floor, the table had been turned on its side, and even the mattresses in the back room had been slit open. Someone had come here and tore this place up, but for what purpose?

"What in the hell happened here?" Lyons said as he turned up a chair to sit down and look over the damage. "It doesn't make any sense."

“A hurried search was made,” I replied. “Whoever killed Captain Meadows came back here to find something that was hidden away.”

“There you go with that murder theory of yours,” he said tartly. “You should give it a rest.”

“Look, Lyons, you and I usually see things eye-to-eye. Why won’t you believe that the captain was murdered?”

“I can’t. It’s all just too fantastic. We’re in the middle of a war where thousands of unlucky fellows are getting killed every week. And I’m supposed to believe that Captain Meadows was shot in the back of the head by one of his own men? I know soldiers can be a vindictive lot, but I can’t think of one that would gladly pull that trigger against a good officer like him.”

I frowned at him and said, “At times you can be quite the stubborn ass.”

His eyes widened at my words. “Now there’s no reason to be testy, my American cousin. If you’re so smart then why don’t you tell me all about it?”

Shooting him another nasty look, I replied, “What do you think I’ve been trying to do? Obviously someone had it in for the Captain and then went looking here for something. When I know more, I’ll fill you in.”

“Very well, old chap. Perhaps I’ll give that colonel of ours a call and tell him the bad news.” Lyons dug through the littered floor until he found the telephone under a pile of papers.

As he rang through, I began putting the mess into some kind of order. I could hear the one-sided conversation as I worked.

“Captain Wodenhill? This is Lyons here.” He made a face at me since he shared my dislike for the man. “I’m afraid that I have a bit of bad news for Colonel Smythe.” He lit a cigarette as he listened to the reply on the other end. “Yes, this is about Prentice and that fool mission you gave him. He wasn’t able to get through the German line at all and was shot up pretty bad. We don’t know yet what his condition is yet, but it doesn’t look good.”

He took a brief puff as he listened. He then answered, “And tell Smythe we will need a new Captain here. Meadows bought it too.”

I thought Lyons’ attitude was rather flippant, but he was always like that in a crisis. It was a likeable trait at times, but in such a situation as this, it was damned irritating. I suppose it was his way of coping with the stress of the front lines.

After another pause, he said, “I’m afraid it isn’t quite that simple. Grant here thinks that Meadows was murdered.”

There was a loud squabble of words over the phone that I could hear even from where I was standing.

Lyons listened patiently to the man on the other end, and then put his hand in the air as if to stop the rest of the conversation. He placated Wodenhill by saying, “Yes, I agree. But I’m sure it will all be sorted out soon enough. Grant here may be right. We have nothing to lose hearing him out.”

He then said a few more words in farewell and hung up the phone. Stubbing out the cigarette, he turned to me and said, “You’re not making any friends there. But what the hell do the staff officers ever know? Too much dug-out disease if you ask me. Well, Wodenhill decided to come over personally to look into the matter. Not that it will be any use to us.” He grinned and handed his pack of cigarettes to me.

Taking one, I lit up and blew the harsh smoke out. I was exhausted and too tired to think clearly anymore. I could barely remember the last time I'd slept or eaten.

Lyons said, "You know that was a brave thing you did out there – rescuing Prentice that is. Are you trying to win a medal or something?"

"I was just doing my job," I answered.

"You and Prentice aren't exactly friends," he said wryly.

"We have our issues," I agreed, "but I would expect him to do the same if I was in the same sort of trouble."

Lyons opened his trench lighter and clicked it a few times to watch the flame ignite. He smiled at me and said, "Then you certainly think better of Prentice than I do. I doubt the bastard would do anything of the sort. But after you saved his life, perhaps he'll turn over new leaf and start treating you properly."

With a shrug, I replied, "It doesn't matter what happens either way."

"True, the lucky old bugger may have gotten a ticket back home to old Blighty. If he has any luck, we may never see him again."

"That's not what I meant. I mean I would do the same even if he was my worst enemy. No man should have to die out there alone in No Man's Land."

Lighting another cigarette, he looked me over suspiciously. "Don't forget that most men won't do the same for you. Out here, it's every man for himself. There is no reason for heroics my friend– it's unsafe and foolhardy at best."

The talk of Prentice had distracted me, but I ignored him and began sorting through the papers spread on the floor. There had to be something here that the captain's killer wanted. Something worth money, or some piece of information that was deemed valuable enough to kill for. But what could it be? Lyons continued to sit there, and I could feel his eyes on my back.

He eventually said, "What are you looking for?"

"Whatever the murderer was looking for," I answered simply and continued to work through the mess. I turned the table back upright and began placing things back in order. There was nothing here out of the ordinary - papers containing supply requisitions, orders, and the various bureaucratic forms that plague any officer. It seemed that the higher the rank, the higher the pile of paper that follows you around.

"Do you know anything out of the ordinary that Meadows was working on?" I ventured to ask. "You were quite close to him."

With a sour laugh, he said, "I was never too good with paperwork. Prentice had the job of helping him out with that sort of thing."

"So you can't think of a single reason why anyone would ransack our headquarters like this?"

"Not a single one," he replied as he stubbed his cigarette out on the floor with his boot.

"Thanks for nothing," I said rather more nastily than I intended. I picked up the pile of papers and left him there. He didn't say a single word as I strode out into the bright dawn light. With a fast stroll, I made my way back to the billet. The Huns were in fine form that day. They were still in a nervous state from the night attack and continued to shell our lines. Quite a few coal-boxes dropped near me,

so I had to scurry for what cover I could find. It took a while, but I finally reached the relative safety of the deserted village.

The wrecked buildings and torn up roads only succeeded in making my dark mood worse. Captain Meadows has been murdered, and here I was, stuck in this meat-grinder of a war. It all seemed useless. I was stuck so deep in my thoughts that my eyes were glued to the cobblestones in front of me. I finally yanked my head up when I heard shouting in the distance. It was Owens, and he was standing in front of my house, trying to attract my attention by waving at me. I trotted forward.

“Thank goodness you’re here,” he said excitedly.

“What is it, Sergeant?” I demanded with what little breath I could muster.

“It’s Meadows’s quarters, sir. I’m afraid it has been ransacked too.”

The news wasn’t that unexpected, so I merely nodded and brushed past him. I immediately went to the captain’s bedroom and found it in disarray. Meadows was normally a meticulous man and would have paled when he saw the current state of his belongings. They were scattered everywhere, and even the mattress had been ripped open, spilling straw onto the floor.

Owens was standing behind me. I asked him, “Did you come directly here as ordered?”

He shifted his feet back and forth, staring at the ground. “To be honest, sir, I stopped and had a quick chat with Corporal Childs. He was telling me all about the problems they had out there in No Man’s Land.”

“I told you to come directly here, Sergeant. How long were you jawing with that good-for-nothing Childs?”

“Only a few minutes, sir,” he replied. “Honest. I came here and found it like this. Word must have gotten out quick about the captain being dead, though I can’t imagine any of the boys taking the liberty of stealing from him.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “Have you touched anything here?”

“No, sir, it looks exactly as I found it.”

Stepping gingerly into the room, I looked over the mess. There had to be something here that was important. The murderer must have quickly gone through our headquarters, and when he didn’t find what he wanted, decided to search here. Was the murderer successful in his search? I would have to take a look myself to try to determine what was missing. A near-impossible task since I didn’t even know what I was looking for.

“Sergeant, I want you to help me look through the captain’s belongings.”

His own thoughts mirrored my own when he asked, “What exactly are we looking for, sir?”

I began digging through the captain’s bags and replied, “Anything out of the ordinary - a box, bag or book that an officer wouldn’t normally have.”

“That doesn’t give me much to go on, sir,” Owens said as he finally joined in the search.

We looked through that room thoroughly, going through everything that I could see. But it was all to no avail as we found nothing out of the ordinary. It was just the type of kit you would expect any officer to have.

“Doesn’t appear to be anything strange here, sir,” the sergeant said quietly.

"I believe you're right," I said with disappointment. I then rested my right hand on one of the rough-cut ceiling beams above me and leaned forward to look at the debris on the floor. I was beginning to feel angry when I realized that there was a gap on top of the beam. I ran my hand down the length of the opening and felt something tucked away inside. I pulled it out in triumph and saw it was a small leather book.

With his eyes wide in admiration, Owens said, "Good show!"

I briefly studied the leather bound book and said, "Sergeant, I want you to find Lyons at headquarters. He's there waiting for Captain Wodenhall to arrive. Could you have them come here as soon as possible?"

He saluted and paused a moment before making his leave. "Sir, do you think you will be safe here? What will you do if someone comes back here while I am gone?"

I touched the butt end of my pistol and replied, "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself. You should know that by now."

"Very good, sir." He saluted yet again and took off.

In the pale light coming through the window, I sat down at the desk and began examining the leather-bound book. It looked cheaply made, and I saw a London manufacturer stamped on the back. Turning to the first page, I saw it was first dated from seven months ago. There was a list of military goods, and a number that looked like a dollar amount jotted to the right. There was an itemized list of rifles, grenades, food, kits and everything else you could imagine - even tobacco. The quantities involved were nothing that would fully support a regiment like ours, but it was still quite a substantial number of goods being entered. I rifled through the pages and advanced quickly through the months. There was thousands of dollars worth of gear listed here.

It didn't make any sense at first, but suddenly I remembered the packet of papers I retrieved from the floor of headquarters. I finally had some idea of what the book meant. Someone was pinching from our supplies and selling them for a profit. The book contained the entries of the stolen items being sold. It was Meadows who had discovered the loss by studying the supply depot records. The question was how did he get a hold of this book?

I heard the soft squeak of leather soles against wood. My hand reached for my pistol. Looking up, there was Corporal Childs standing in the doorway. His face was still darkened with cork from the night action. He pulled his cap off and saluted.

"Can I be of any help, sir?" he asked. I caught his eyes lingering over the book and papers.

"No thank you. What are you doing here?"

"I thought Lieutenant Prentice would like to have his pipe. He's at the casualty station waiting for the lorry to pick him up and bring him to hospital. Word is he is going to be alright. I thought a bit of tobacco would cheer him up."

"I see," I said. I shuffled the papers together and slid the book into my breast pocket. "Let's go see if we can dig it up."

Feeling uneasy with Childs behind me, I led him to Prentice's quarters where I found his old pipe sitting on the windowsill. The corporal was unexpectedly quiet,

and the little house now felt very still and menacing. He looked up at me with a grin and was about to speak when the front door opened.

“Well, I best be off,” Childs said and quickly grabbed the pipe from my hand. He left before I could say another word, and I heard the side door shut as he went out.

“Sir?” I heard Owens voice call out.

“I'm in here,” I said and went to meet them in the hallway. Wodenhill and Lyons were there. The sergeant stepped aside to let them pass.

Wodenhill was the first to speak. “Owens here said you have some evidence to bolster your claims that Meadows was murdered.”

“Yes, sir,” I answered and pulled out the book from my pocket. I handed it over and watched as the captain began paging through it.

“What am I supposed to make of this gibberish?” Wodenhill said sharply. “There is nothing here but a list of goods.”

“It goes on for some months, sir,” I answered. “Look at the other papers that I found at headquarters. Meadows was gathering evidence that someone was pilfering from the general supplies and selling off the goods. If you look at the right hand column you can see the money amount for each transaction.”

“What do you make of this?” he asked Lyons and shoved the book into his hands.

He looked at the book momentarily and replied, “Well, sir, I do believe Lieutenant Grant here may be on to something. We have been short of many items that other regiments have plenty of.”

“You would say that,” Wodenhill said wryly. “You two are chums and will say anything to help each other out.”

I got a quick wink from Lyons, who said, “If you say so, sir. But nonetheless I do believe it is worth investigating. There is no harm in looking into the matter. If someone is nicking our supplies, then it certainly couldn't hurt to know.” He handed the book back to Wodenhill who weighed it in his hand.

“Good,” he said. “I'll make sure this book reaches the right hands. The colonel will be most interested in this matter. Theft from an officer and murder are serious matters.”

“Don't forget these, sir,” I said and handed the sheaf of papers over to him.

He nodded and said, “You should know this is on the hush-hush, but this death of Meadows couldn't come at a worst time.”

“How is that?” Lyons asked.

“I've heard there is going to be a big push against the Germans soon, and now we're suddenly short of two experienced officers. We will have to dig up a replacement quickly, and Smythe is not going to have an easy time of it. So the colonel and I need you two to be on your best behavior. Keep the men in line and drilled. Make sure Carter does his job too. This is going to be a very big offensive and every unit up and down the front line is going to be involved.”

“So we're finally going to take it to the Germans?” Lyons asked grimly. I guess he wasn't the type that wanted to charge over the top to glory. After tonight, I couldn't blame him. We were going to run into nothing but barbed wire, shrapnel and bullets.

“This is going to end the war, Lieutenant,” Wodenhill exclaimed.

“Don’t worry, sir, we will do our best,” Lyons said sourly.

“Yes,” I agreed and hastily added in a salute.

“Good, gentlemen. Mind what I said and keep this information to yourselves. But make sure to get your men prepared too.” He saluted both of us and left by the front door. It slammed heavily against the frame.

“He’s an insufferable ass,” Lyons said and shot me a nasty grin.

Behind me came a low chuckle from the sergeant.

Though I had no reason to be happy, I returned my friend’s look with a smile. I said, “It’s a wonder that he ever became a captain.”

“Oh, he’s Smythe’s golden boy. He can do no wrong in his eyes. You meet that type all over this army. It’s a wonder that the Boche don’t sweep right over us with those kinds of staff officers leading from the back of us.”

Chapter 7

Meadowes's replacement was some old fellow they dug up from who-knows-where. Captain Bryant was New Army and used to be a lawyer at some well-respected family firm. He was a thin, reedy man with a tidy mustache and arrogant airs. Right from the start, he complained about our lack of discipline and seemed to mostly target me for extra criticism. Perhaps he didn’t like Americans, or maybe it was just me, but at this point I didn't care. I found his attitude most annoying. I ran into his type at my old office. He was more concerned about the rules than trying to actually get something accomplished.

Under his leadership, there was always more work to be done. Because of him, we were out all night expanding our forward trenches and filling sandbags. The men grumbled, and I couldn’t blame them since this activity only made the Germans more suspicious. Every night there was a stream of dead and wounded as the enemy shells targeted our working parties. The men had been comfortable where we were and didn’t like poking their heads above the parapet unless they had to. Not that I could blame them - after Prentice had been wounded, morale had fallen like a rock. No longer did we feel invincible. The casualties from that night had been a lesson in humility. The enemy had a heavily defended position that would be nigh impossible to crack with the firepower we had available. There just weren’t enough men and guns to do the job.

It was with great joy when we finally received news that Prentice was going to make it through alive. There was also good reason to believe that he would be returning to us soon. They even postponed sending his replacement which was further proof of his future recovery. I know he and I were not close friends, but I still missed his sour disposition. It was odd to feel that way about him, but the circumstances of living in the trench had that effect on a man. I had even forgiven Lyons for his offhand manner of that terrible night. He was dealing with the horrors of this war in his own way. Who was I to judge him?

I should remember to mention Childs. Ever since that night, he became quite friendly towards me. Personally I found it annoying and wanted to thrash the

bugger. Lyons told me not to mind him, but the corporal nonetheless bothered me. I could feel his mocking eyes carefully watching every move I made. He seemed to be everywhere, and perhaps it was my imagination, but the man made every effort to attach himself to me. He was somehow part of every work party I commanded.

Owens was always nearby. I found his constant attention quite unsettling. Since the death of Meadowes, he had decided to take it upon himself to be my personal bodyguard. He was a simple man with strong loyalties, so I suppose I should commend him for it. But when you're busy and trying to take care of your duties it can be a bit difficult with someone always over your shoulder. Whenever possible I had to order him away so I could complete my work.

A week after Meadowes's death, I heard nothing new concerning the investigation that was supposed to have started. There should have been something useful in that book, but even the damned Red-Caps did not come to question me. When I had a spare moment, I even gave Wodenhill a call from the HQ, but he rudely told me that the investigation was currently going on, and I would be contacted soon enough. He told me to be patient and soon everything would be sorted out. That was army bureaucracy for you – ploddingly slow and inept.

I'd thought and thought about what had happened to the captain. Honestly it crowded my mind at times, especially when it was quiet and I was trying to sleep. We knew we could all die any day – that was readily apparent right now. A stray bullet, a night watch that ended up being your last, even someone on your own side could shoot you by accident. But being murdered was not what Meadowes had signed up for. He'd been in the army, he knew the risks, but yet he continued to serve.

The war ground on, and for the next day we were kept busy with our duties. I couldn't help notice that there was an increased amount of train and truck traffic in our area. Deeper behind our lines, many artillery guns were being placed, and massive amounts of shells were also being brought up. Something big was definitely going on and everyone seemed to know about it. Talk was everywhere about the big push. Even the Germans must have known that something was about to happen. Finally, during one chilly morning meeting, Captain Bryant confirmed our worst fears and began describing our next operation.

"You may have noticed that a large number of artillery is being placed behind us," he said, blowing through that ridiculous mustache of his.

"I did notice that," Carter chimed in.

I was absently stirring my cup of tea and barely looked up at the new captain. I wanted a good cup of coffee, but you would swear the British had never heard of the stuff.

"Grant, I hope you are paying attention," Bryant said to me, chiding me like some schoolboy.

"Yes, sir," I replied glumly and cupped my hand under my chin in mock boredom.

"I might as well tell you before you hear the rumor," he continued on. "There is going to be a big push soon, and we're taking a small part in it." Bryant then gave us a rare smile which sent a chill down my spine and said, "This is going to be a multi-unit operation, and I'm personally going to make sure we reach our

objective. The Germans have been complacent along our lines for far too long, and the French need our help because of that mess at Verdun. According to them, we haven't been pulling our weight."

"Damn Frogs," Lyons muttered darkly.

Ignoring him, Bryant went on. He said, "The French forces have become bogged down at Verdun, so General Haig has agreed to help. We're going to relieve the pressure on the French by mounting our own attack. The Germans are tied down fighting them, so we're not expecting too much resistance along the Somme front."

I let out a snort and said, "The Boche has given us enough trouble here already, sir. Just look at what happened to Lieutenant Prentice."

"I heard about that, but don't let that worry you. There is going to be a massive bombardment starting in another week. There is going to be enough shells dropping down on the Germans to destroy their trenches, dugouts, artillery and supply network. I doubt if there is going to be anything left over there to stop us. Trust me gentlemen, it will be an easy walk over." He gave us another version of his smile, a frightful leer which did nothing to improve my confidence.

I said doubtfully, "The shelling that we gave thee enemy did little to help Prentice. The barbed wire entanglements were still there when he tried to scout out their lines."

Carter looked between the captain and me as if expecting a bit of fisticuffs.

"Grant has a point, sir," Lyons said as he pushed his cup of tea away. "Our shells do nothing but blow the barbed wire up and drop it down to the ground again. We need something heavier that can cut through that wire."

A dull thud of distant shells seemed to punctuate his words.

Bryant sighed. "Gentlemen, I've been assured that all of this has been considered by command. This shelling is going to last for a week and will include plenty of high explosives. There won't be anything left of the German line by the time we are scheduled to push off. We will be part of the thirteen divisions taking part in this operation in tandem, so we must do our part to make it work. The entire line will be moving forward. The enemy won't be able to defend against such an enormous attack. We will take over their first lines, and once they have been secured, we will hold them until the reserves come to continue on. We have the easy part, but mind you it still is important."

Lyons looked at me and gave a quick shake of his head. His face betrayed his emotions – we were going to get killed out there.

The fool captain must have read our thoughts for then he said, "We do have our orders, gentlemen."

"Yes we do," my friend replied bitterly. He got up and stalked out of the room without saying a further word.

Bryant shot me a scathing look as I stood up to follow. Carter just gaped at me. Giving a quick salute to the captain, I went out to follow Lyons. He was ahead of me, moving quickly down one of the communication trenches towards our billet. I caught up to him and began walking next to him.

"Those damn fools are going to get us all killed," he said sourly.

"What can we do about it?" I asked as we climbed out of the trenches and started taking the road into town.

He shot me a dark look and shook his head. His eyes were sick with worry. I began to question the man's sanity. Perhaps he had been here for far too long. The pressure of everyday death was enough to make the bravest man crack. I would never have suspected Lyon to be afraid, but I could see the fear bubbling underneath. I just hoped the fellow wouldn't break before we had to go over the top.

"Why don't you go and get some rest?" I asked. "I recently picked up a bottle of good whiskey and we could have a couple of snorts."

He nodded weakly and said nothing for the rest of our walk back to the billet.

Chapter 8

It was that wonderfully quiet part of the morning. The nurses and doctors were scurrying about and paying no attention to my needs. I could hear the click of the nurses' hard heels echoing down the marble hallway. The guards outside my doorway were sitting on their chairs and conversing in low tones. Nurse Pennington had already come and gone with the promise of stopping by later to hear the rest of my story. She had spent the night patiently hearing my side of the remarkable events that I took part in. Whether she really believed me or not remained to be seen.

The dishes from my breakfast were piled on a tray that was balanced precariously on the side table. By any stretch of the imagination it had been rather poor fare, but compared to the food in the trenches, I considered it fine dining. I had asked repeatedly for coffee, but I was still getting weak tea cut with sour milk. Still, if this was a poor lot for an officer, I hated to think what the regular soldier would receive at their hospitals.

I got around to thinking of my own problems. This damned leg was hurting something furious and would impede any possible escape. But no matter what, I wasn't going to give them the pleasure of having me put against a wall and shot. There had to be some way to get out of here. I racked my brains thinking of a plan. I was hoping I could count on Nurse Pennington to help out. She seemed most interested in my story. Perhaps with some further persuasion she would be willing to risk a spot of trouble on my behalf. It may sound cold-hearted to use someone like that, but I was in desperate straits.

Some loud voices broke my reverie. I craned my neck to see who was there. My heart leaped and any remaining self-pity faded once I saw Lyons talking to the guards. He was handing over a few of his choice cigarettes and giving them a round of smiles all around. They gave him the nod to pass. With a knock on the open door, he walked into my room with a broad grin pasted on his face.

"Well, well, Lieutenant Grant. Are you fit enough to stand at attention yet?"

"Not quite," I replied and waved him to the chair. I was excited to see my old friend, but I pretended to be nonchalant; I hadn't realized how much I'd missed him. It occurred to me that I'd love to see any familiar face I knew, even Carter or Prentice.

He drew up the side chair and sat down. Leaning back he surveyed my room with some interest.

“Planning to move in?” I asked sarcastically.

“I’m just seeing how the better half lives,” he replied with a wink. “It is almost worth getting wounded for such posh surroundings. And the nurses here are something else.”

“Yes, they are,” I admitted.

He gave me a wolfish leer.

I asked, “Tell me, what is happening at the regiment? Is there any news?”

“I’m afraid there is nothing to report yet, but I just stopped by to make sure you were doing well here at the hospital.”

“Well enough,” I said tersely. “But what am I going to do? I don’t know how much time I have left. Once they have me patched up, it will be time for a short court-martial and then off to be shot.”

There must have been some evident panic in my eyes since Lyons stared momentarily at me before he continued talking. His voice was low and soothing as he said, “Look old man, I’ll do what I can for you, but I’m afraid there is little evidence to go on. I’m sure something will turn up that can prove you are innocent.”

I watched him warily, feeling as if I had lost all hope.

He shook his head. “Come on there, don’t worry. Things will work out for you. You’ve had enough scrapes with death for me to know that you’re a lucky bastard.”

My reply was cut off by the arrival of Nurse Pennington who had already walked quietly into the room. She looked over Lyons with an appraising eye before saying, “I hope I’m not interrupting anything, gentlemen.”

“Oh no,” I said.

“And who is this?” my friend asked with interest as he rose politely from the chair.

“Nurse Pennington, may I introduce you to Lieutenant Lyons.”

The fool actually gave her a bow and kissed her hand. She looked at him with a knowing expression. It gave me a slight twinge of jealousy.

“Pennington?” Lyons asked. He sat down. “Certainly not the Pennington family of Hallam Fields?”

She blushed and gave a little curtsy. “I’m afraid so.”

“So you must be Ellen Pennington. I thought you looked familiar. Surely you must remember me. I’ve actually been up to your place a few times with friends.”

“I’m afraid I don’t remember you,” she said with obvious embarrassment.

“I’m hardly surprised. They were such big get-togethers, so I must have faded into the woodwork.”

“I can’t imagine you fading in the background,” I muttered darkly. This was all news to me. I had imagined Ellen sitting around the family home, knitting and wishing for some man to come along and sweep her off her feet. In reality she was having mobs of people over for drinks and who knows what else. Were there so many men over at her home that she didn’t even recognize Lyons? My mind boggled at the idea. He was hardly forgettable.

Lyons went on and said, "You see, Grant, Ellen here is quite famous, in the right circles, for her weekend parties. We all had a bit of fun with tennis, drinks, a bit of polo and some dancing. Her father is always out of the house, so we've certainly had our jollies while he was gone."

"I see," I said coldly. I really didn't want to hear more of this, but I also didn't want to show how jealous I was.

Ellen met my eyes for a moment and then looked away. Her cheeks were turning red with embarrassment. She said, "I'm afraid to say that those parties got quite out of hand."

"Oh rather," Lyons said and gave me a wink.

She gave Lyons a withering stare and said, "I have some other duties to attend to. I shall stop by later in the day to check the bandages." She took off in haste without a further word. I could hear her fast steps clicking down the hallway.

Lyons had been watching her exit with interest and when he finally turned to me, he gave a low whistle. "Some soldiers have all the luck. Here I was thinking you were lonely with some troll of a nurse at your side, and instead you have an angel like that looking after you."

My stomach felt sour. I said, "What can you tell me about her? I'm surprised that you know her at all."

"Really? You must realize that England is a smaller country than America. The aristocratic crowd makes for even a smaller group of people than you could imagine. But I can tell you that she was a popular girl. Plenty of blokes were after her."

"Like yourself?"

"Me?" he asked with surprise. "You give me too much credit. You must trust me when I say that I never had any such designs on her. She was always out of my league. But you seem to be doing rather well with her. I can tell you that you're getting further along than anyone I ever knew."

Those words made me feel better, but I said innocently, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Look, old man, I can tell you're interested in her – that's obvious enough to me. And I thought we two were comrades. There is no reason we should be hiding anything from each other." He leaned back in his chair as if he had proved his point. A lighter and cigarette was flipped out. He was soon smoking away.

"You've been too long in the trenches, what do you know?"

He grinned and said, "I remember our trip to Paris. You were doing well enough with a certain girl there."

I let out a laugh. "She was a prostitute - of course I was doing well since I had a pocketful of cash."

"I still say you have a way with women. A girl like Ellen Pennington is a rare catch let me tell you."

"How are things with the regiment?" I asked to change the subject. I didn't wish to discuss my love life with Lyons. He had nothing to offer but bad advice.

"You asked me that already. You mean, how are your men doing? I know you miss them."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Part of me does. I'm not sure why."

“That's easy enough – you're like a father to them. They look to you for guidance in a dangerous world.”

“And led them through hell and back,” I said grimly.

“They don't look at it that way. They know that you're trapped in circumstances beyond your control much like they are. They know that you're looking out for their best interest - at least as well as can be expected in this war. Don't worry, your men are doing just fine. They still wonder how you ended up here in the hospital since they were beginning to think you were invincible. But word of why you are here has not been forthcoming, and I certainly haven't said anything to them.”

I nodded and reached over for a cigarette. Lyons lit it for me and patted me on the shoulder. “I'm afraid I must be off. I didn't exactly come here with permission from the powers-that-be.”

“Thanks for taking the risk and for taking the time to see me.”

He got up and gave me a wink. “Don't let the bastards grind you down. You'll be up and about soon enough. I'll see that you're set free of this gross injustice and we can go visit Paris again.”

“I would like that.”

“I know you would,” Lyons said and with a wave of his hand he was off. He stopped to thank the guards and then his footsteps faded down the hall.

I suddenly felt lonely and realized I couldn't wait until Ellen came by to dress my wound. It was good to unburden my story on her. She was a good listener and a good woman too. Maybe Lyons was right and she was a good catch. To take my mind off of her, I thought of my trip to Paris.

Lyons and I had gone there for a day on leave. It was before the start of the great push. Colonel Smythe had decided, after our bad experience out in No Man's Land, that a little rest and relaxation was in order. We were given just one night away, but that was a gift I gladly took. So with my friend as my guide, we had set out for Paris. Lyons had been there many times before and promised we would have a good time. So with a happy heart, I left my company behind under my sergeant's care, and we caught the train.

The train trip was long, but I didn't mind it in the least. The cars swayed and bucked while my face stayed glued to the window. It was amazing the number of soldiers and transports I saw. A large amount of men were certainly being moved to the front. But best of all was the untouched countryside – green with the summer sun baking the ground. The farms and villages sped by with few words passing between Lyons and myself. After living in the trenches, one forgot that another world still existed.

“You're enjoying this trip,” he remarked.

I nodded. “The trenches are claustrophobic. It is strange to be somewhere where you're not surrounded constantly by death.”

He motioned towards the other officers riding in the train and said, “Death is everywhere. This train could crash. We would all be dead in an instant.”

“You're a gloomy sort,” I shot back.

“Hardly,” he said with a smirk. “I'm just a realist. Being on the front lines just sharpens the mind and makes you realize how frail life is. It makes you realize that you have to take what you want out of life before it takes you.”

"There are laws in this world," I reminded him.

"I know that," he mumbled and turned his own attention back to the passing landscape.

When we arrived at Paris that evening, the sheer beauty of it all was unexpected. The city was brightly lit up, and a gay, carnival atmosphere ran through the crowded streets. People were laughing with a number of drunken soldiers staggering about. Prostitutes were also prowling the streets, trying to deal in their trade. It was like the war was far away and of little concern to them all. I had to admit it made me angry thinking of the sacrifices my men had given for these people.

"Now what is the matter?" Lyons asked as he led me through the maze of streets. "You've been very quiet."

"It's these people here. It just doesn't seem right."

He shook his head. "You'll get used to it. The men and women here don't know what war is about. They aren't out there on the lines like us. Don't blame them for being sane enough to stay away from it all. If the Germans broke through then they would be clamoring for our help and blaming us if we didn't come to their aid.

"It's still not right," I growled.

"I think you need to relax and have a drink before we get to the hotel. I know a nice little place where the booze is good and cheap. It will pick you up before we go on to see the rest of the city."

"Maybe you are right," I agreed and let him take me by the arm.

We walked a few blocks to a little dive that was filled with soldiers and women. I was never sure who was a prostitute or just a local girl, but they were everywhere trying to get a drink bought. Lyons ordered the best whiskey they had, and we began some serious drinking. I'm normally not a heavy drinker and was soon slurring my words as we tried to talk over the din. Soon a pretty, petite black-haired girl came to our table. She kept slipping her arms around my shoulders and demanding I buy her a drink.

"Achetez-moi une boisson le général?" she asked.

I didn't know enough French to exactly understand her, but I knew what she wanted. "Oui," I snorted and waved over to the harried waiter.

"Whisky s'il vous plaît," she said to the waiter.

He was a slick-looking devil with a wax-pointed mustache. I saw him give the girl a little wink and even in my drunken state, I realized she was working the crowd for the money. Sure enough, when the waiter came back with the whiskey, I grabbed it out of his hand and before he could stop me, I gave it a sip. It was nothing but brown-colored water. I handed the drink to the girl and paid the waiter anyways. She didn't look too happy that her ruse had been discovered. She gave me a hard pout.

Lyons let out a laugh and poured another drink from our bottle. He looked none the worse for wear, but it always took plenty of whiskey to put him under the table.

"You don't need to fool me," I said to the girl. "I'll buy you a drink anyways."

She smiled and said in a sweetly-accented English, "Thank you."

"So you do know English."

"A little bit - enough to get around."

I put my arm around here and rested my head against her shoulder. "You're a very pretty girl."

"You're not the first to say so," she said as she gently pushed me away to a more upright position.

"No reason to be sore. I said I'll buy you a real drink. What will you have?"

"Just a little wine," she said and to my surprise actually sat a little closer to me. I snapped my fingers for the waiter and ordered a glass of red wine for the girl.

Lyons looked over his glass and gave me a smile. "You're a fast worker over there. Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?"

"Ah, what is your name again?" I asked her.

She gave me a grin and said "I haven't told you yet. But you can call me Pauline."

"Pauline," I said to try out the name. "And what a pretty name you have to match such a pretty face. My name is William."

"Oh, you are smooth," my comrade butted in.

I shot him a dirty look and then tried to ignore him. "Pauline, this here is my friend Lieutenant Lyons. He's an insufferable ass, but I trust him with my life. So tell me do you really work here?"

"Of course, you silly boy. I have to make money to live. Though getting soldiers to buy me drinks is not much money." She tasted her wine and after setting down the glass she snuggled in closer to me. "You see working here is so very hard. I'm just a country girl trying to make a living. When the Germans came, I ran away in fear to Paris. This was the only job I could find."

"It's a sad story alright," I said and took another drink. Not that I believed a word of it. It was some type of patter she had come up with to please the customers. A little sympathy will get you a little more money. I looked across the table and saw that Lyons was busy talking to a pretty brunette of his own.

"We're lucky you British were here to save the day," Pauline said coyly. "I'm sure Paris would have fallen if it hadn't been for your bravery."

I laughed a little bit and said, "I'm afraid I'm not British, my dear. I'm an American."

Her eyes widened. She said, "An American? I thought your accent was rather odd for a Brit. Please tell me all about America. Is it true that you all wear six shooters, cowboy hats and duel each other in the streets?"

"Hardly," I said. "You've been watching too many movies. We're rather civilized and do the same kind of things you do here." I shot her a smile and said in a low voice, "Though I'm not sure my mother would approve of me being here with a girl as beautiful as you. It may lead me into temptation."

"I think I can show you the way," she giggled. "Come with me." She stood up and took me by the hand.

I quickly tapped Lyons on the shoulder and gave him the wink. He stood up and said, "Don't be gone long, or else we will miss our sign-in time at the hotel."

"Damn the hotel," I spat out. Any further protests by him were drowned out by the crowd.

Pauline led me past the bar, away from the noisy revelers and up a flight of stairs. My knees felt less steady as I climbed behind her, watching the belt of her dress move back and forth as she climbed each step. The rumble below became

muted as we walked down a dark hallway with creaking wooden floors. We went past several doors where I could hear laughter and a few frenzied groans from inside. Coming to the end of the hallway, a little window was open and blew in a cool breeze. She stopped to turn and face me.

“This here is the door to my room. I’m afraid if you want to come in it will cost you.”

I leaned against the window frame and felt the cool night air blowing gently against my face. My head was pounding with drink, and my throat felt burned by a hundred cigarettes. But I nonetheless nodded and said, “I’ll pay.”

“Very well, William - come in and spend the night with me.”

Unlocking the door, she let me in and lit an old oil lamp. It was a cheap little room with a bed that was too large for the space, a mess of clothes scattered on the floor and broken-down dresser with a cracked mirror balanced on top. She had also hung up travel posters on the wall. The total effect reminded me of some teenage girl’s messy bedroom.

“Have a seat,” she said and motioned me towards the bed. I took her advice and watched as she shut the door and stood in front of the mirror. She reached back and unzipped her dress. It fell to the floor. She was now standing there in a faded chemise. Her legs were long and beautiful like a dancer. In the reflection of the mirror, she caught me looking at her. She gave me a shy smile.

“Do you like what you see?” she purred.

“Oui,” I answered.

“Now take of your boots and trousers. A man always looks like he is going somewhere when he is sitting on a bed wearing boots.”

I nodded and pulled my boots off. The trousers and braces soon dropped to the floor. I took off my wool soldier shirt. It felt good to be free of the damned itchy thing.

She turned the oil light low until only a flicker of light remained. We were cast in shadow, and she got into bed next to me. She slid under the covers. I did likewise. We laid there for a moment, and I could smell her long hair. It smelled good and clean.

“Do you get lonely out at the front?” she whispered into my ear with her lips nuzzling against my face.

“You’re never truly alone out there. But I miss being near and talking with a woman.”

“Do you think I’m beautiful?” she asked.

“Very,” I replied with a voice that sounded hoarse to my ears.

“For a start, why don’t you try kissing me,” she said and nibbled on my ear.

So I turned over and kissed her. Her mouth was cool and unresponsive.

She gently kissed me back in a reserved fashion and whispered, “Tell me, do you have a girl back home?”

“I’m afraid not,” I said honestly.

“I thought so. You don’t seem distracted with guilt. I should hate to take you away if there was someone else in your life.”

“No worries there,” I said.

“Now I’m going to shut off the light, and you’re going to make love to me.”

She got up. I watched as she stood in front of the flickering light facing me. She pulled her chemise off and stood there momentarily to let me see her entire body. She slowly spun around for effect and then leaned over and blew out the wick. It had been a beautiful sight.

Pauline got back in bed. Leaning over my ear she whispered, "Now you can kiss me again."

So I did. This time it was warm and responsive.

Chapter 9

Ellen's Story.

I found Grant's friend Lyons quite the bore. I have to admit I pretended not to remember him from those days of my past, but how could I forget someone like him? He practically went out of his way to embarrass me in front of William. It reminded me of his annoying actions at my little past get-togethers. He and his friends were always getting into things and upsetting my father. Poor old Father hated to have the garden disturbed and his library made a mess of. My friends and I eventually had to stop having those parties since we were always being interrupted by Lyons and his ilk.

Still, those were good times, and now I could hardly fault him for his boyish enthusiasm back then. This war has certainly changed anyone it touches and I imagine it has also changed him as well. Strange to think that I'd ever be sorry the parties had to end. Compared to the present, the past seemed so much better. I just had hoped we wouldn't cross paths again, or at least he could keep his mouth shut. There are so many stories he could tell William and the male imagination has a tendency towards exaggeration. However, I think William would be too much of a gentleman to believe them. And they were such trifling matters anyways. An indiscreet kiss in the potting shed is hardly a marriage proposal.

Anyways, I continued to report to Major Radford every night to fill him in on William's story. The major seemed more haggard with every passing day, and I could only wonder what he was up to. When I asked him for an update, he just shook his head and said it would be better if I knew nothing of his activities. Well, I do know something, and that is that William has to be innocent. I have detected no lies or evasiveness from him. I just hope that truth wins out in the end.

Chapter 10

Captain Bryant was true to his word. The heavy shelling started the day we arrived back from Paris. The artillery guns behind our position pounded on, creating a maddening din of noise. At first a great cheer went up since across the way, we could see the German lines being battered with a heavy rain of shells. Not

a man stirred over there, and we all hoped when the time came to cross over, there wouldn't be anyone left to oppose us. But soon enough the constant barrage began to tell on our own nerves and put everyone in the most foul mood. Out on the front line, we had to shout to be heard and repeat ourselves many times, our voices getting hoarser and hoarser. I could only imagine how the Boche were dealing with it.

This shelling went on day after day, and I was having more than enough of the noise. With Captain Bryant and his constant drilling of the soldiers, it was with happy heart that I was given a bit of time away from my duties. The morning was clear and since it was good hunting weather, I decided to go out looking for game. Of course I had to bring Owens with me. He practically forced himself to go along. I was in no mood to argue with the man. So we picked up our rifles and headed away from the stench of the trenches and into the wooded hills behind us.

Before going through the town, we had to walk through the line of artillery. There we could see the men working feverishly away. Sweat was pouring off of their brows as they slaved away, stripped to the waist. Towels were tied around their heads, and they moved like automatons feeding the metallic beasts. Shells were being loaded, the gun pounded away, and the empty shell cases dropped off to the side. Then the whole operation was repeated ad nauseum. Hundreds of casings littered the ground, and men with dog carts were busy moving more shells up. I couldn't even imagine the amount of explosives we were dumping on those damned Germans. Owens and I did not stop long to watch.

It was with light heart that we left the village behind us and began to climb into the woods before the distant rolling hills. The sound of the artillery began to diminish somewhat and began to sound like a distant storm rolling in. It was rather pleasant to finally hear the chirp of the birds and see a countryside free of lead and bloodied steel.

After an hour of hiking slowly upwards, we paused for a rest. I sat down, put my rifle gently on the ground and uncorked my canteen to take a gulp of water. Owens stood and cautiously watched the surrounding woods. He held his rifle at the ready and seemed to be scanning for some unknown enemy.

"Go on and have a rest, Sergeant. There is no reason to keep any kind of army discipline right now. There is no reason why we should be attacked here."

"If you say so, sir," he said and dropped down on his haunches to dig into his pack. He brought out a tin of peaches which we split. I didn't ask where he got the canned fruit since we hadn't had any kind of good food for a long time. The sweetness of the fruit tasted good on this hot summer day.

I noticed that Owens still seemed tense and watched our surroundings carefully. He didn't look very relaxed at all, so I asked, "Anything the matter?"

"No, sir," he said rather too quickly.

"Are you sure?" I asked in puzzlement. "You just seem a bit on edge."

"Old habits die hard, sir," he said and gave me the briefest of smiles.

The habits of a poacher, I thought to myself. Not wanting to push the issue, I shrugged my shoulders and let out a deep yawn. The air was clear up here, and I had half a mind to take nap, but the restless nature of Owens finally made me stand up and keep on moving. "Let's go find us some game, Sergeant," I said.

We continued down a rough trail and found some recent deer tracks that we began to follow. It was rough going, pushing through the branches and climbing up to the ridge, but the exercise felt good. As we walked, we kept quiet as we could. Only a few murmured words passed between us. Deer are easily spooked, so I was surprised they would even be about with the crash of the artillery battering away at the silence of the woods. But I suppose even the animals could grow used to the cacophony of our man-made disaster.

Hearing a rustle of leaves behind us, I stopped and motioned for Owens to be silent. He must have heard the sound before I did since we both turned and raised our rifles in expectation. We waited and I could hear the thump of my heart over the low rumble of artillery in the distance. A rivulet of sweat broke across my forehead, and I blinked heavily as it dripped into my eyes. A nearby tree creaked. The wind gently blew across the treetops. We waited that way for another minute and did not hear another sound.

Looking back at my sergeant, I saw his face was tight with concentration. I mumbled, "Must have been a falling branch."

He slowly nodded and began following me again. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him stop at intervals to look suspiciously behind us.

The day was turning out to be a warm one, and my wool uniform felt sodden with perspiration. I motioned for Owens to stop and pulled out my canteen. After taking a deep drink, I stopped it up again and dropped to my haunches to rest. My legs ached from our slow climb and it felt good to stretch them out.

"Do you think we are getting closer?" I asked him in low tones. He had been oddly quiet all morning, not that he ever been the sort to run off at the mouth.

"You never know with deer, sir," he softly answered back. "With all those shells going off they are probably a bit spooked. But it is hard to hear anything up here and that could turn out to be to our advantage."

"True," I agreed with him. After another moment, we continued along the ridge.

There was another faint rustle of leaves and not twenty feet away in front of us, out popped a fawn behind a copse of trees. I raised my rifle in surprise, but did not fire. I heard Owens let out a breath, and I watched as the mother came out. I stayed quiet and watched as they walked out of sight. In the deep green of the forest, they made a beautiful pair.

"Why didn't you fire, sir?" the sergeant asked.

"I don't know," I replied. I really did know, but I wasn't about to tell him. I realized at that moment that I didn't feel like hunting game anymore. There was enough bloodshed right now. Why should I add anything more to it? It was a sentimental notion, but it sat hard inside of me.

"Let's keep going," I finally said.

"I could almost taste that venison," Owens added as we walked away.

Hearing him mention it conjured up the smell of cooking for me. I shook it off as the fresh image of the deer came back to me. We walked on.

The trees became sparse as we reached the top of the hill. The sun shone brightly up here. We both turned and in the distance below, we could see the broken village of Deveaux. No Man's Land stretched from the north to south horizon and looked like a brown ragged scar against the green fields. Small puffs of smoke showed the location of our artillery firing on the enemy lines. With the

aid of my field glasses I could see where the shells were landing and the brown patches of dirt being thrown up into the air. There seemed to be hundreds of shells dropping down. The Germans must be catching hell.

"Isn't it a sight?" Owens said in disbelief.

"It certainly is," I agreed. We spent another few moments trading my field glasses back and forth as we watched the spectacle below.

"Poor buggers," he commented.

I couldn't agree with him there. The Huns deserved everything they got. In my book, anything that weakened their defensive line was a good thing. We would need all the help we could get once we jumped the sandbags and entered into No Man's Land. I frowned at the thought and decided it was time for a smoke. Leaning over to put my Lee-Enfield down on the ground, I felt the momentary sensation of a bullet shattering the air over my head. Then I heard the crack of a nearby rifle shot. In the manner of a practiced soldier, I dropped to the ground and saw my sergeant do the same. A few more shots rang out, throwing dirt up into our faces.

By nature, Owens was a quick thinker and had dropped only to immediately return fire on our unknown assailant. I couldn't see what he was shooting at, but I joined in anyways and began peppering the woods below with bullets. I quickly ran through my cartridge of ten. I then loaded quickly. I thanked my lucky stars that my sergeant had decided to go along with me. Owens was being more conservative in his shooting and only emptied his clip by the time I had reloaded mine. I held my fire this time and waited. The only thing I could hear was the distant rumble of the artillery.

He nodded at me. He reloaded and said, "Bloody hell, sir, that was no German firing at us, it was the sound of a Lee-Enfield." His eyebrows were knitted together in concentration as he slid forward on his belly. Through the tufts of grass he peered into the woods and shook his head.

"See anything?" I asked cautiously. I noticed my hands were shaking. I pressed them hard into the ground. I was angry. If I hadn't leaned over at that exact time, I would be dead by now.

"No, sir. Just a couple of bullet holes in those trees we shot up."

We stood up cautiously and began to make our way back down the hill. There was a rustle of movement and some fifty yards away, I saw the back of a soldier running into the thick forest below. I raised my rifle to fire, but the figure disappeared into a thick stand of trees.

"That was one of ours," Owens grunted.

"Could be a German in disguise," I said, but didn't believe it myself. What were the chances of that?

Without any further words, we took off after the man. It was a wild chase down the hill with us sliding through the leaves and dodging past the trees. A good place to break an ankle, but I was angry enough not to care. We caught brief glimpses of our quarry, but never had a chance to take a decent shot. We were then forced to stop at a thick stand of pines since we had lost sight of him. Panting, I began looking over the ground in front of us. Our quarry had either gone to ground or had taken a turn that we missed.

“Careful now,” I warned Owens. I didn’t want to be ambushed, so there was no reason to rush ahead. Anyways, we were bound to catch the man if he made for Deveaux. After the forest there was no cover left before the village, since it had all been blown to smithereens. Any man crossing that barren ground would be an easy target to find.

I held my rifle out in front of me, ready to fire at any movement. Owens moved stealthily in front of me and halted every few steps to listen. The air was thick with tension and my hands felt cold, even in the June air. I heard the small crack of a twig breaking and immediately swung and fired my rifle at the sound. That mother deer and her fawn jumped across the path. It took a moment to stop myself from firing on them. My sergeant had fallen to the ground. He was smart enough to know that an errant bullet from me could go anywhere.

He looked at me and broke into a grin. “Damn girl almost got herself killed.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at our predicament. Here we were - two experienced hunters, who couldn’t even track a running man. The bastard must have taken a turn that we missed and meanwhile, we were busy taking potshots at a deer. I motioned him forward again, and we took off in a run to the bottom of the hill. There was still a chance we could get a good shot at the man once he cleared the open land before the village.

We breathlessly dropped to the dirt at the edge of the forest and looked over the ground approaching the town. It was once farmland that had been pounded down by months of shelling. I pulled out my field glasses and began going over the broken ground. Owens was breathing hard at my elbow. I could feel him jostle with the bolt on his rifle. I quickly picked up the brown uniform of a man crawling along the old shell holes. He was at least a hundred yards away and would soon be in the safety of the buildings of Deveaux.

My sergeant saw him too and brought up his rifle. Before he could fire, I said sharply, “Hold one moment before you take the shot. I want to see who it is before you kill the man.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied testily. “There isn’t much time.”

Our quarry tripped and fell hard onto the ground. He looked back for just a moment in panic and with the help of my field glasses, I would swear it was Corporal Childs. I dropped the field glasses from my face and shook my head in disbelief.

“Should I fire?” Owens asked impatiently.

“No, I think we’ll have some questions for our Corporal Childs.”

“Childs?” My sergeant was incredulous. “I’ll show that blighter the back of my hand,” he spat out.

I brought up my field glasses one more time to look at the fleeing figure. I was surprised to also see Carter coming down the road. He was walking quickly and looking about in a furtive manner. Did he have a part to play in all of this?

* * * * *

After we worked our way past the artillery and back into our lines, we spent a good hour asking about if anyone had seen Corporal Childs. None of his cronies knew where he was, so we went back to HQ. We found it nearly deserted with only Lyons left behind. He was leaning back on a chair with his head resting on the

wall of the dugout. Looking calm, a half-finished cigarette dangled loosely from his fingertips. A bottle of whiskey was at his elbow, and the glass next to it was half empty. A splash of liquor was pooled on the table with ashes floating on top.

His eyes were still clear when he looked up at us. "Have a good hunt?" he asked.

The thump of our artillery was constant, and even inside the dugout we had to raise our voice to be heard.

"We ran into a spot of trouble," I said. "Do you happen to know where Corporal Childs is?"

"Childs? On Wodenhill's orders, he was sent up to the regimental HQ just after you left. I delivered the message to him myself."

"That bastard took a few shots at us up on that hill," I said acidly. I filled him in on what happened during our expedition. He barely raised an eyebrow during the entire telling.

"You have to be joking," Lyons finally said.

"It's no joke, sir," Owens added his bit to the conversation.

"It makes sense if you think about it," I said defensively. "Childs must have killed Captain Meadowes and suspected me of knowing about it. That explains why he was following me lately. He took the chance today of taking a couple of potshots at me."

"Plenty of soldiers hate their officers, but I can't see Childs killing old Meadowes. For one thing, he is a complete coward."

"I know what I saw with my own eyes," I replied. "I saw the damn corporal sneak back into camp after he lost us in the woods."

Lyons lazily wagged his finger at me and said, "I saw Childs leave for the headquarters myself. He hooked a ride on an ammo lorry and looked none too pleased about it. You know how much he hates to work. Tell me Owens, did you see him out there?"

"No, sir. I did not get a chance since I do not have field glasses."

"There you go, Grant. If you don't believe me, then we can go and give Wodenhill a call. If Childs did sneak back to get you, then there is no way he could have gotten back there yet."

"Go ahead," I said defiantly. I could feel the anger rising in me and waited impatiently to be vindicated.

Lyons nodded and reached over to grab the phone. After a flurry of connections he was eventually calling the right line. "Good afternoon, you bastard," he said. He cupped his hand on the receiver and said to me, "Wodenhill." Lyons had the bad habit of nodding when on the phone as if the person on the other line could see him. "I'm calling about Corporal Childs. Is he still there? What do I mean? Well, has he been there all day? I see. Are you sure? All day? Thank you." He put the phone down.

"Well?" I said.

"Captain Wodenhill says that Childs has been there all day helping him move some records into storage."

"That bastard," I said and stormed out of the dugout before my friend could reply. Owens trailed behind but didn't say a word.

I never saw Childs the rest of that week. I suspected that Captain Wodenhill was keeping him away from me. I didn't really know why that would be, but I could

only think of one thing - Wodenhill had been in the plot to kill Meadowes. It must be related to those papers and book I had found. Childs was stealing from the regiment and making a tidy profit for himself. I had no proof since the materials I found were now in the captain's possession. He must be working along with Childs. What other reason could there be? The only way of seeing justice done was to see Colonel Smythe and explain my suspicions.

Later that night at our billet, I tried this theory out with Lyons. He called my suggestions absurd and suggested I concentrate on staying alive. After a brief argument, I gave up trying to convince him and instead waited for the moment when Colonel Smythe visited our lines. He often came to our HQ, though he tended to stay away from the very front line. For some reason, that visit never seemed to happen. The colonel must have been too busy with the planning of the upcoming offensive.

Instead of taking care of Childs, I was stuck dealing with my men's trench foot, drunkenness, and despair. The soldiers were getting nervous of thinking of going over the top, and even with our heavy bombardment of the enemy, they still expected the worst on the day of the big push. Not that I could blame them. Even with all the propaganda concerning the cowardly ways of the Germans, they were truly proficient fighters. We also knew they were dug in deep since they had a long time to fortify their positions.

With Bryant, we went over the plans given to us by the brass. We even found time outside the village field to practice our movements against some mock German trenches. The staff officers decided we needed to carry everything under the sun with us. There was trenching tools, wire cutters, signal flares, and there was even a designated messenger-pigeon carrier. I think we would have preferred to eat the poor things instead of carrying them along.

While all this was going on, I noticed that Carter was acting very strangely. It was almost as if he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. Perhaps it was fear, for he could not make eye contact with me. I wanted to discuss his presence on the day I was shot at, but he would always mutter something incomprehensible and would skulk off at the first opportunity.

The unending thunder of the artillery certainly didn't help anyone. It was constant nuisance, and during one afternoon we didn't even recognize the sound of true thunder until it began raining heavily. Every day I would look over the parapet with my periscope and see the damage inflicted by the shells. The enemy trenches were caved-in with torn sandbags and fragmented wooden supports. Not a single movement of life could be seen. I could only imagine what it felt like to be them, lying in their bunkers and hearing the constant, unending rumble of the ground being torn up above. It would be enough to drive any man to insanity. But still all that explosive force had done little to their barbed wire. It was still grouped heavily in front of the German works, and only the heaviest of shells could shred it. The wire still looked like a formidable obstacle. I remembered how Prentice was stymied by it. It would take several minutes to chew through the wire with a cutter and by then, we would be cut down by machine guns. I just hoped that the last bombardment would be large enough to shred the wire, so we could safely pass through.

Deveaux was now crowded with men, tents and wagons of supplies. Soldiers from other divisions had been moved up and were encamped behind our lines. They were new army recruits, and I confess we had little faith in their performance. This was the first time many of them were to see combat. Our veterans grumbled at the idea of a bunch of trigger-happy untested soldiers behind them. But still, if we took the first enemy line then all we had to do was wait for these fools to do their job. It was of little consolation.

The funny thing is, the more you dread an upcoming event, the faster time seems to pass. I kept my boys busy as possible with drilling and night trench construction, but the upcoming battle weighed heavily on all our minds. Before I knew it, it was the day before the big push, and by that time I was a bundle of raw nerves. That evening, we all had a break before the big day. I went off and found Lyons at our billet. He was drinking heavily with an empty bottle at his feet and a half-full one at his elbow.

“Mind if I join you?” I asked.

He gazed at me sourly and shoved the bottle towards me. “Suit yourself,” he replied with a slur to his voice.

We hadn’t been on the friendliest of terms since our last argument, but at this point I was looking for any companionship I could find. I had some real fears about leading the men across No Man’s Land and didn’t know fully what to expect. I took a real hard swig from the bottle and made a face. It was some nasty rotgut that Lyons had dug up.

“Can’t keep your liquor down?” he sneered at me. Then he broke into a frown and said, “I’m sorry, Grant. I’m just a bit keyed-up right now.”

“So am I,” I admitted.

“Feeling a bit nervous about tomorrow?” he asked. He pulled the bottle back and took another nip.

“Are you?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Just blow your whistle, climb the ladder, and you’ll be over on the Boche side before you know it.”

“I’ve been looking at their wire across the way, and all that artillery has hardly put a dent into it. I don’t want to be stuck on the wrong side and try to cut through the stuff.”

He shrugged his shoulders and said, “But still, we have to follow our orders - for King and Country.” He saluted in a comical fashion, missing the side of his head.

“It’s not my King or my Country,” I reminded him.

“That’s true,” he said and sampled another bit of whiskey. “I bet you wished you had stayed over in America where it is safe and sound. No Zeppelin raids, no women working the explosive factories with their skin yellowing from the nitrate, no men dying by the hundreds from this merciless, butcher shop of a war – you know you’re a damn fool for coming over here. You know it, and I can see it in your eyes.”

I stared at my friend grimly and said, “But I’m here anyways. Not much I can do about it right now, is there?”

“I suppose not. I’ll tell you a story about a major I heard about who tried to escape all of this shit. After the dustup at Marne, he got a letter from his brother. Turns out the major’s wife had taken up with another man and was living it up on

the money that he had left behind. This major was rather well-heeled, so the thought of his money being spent like that was too much for him. He went and led a patrol out to No Man's Land. When his men returned, they said their officer had been badly wounded. He told his men to return back to the trench. One week later, that same major was found dressed as a woman trying to board a boat to get back across the Channel. He told the police that he was going to shoot his own wife." He smiled at his own story.

"What happened to him?" I asked.

"They wanted to put him against the wall and shoot the poor bugger, but instead they cashiered him out of the service. It just shows that having the right connections is too important in this damned world. Mind you, if an enlisted man tried to pull the same stunt, they would have shot him the very same day."

I nodded sagely. You heard so many stories out here, and you never knew what was true or not. Rumors were the order of the day in the trenches. One story would pass from soldier to soldier and grow distorted with each telling. "Lyons, I know you've been in this game longer than others. What happened when you made your first jump over the bags?"

A dark shadow passed over his face. His hands reached clumsily for the pack of cigarettes shoved in his breast pocket. He lit one and blew the smoke high into the ceiling above. "It was a tough business," he said softly. "It was during the beginning of the war. The armies were still marching and fighting each other like the olden days. We were trying to find the best tactical positions and all that. At the time we really didn't have trenches like this – we were just using them temporary-like with no sandbags. They were just quickly dug holes in the ground without a sign of barbed wire. But it didn't matter anyways since Fritz had setup his machine guns to stop us. I blew my whistle, and over we went. Their machine guns begin sweeping across us, tap-tap-tap. I motioned everyone to fall to the ground and find cover. When I motioned them to move forward again, there wasn't a single man in my platoon who wasn't dead or wounded." He took another swig from the bottle and stared at the ash at the end of his cigarette.

"Tough business," I said softly. I felt sick inside with the thought that that could happen to me.

"Well, never mind that," he said. "We had to fall back of course. I was lucky enough to escape without a scratch. It was hell at night, hearing the moan of the wounded. The Boche let us go out and remove our casualties. They didn't even fire a shot at us. Of course things were different back then."

"Different?" I asked.

"Oh, I imagine you've heard the stories about the Christmas truce and whatnot. The war seemed more humane in the early days – we weren't out to murder each other, but just trying to end a dispute. Things have changed plenty since then. We've all gotten a bit more bloodthirsty, and now a human life isn't worth a damn. I think the killing will go on until there's no one left on this cursed planet of ours." He stared at the whiskey bottle. He picked it up and put it down again without taking a drink. His face was now flushed red with anger. He said, "To finish my story, the company I was in was so torn up that it was disbanded. They didn't know what to do with me so I was reassigned to Colonel Smythe here. It's been a right old place for me to wait this damned war out. I just wish it would end."

I lit a cigarette for myself and flicked the ashes to the floor. This wasn't the kind of talk I was expecting from a fellow officer. "You'll be in a spot of trouble if someone else hears such defeatist words," I said.

Lyons suddenly laughed and tilted his chair back. "Oh, don't worry so much. I'm sure our new Captain Bryant will give us a rousing speech tomorrow morning before we make the push. It will lift the spirits of the troops, I'm sure. Too bad the blighter will be waiting in the dugout to see the outcome. Or so far behind us he'd be mistaken for a scrounger if he weren't in uniform. Perish the thought that he would take a bullet for old England."

This talk certainly did little to lift my own spirits. I asked, "How can you stand being here day after day? You certainly seem to have little love for your situation."

"What an odd question," he remarked. "What else am I supposed to do? Can't run away, and I'm too much of a coward to shoot myself. I've just decided to accept my fate and make my life on this damned world as comfortable as possible."

"Speaking of fate, have you noticed Carter lately?"

"No, why?" he asked.

"He's been in rather a strange mood as if he is walking in a dream. I worry about him and how he will act tomorrow."

"I wonder," Lyons said.

"Wonder what?"

"Oh, never mind," he replied hastily. "I don't want to speak poorly of a fellow officer." And with those words he took the bottle and drained the remnants. With a callous wipe of his mouth, he stood up and swayed unsteadily. "I think I'll go and get some sleep," he said. "If I can," he added over his shoulder as he staggered down the hall.

I watched his back and decided it was a good time to get some rest myself. I knew I was too keyed-up to get any real sleep. I walked into my bedroom, undressed and lay on the threadbare mattress. I could hear Lyons snoring away in the next room. His breathing was deep and noisy like the village drunk.

It was a terrible time to sleep with the knowledge that in the morning I would be leading my platoon over the top. I tried to think of Chicago, my family, and the woods I roamed in my childhood, but nothing seemed to help. The artillery still thundered away, and each rumbling charge hammered heavily into my thoughts. My head ached terribly. I rolled uncomfortably about the bed which squeaked every time I shifted my weight. It seemed like hours before I fell into a restless slumber. It seemed I had just shut my eyes for just a minute when I felt someone shaking my shoulders.

"Come on, chap, we have some work to do," the voice said.

"I'm awake," I grumbled. I opened my eyes and saw Lyons standing at my bed. He looked none the worse for wear and was even smiling a bit. He was already clean-shaven and except for the dark circles under his eyes, you would have never guessed he had drunk a fifth of whiskey to himself.

It was still dark out. I felt miserable as if I had drunk three bottles of whiskey. I never felt so tired in my life. It only added to the unreality of the situation I was about to face.

“Get on up,” he said. “We have to get our men up and ready. They’ll be wanting their tot of rum soon. They will need it before this morning is through.”

Chapter 11

Anyone who talks of going bravely into battle has either never been in one or is a damned bloody fool. Feeling sick to my stomach, I stood there at the bottom of the parapet, ready to jump off with my company. As I got my men to line up, my mouth felt dry. I could barely croak out the orders. In a daze, I wondered if I would have the spit to blow the whistle hanging around my neck. The men to the sides of me didn't look any better either. Even Owens was pale as he nervously checked his rifle. We were all looking grim, though a few made some half-hearted jokes that quickly died on their lips. The shelling was growing to an enormous pitch, making the ground tremble, and the air shriek with shrapnel.

A commissary officer dropped off our rum jar. I quickly dispensed it to my men. They drank it gladly and watched greedily while I finished the last splash left on the bottom. The rum hit me all the way down to my legs. I began to feel a bit better about our chances. I threw down the jar and give them all a wink. “Keep steady boys,” I said. “No time to get cold feet.”

Captain Bryant was going down the line to give us words of encouragement. I really wished he would shut his mouth, since he was suffering from dug-out disease and wouldn't be joining in the attack. The men hated the brass that wouldn't lead from the front. I daresay no one was making an exception for him.

“Look sharp men, and be brave,” Bryant shouted as he came to my platoon. Someone said something in the back, and a few chuckles could be heard. He ignored them and went on, “This is a momentous day in history. A day you can tell your grandchildren about. This is a day where we turned the tide of war and made the Germans retreat in shame. You will remember this day for the rest of your life.”

“If we live that long,” someone in my company muttered.

Bryant ignored this, cleared his throat and continued, “You have been given the tools to succeed. You must trust the orders of your superior officers. Now Godspeed and long live the King.”

Even though I didn't mean it, I said, “Thank you, sir.”

The soldiers didn't say a word but just stared blankly at the fool captain. He shuffled his feet nervously, and decided he had enough. He went on his way to visit Lyons's company further down the line. From my spot, I could see my friend shake his head as Bryant started walking towards them. He certainly had no love for the captain.

The other regiments that had been brought up to join the attack were hunkered down in the communication trenches behind us. In the air there was a heavy reek of sweat, shit and urine as soldiers relieved themselves wherever possible. Bad nerves makes for bad bowels. My boys continually checked their rifles over and over, while I kept cracking open my Webley to make sure the bullets were still in

place. The situation was ever so dreamlike. I felt if someone poked me hard enough, I would have woken up back in my bed in Chicago.

I checked my watch and just at that moment, the shelling lifted. Behind me, Bryant blew his whistle. I put mine up to my lips and gave out a weak tweet that sounded strangely distant to my ears. We clambered up the ladders and began our steady walk across No Man's Land. The staff had told us that resistance was going to be light, so there was no reason to disperse the troops in safe order.

Owens was next to me. He was shouting, "March in good order, lads."

My other sergeant, Dobson, was staying behind the body of troops, making sure no one would run for it.

I looked to each side and saw my boys were doing well, marching almost like a parade formation. Only the shell holes disrupted our straight marching lines. Well, it didn't last long. We only made it to the middle of No Man's Land when the Hun opened up with their machineguns. In the haze of the morning, I could see the little lines of tracers coming from just to the right of us. Bullets began to snap in the air. My men were falling. I could hear them shout and scream in panic.

We could go no further without taking more casualties, so I motioned for my remaining men to drop to the ground and find cover in the shell holes. I jumped into a nearby hole with Owens quickly following behind. Our artillery fire had started up again, but it just continued to roll past the enemy lines. I wished I could have sent a runner back to direct their fire back on the German machinegun positions, but there was no way I could send anyone back in time to make any difference. It was useless anyways – a messenger would have been chopped down by the murderous fire coming our way.

"Give me my rifle," I shouted to my sergeant. He was carrying my Lee-Enfield along with his own. He threw it over. We both crawled up the sides of the muddy hole to find that cursed machine gunner. We found the bastard holed up in a mound of sandbags, tapping his machinegun back-and-forth with hellish results. With the bullets flying over my men, they had nowhere to go. I grew angry and began firing at that gunner. We managed to fire off a few rounds each before the bullets began tearing up the ground before us. The sergeant and I had drawn his fire. Now he kept a steady stream of fire coming our way.

I waved my arms to two privates to the right of us, and they noticed my motions to move forward. They crawled on their bellies and found a good place to start shooting at the machine gunner. His attention was now drawn to them. I managed to get a good shot in on his gun loop. The machinegun fell silent. I jumped up and began charging towards the enemy line.

A foolish action, I know, but I was angry – angry at this idiot plan and angry at the senseless slaughter. Why did my men have to die? They were good soldiers and I was going to do everything I could to save them from any further suffering. It was a good hundred yards to the Boche lines. I had to dodge through shell holes, torn up barb wire, and mud. I glanced behind me and only saw Owens plodding behind me as quick as he could go. The rest of my company was dead or lying doggo.

Another gunner must have taken the place of the dead German since that machinegun I had quieted opened up again. The ground next to me was chewed up with bullets. I felt a strong arm push me to the right. It must have been Owens.

I tripped and fell forward. On the right side of my head, there was an explosion of red pain. My whole world went dark.

* * * * *

It seemed like only a moment of time passed. I opened my eyes again. My head ached terribly and it hurt even to blink. I was surprised to find it completely dark. Had I gone blind? Fighting my panic, I reached up and felt that the top of my head was matted with encrusted blood. Feeling around some more, I found my helmet. It had been dented hard. A bullet must have ricocheted off the side, knocking me out cold. I turned over on the muddy floor of that shell hole and saw distant stars twinkling down. They looked faraway and cold. I sat there, wondering what had happened with the battle, and how the rest of the day had passed me by. The artillery was quiet now. I cautiously pulled my pain-wracked head over the lip of the shell hole.

At that moment, a star shell from the Boche lines shot up. I could see their shell-torn barbed wire and sandbags just a scant twenty yards away. I was too close to their lines for my liking. I was going to have a hell of a time getting back to mine. It may have been my imagination, but I swear I could hear low, Germanic whispers drifting from their front lines. In the gloom, I looked around the ground near me and couldn't find my rifle. My Webley was also gone. It must have slid out of my holster and gotten lost when I had fallen into this wretched hole.

I looked over No Man's Land some more. To my left, not more than ten feet away, I saw a motionless body. It was my poor sergeant and he was lying quite still. "Owens," I whispered.

There was no response. From what I could see, he was dead. I felt a flash of deep sorrow and hoped he hadn't suffered too much. The poor blighter would still be alive if he hadn't felt the need to be my guardian angel. There was no reason that he had to follow me across No Man's Land.

The light of the flare above disappeared, and I was once again plunged into darkness. I suddenly felt hot. My throat was parched. I found that my canteen was still strapped to my belt. I brushed the mud off, removed the cork top and took a long swallow. The water was warm, but it felt good. I splashed a bit on my face. In my pocket, I found my trench lighter. I was careful in hiding the flickering light and checked the time. It was just after nine o'clock. That means I had been knocked out for just over fourteen hours. It was time to try to crawl back to my own lines. I just hoped I wouldn't be taken for an invading German and shot.

Cautiously, I crept back up the steep bank of the shell hole and peered towards the British lines. Perhaps it was my imagination, but I thought I spotted a figure crawling towards my direction. I squinted in the dark, and sure enough, there was someone moving slowly my way. I had no hope of making out who it was, but I started to feel better. Perhaps they had sent someone out to find me.

Then I had a sudden terror-filled thought – perhaps it was a German patrol. He could be returning, taking a route past my shell hole. If I was discovered alive, I was sure to be captured or executed. I couldn't very well shoot the bastard even if I had a gun, since I was too close to their lines. Any shooting would attract further attention. I reached into my boot and found the small hunting knife I carried there. The knife was hardly considered a gentleman's weapon by the officers I

knew, so I had taken pains to conceal it. After I opened it with a slight comforting click, I felt the keen blade against my thumb and felt a bit better. There was nothing better in a close fight than a knife.

I waited impatiently, and in all honesty, my heart was beating heavily in my chest. Another star shell went up. I nearly yelped when the sudden light shone up above. At that moment, I heard the brush of cloth against dirt. A whisper came out of the darkness.

“Lieutenant Grant?” the voice said.

I didn't immediately recognize the voice so I didn't say anything. My grip tightened on the handle of the blade.

“Grant?” the voice called out again, and then a head suddenly showed itself over the lip of the shell hole. It was Smythe's servant, Corporal Reese. He was holding a bayonet in his hand. When he saw me, his face broke into a heartless leer. He slid head-first into the shell hole with the bayonet held high over his head as if he was going to kill me.

He must have thought I was wounded, since I had just barely enough time to dodge to the side. The slice of the blade whistled past my ear. I was still surprised by this attack so I looked at him with disbelief. “What the hell are you doing?” I asked in a whisper.

“I'm going to kill you,” Reese said through clenched teeth. He held the blade in front of him and took a measured step towards me.

“Come and get me,” I taunted him with a whispered voice. I lifted my knife in front of me and saw a sudden look of worry pass over his face. He wasn't used to meeting someone on equal terms. These bullies are always the same, and I suddenly remembered my school days. It was an odd time to be thinking of such matters. He rushed towards me. In the close confines of the shell hole it was a tricky business not to get skewered by that bayonet.

I felt his breath close in my ears as I turned away just in time. His bayonet struck the dirt behind my head. I cut upward into his stomach with my little knife. As he grunted in pain, I felt his blood soak onto my hand. I was glad he did not scream and attract any further attention. His left hand came up and struck me hard in the side of the head. In the shock of the blow, my knife fell to the ground, and my head roared in pain. I saw stars in front of me. With one final effort, I just managed to push him away before falling to my knees. The star shell above us began to die out. His face became a shadowed black mask.

“You're going to pay for cutting me,” Reese said between ragged breaths.

“Why are you doing this?” I spat out weakly.

“Because I was ordered to,” he replied.

I was still dizzy and could do nothing but watch as he advanced towards me. His bayonet was at the ready. Suddenly, behind Reese, another shadow joined my vision. A rifle jabbed out. The bayonet on the end hit the man straight in the back. The bastard let out an ear-splitting scream and fell towards me. I crawled over and pushed his face straight into the mud and held on tightly as he struggled against my weight. I had to keep him quiet.

“That's a good Lieutenant,” a weak voice said. It was Owens and he was lying down with his body just over the side of the shell hole. The rifle had fallen from his grasp and was lying with the bayonet stuck in the mud.

I know it sounds terrible, but I waited there until Reese no longer moved. I then checked for a pulse on his mud-stained neck. He was dead.

I gasped out, "Sergeant, I thought you were finished."

"So did I, sir," he said in a choked whisper.

"You did the right thing to help me," I said thankfully. "Do you think you can make it back to our lines?"

"With a little help, sir," he admitted.

That night, I dragged Owens through the mud. The work seemed to take hours, but he never complained. Though our lines were really close, it felt like we went for miles through that hellish landscape. We crawled past our own dead men, who leered at us like broken ghouls. At some point my sergeant went unconscious and without his feeble help, I had to pull him along as best as I could. It was a near thing when we finally were spotted by one of our sentries. I had to call out and convince the trigger-happy fool that we were not Germans. They finally sent someone to come out and help us.

He was a big man with giant hands, thick whiskers and a large grin. "You made it back, Lieutenant," he said to me.

I nodded with exhaustion. "I'll need some help with my sergeant here. I'm afraid he's been badly wounded."

The big man bent over the body and said calmly, "I'm afraid he's dead, sir."

I looked at the man in disbelief and went over to feel for a pulse. Owens really was dead. The skin was barely warm. I reached over and gently closed the half-open eyes. I felt sick and weak inside. The big man pulled me up by the arm and led me down into our front line. I fell into a faint.

* * * * *

I woke up. I was stretched out on a bunk in the backroom of our headquarters. The pale light of day was shining through the open door in the other room. Lurching out, I found Carter sitting at the map table. His lips were taut, and his hollow eyes were staring at the wooden wall. He didn't even notice my presence until I cleared my throat.

"Where is Lyons?" I demanded. My voice was hoarse. I could barely say anything above a whisper.

Carter waved his hand in the direction of front lines. He said, "If he had any sense he would be back in England. But he's somewhere out there getting the wounded together."

"What are you doing?"

He shut his eyes and mumbled, "I'm just resting." His head fell onto his hands on the table, and he began to sob.

I went over and patted him on the shoulder. "So how did it go out there?"

"It was murder," he said through his tears.

"Yes it was," I replied harshly and left him there. I needed to see what was left of my men. I needed to get out and breathe again.

We spent that day burying our dead and moving our wounded to the casualty station. The Germans kept oddly quiet that day though they could have walked right through our defenses with only token resistance. We had been decimated, and morale was at an all-time low.

With the help of two of my men, I took the body of Sergeant Owens up to the hills behind the village and buried him deep in the forest. He would have liked being there instead of being amongst the rows of faceless graves. He was a better man than most, suited for spending his days with God's Creation. I placed his body near an old oak tree, not too far off the little path we had walked before. As the men watched in silence, I said a prayer that I had learned from my father.

That night I spent a lonely supper writing a letter to Owens's mother telling her what a brave soul he was. Rain began to fall heavily against the windows and only added to the painful misery I was feeling. Lyons walked into my room. His eyes were black circles of exhaustion.

Leaning against my doorway, he let out a sigh. "Word is we are to be pulled out soon."

This news was hardly surprising considering the over fifty percent casualties we had suffered from yesterday's attack. "Any idea where?" I asked.

"Some village called Tremont."

"Never heard of it."

"It will be a chance for us to rest. You don't have anything to drink do you?" he asked hopefully.

"Afraid not," I said honestly.

He coughed and looked nervously about my room. "I've been drinking whiskey, a bottle a day, and I've pretty much run out. I don't know how you keep your nerves so steady." His sudden compliment made me feel a little more relaxed than before.

"They aren't – trust me."

He smiled and said, "Most of the officers I know are heavy drinkers. I can highly recommend it. It's the only way you can stop yourself from going crazy with worry. At this rate we're all becoming a generation of alcoholics."

"If we should live so long," I said.

"Ha! You're not doing anything to help your longevity. I saw what you did yesterday. What gave you the fool idea to directly charge that enemy trench like that? You're looking to get yourself killed with that sort of bravery. It's madness, pure and simple."

"And what were you doing?"

"Keeping myself from being shot since that machinegun fire was simply too murderous. I lost too many men to go any further. After I saw you and Owens go down, I didn't want any more of it, so I had the men pull back. We even took casualties doing that. Of course that fool Bryant accused me of cowardice, but I soon set him to rights on that idea."

"How's that?" I asked. My own voice felt stiff and far off. It took all the energy I had to concentrate on what Lyons was saying.

"I told him to go ahead and bloody-well lead the men across. Quite the row we had, but that fool daren't go out and actually do it. In the end, he gave in and said nothing to Smythe. Of course I would shoot the bastard if he did."

I nodded in agreement. I would have done the same.

"Now you haven't told me what happened out there," he said.

I told him about charging the machine gun nest and how I was pushed me into the safety of the shell hole. I then went on and told him about Corporal Reese and how Owens saved my life at the very last moment.

When I finished my story, Lyons took a deep breath. "So they sent that bully-boy of theirs to take care of you. I'm sorry I didn't believe this conspiracy of yours in the first place. But you must admit on the face of it, it seemed quite fantastic."

Even in my gloom, I was happy for him to finally admit that he had been wrong. If only he agreed to help me then I would have a chance of getting the guilty punished.

"What is going to be your next step?" he asked.

"At this point I'm not too sure. Perhaps the military police could investigate."

"The Red-Caps?" he scoffed. "Well, old man, there is the matter of evidence - it isn't likely that we can go out there and haul Reese's body back. It's too dangerous. They will want something a little more solid than just your word. No one is going to believe that staff officers would try to kill you. Wodenhill has the book you found, and Corporal Childs has gone to join him at headquarters. If they keep their stories straight, you will look like a fool."

"I would like to march over there with my rifle and shoot those bastards," I said testily.

"I'm sure they would like that - good chance to have you arrested and shot for insubordination. No, we must get something on them. But at this point I can't think of what."

"Then why did they go through the trouble of making an attempt on my life?" I asked weakly. "If they know I can't prove anything, then why take the risk of having me killed?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps they just want to wrap up any loose ends. You must have them worried that you are holding a piece of evidence back that they aren't aware of. Though honestly, I would never have thought that Wodenhill would have it in him. He always struck me as the cowardly type."

"I'm not sure it was just Wodenhill and Childs in the middle of this mess."

Lyons raised an eyebrow and said, "Surely you can't suspect Smythe of being the ringleader?"

"How quickly you come to the point," I smiled. "Wodenhill reports to the colonel, and Reese was the colonel's man. Who else could order him to take a chance like that in No Man's Land?"

"You're just guessing at this point," he said calmly and opened his cigarette case. He fished one out and lit it.

"And I thought you were on my side," I said sarcastically.

"Smythe is a respected man. Why would he embroil himself in a black market scheme? He's from a wealthy enough family."

"How do you know this?" I asked.

"If you've been around as long as I have, word gets around. Of course you're an American, but we still have some wealthy aristocracy in old Blighty. No one as rich as your Rockefellers, but most of the old families still have some loot socked away."

"Except for your family?"

Lyons gave me a hard stare as if I jabbed at a sore point. "I should hardly think of that as a concern of yours. My family name is better than most."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend. You seem to take your land and titles without any airs."

He gave me a quick smile and said, "I may take that front with old Prentice just to egg him on, but in all truth, I was taught to be rather proud of my background."

I didn't even pretend to understand this British class system so I merely nodded. I placated him by saying, "I see. It seems a bit odd that your last name and family determines where you go in life. Men in America are rated by their money and accomplishments."

"America has its aristocracy – oil and train tycoons, and the bankers who loaned the money to them in the first place. Their names are recognized well enough."

"True, but if they didn't have the money they would go unnoticed. How does Smythe rate in this aristocracy of yours?"

He gave this thought before saying, "Colonel Smythe's family has some poor relations in the past. His mother was an actress that his father married suddenly after his first wife died."

"So?" I asked.

"That is reason for scandal enough. Especially the last generation – anything to do with the stage wasn't respectable. It has a tendency to add a bit of tarnish to the family name. I'm sure they were never poor or short of money, but I bet Smythe wishes he had some more."

"Who doesn't," I said. "But still it doesn't seem like it would be a good enough reason to take the risk."

"Men do funny things for a bit of money," Lyons mused. "Now I'll ask around for you and see if I can find out more of the colonel's financial state. But I've had enough talk for now. I have to go and scare up a bottle while I can. I bid you goodnight."

I watched as he meandered off. I then sat down on my bed and thought of the events of the days before. I tried to tie all the threads together, but my head only hurt with the exertion. Leaning back on my pillow, I realized I was exhausted and needed some sleep before I was called for my watch. I shut off the oil lamp and immediately fell to sleep.

My dreams were strange – filled with broken bodies and gaping shell holes. The shell holes were filled with a mixture of blood and mud. It covered screaming men as they were attempting to crawl out of the cesspools of muck. There was a sudden boom of artillery shells falling nearby, so I snapped my eyes open. The sound was real and not just a dream. It sounded too close for my comfort. I rolled over and looked at the alarm clock by my bed. I had only been asleep for two hours. The Hun was telling us they were still around and ready for another fight. I wasn't ready for anything but sleep. I found it impossible to even get that now.

I tossed and turned for another hour before giving up. I got up and went to the kitchen to see if I could scare up something to eat. I found Carter there, sitting on the little low table that was used for food preparation. He looked gloomily up at me.

"Can't sleep?" I asked as I started rooting through the cupboards.

"Too much on my mind," he replied darkly.

Though we weren't on the friendliest of terms now, at least Carter seemed like an honest chap. "Anything you care to talk about?" I asked.

"Well, it's this move to Tremont."

"Oh, I heard that we were moving out."

He coughed nervously and finally said, "You see there is this smashing girl here in the village. Her name is Marie, and she is the most wonderful thing I have ever come across. She's kind and gentle, plus she's a real looker."

"Sounds like a nice girl," I said as I found a box of biscuits that had been sent by Prentice's mother. Seeing that he was in the hospital, I didn't think he would care if I took a few.

"Oh she is," he said brightly. "It's just that I don't want to leave her here. What if the Germans take this village back? Or you never know what kind of regiment could come and replace us. There could be some real scoundrels coming here."

"We have enough trouble with our own scoundrels," I said with a chuckle. "Tell me, doesn't she have some relatives she could move in with? Somewhere away from here?"

"Her father and mother died last year. Marie came here to live with her grandmother. I'm afraid she doesn't have anyone else."

"What about your parents – can they help you out and get her to England?" I asked helpfully as I started eating. Many of these officers were gentlemen of distinction with rich enough parents. I'm sure they could help.

"Oh, my father is rolling in it. But I'm afraid he is rather old-fashioned. I'm not sure what they will think when I tell them the news."

I put the box gently down on the table. "What news?"

The poor boy actually blushed. He said, "Marie told me last week that she is with child."

This explained his sneaking about the day I went hunting. He had been seeing his girl. I could only imagine his fear when he went over the top. Leaving the women he loved behind was bad enough, but if she was expecting, that was an entirely different matter. "I do believe congratulations are in order," I said with a smile.

"Are they?" he asked weakly.

I shoved the box of biscuits in his face. He took one gingerly and held it in his hand without eating it. I said, "At this point there is nothing to do but marry the girl. That's if you want to."

He took a tentative bite and nodded. "I guess so," he said.

"Once you marry her, your parents will have little choice but to take her in. It is as good as done now."

"But what will Colonel Smythe say? We can't marry without regimental permission."

"What can he say?" I asked incredulously. "Damn the regiment. I think it would be better if we didn't tell him a thing. You'll get married without his permission and sneak her out of the country into safety. I suggest you start that letter to your parents and have it posted from Paris so it doesn't go through the censors. Some chap on leave can mail it for you."

He stood up quickly. "Thank you very much!" Shaking my hand, Carter slapped me on the back. "I feel like a weight has been taken off my shoulders."

"Now go and get some sleep. We'll be pulling out soon, so you will have a busy day tomorrow rounding up a minister."

"How can I do that without Captain Bryant finding out?"

"I'll cover for you," I replied.

He shook my hand again and said, "You are the best." He left for his bedroom.

I could only shake my head in disbelief as I watched his retreating back. This was a funny place to fall in love.

Chapter 12

Two days later and we were finally on our way to Tremont. Our baggage had been packed and forwarded on by train. There wasn't enough room for all of us to ride, so only the staff officers and their lackeys were moved by rail. We, on the other hand, were to march for twenty agonizing miles to our new billets. The remnants of our company was grumbling the entire way down the road - of course, it is the soldier's lot to grumble - but they were still happy enough to get out of those filthy trenches. Who knew what was ahead of us, and how it would compare to what we'd left? At any rate, I knew there were going to be some sore feet tonight.

Overall morale was low, especially when we found out that we were not the only regiment that had been badly mauled. Losses all down the line had been staggering, but still the brass hats wanted to press on with the offensive. They were damned fools, and the men knew it. We were glad to be out of the fight for now. It would take more blood than we had to crack those German lines.

My men were marching down a muddy road, bringing up the rear of the regiment. A light rain was falling down, covering us with a miserable wetness. A number of trucks drove by, and the men cursed every time they saw a dry passenger give us the friendly wave. Because of the traffic, I had to keep them on the side of the road, marching in a scraggly line. Even though the bulk of the regimental goods had been shipped ahead, each man was still expected to carry his rifle and a full backpack.

I was walking in the very back of our column, keeping an eye out for stragglers. My Sergeant Dobson was leading from the front. I heard a car coming up from behind and going slow. I was tired and ignored it until the driver blew the horn. I turned and gave them a blistering look. I was in no mood for idiots.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant," a voice called out from the car.

I gave a closer look and quickly saw the bars on the shoulder. It was a pudgy, butterball of a general with a red face and a spot on the end of his nose. He was quite dry and comfortable inside his buttoned-up Sunbeam staff car. They had stopped, and the driver left the car running. With the disapproving look on the officer's face, I knew this was going to be trouble.

"Yes, sir?" I asked innocently as I could. I really felt like slapping the little bastard.

He leaned over the side of the car to talk to me, but was careful enough to stay out of the rain. "Your men aren't marching in proper order, Lieutenant," he said to me like he was addressing an idiot.

"Excuse me, sir?" I asked, wondering if I was talking to an escaped mental patient.

"Your men - they're walking on the side of the road. It looks quite unprofessional. They should be marching on the road in proper order."

I replied acidly, "Well there are lorries going down this road. The men got tired of moving out of the way."

"That's hardly the point is it," the general said. "These men of yours need discipline if they ever expect to beat the Hun."

"Very good, sir," I replied coldly. I saw no reason for further argument. If this prat wanted marching, I decided to very well give it to him. "Dobson," I shouted out in my loudest parade voice, "The general here wants the men to march in proper order. "

"Yes, sir," I heard Dobson reply with a shout. He then moved into the lines of men and began pushing them into the road. They closed ranks well enough and soon were marching down the road in good order.

"Is that better, sir?" I asked the general, sarcastically.

He looked at me strangely. He then nodded and told his driver to move on.

I called out, "They'll have to move to the side of the road to let you through."

With those final words, he shot me a dirty look and his driver took off. He beeped the horn angrily at my boys, and they grudgingly moved to the side of the road to let him pass. The bloody fool. The common soldier loathes staff officers, and I understand why. The general went on ignoring the other platoons on the side of the road and sped ahead. Once he was out of sight, I had the men return to the side of the road. If that little bastard came back, I think I would have shot him. Not a man in my unit would have testified against me.

As the afternoon wore on, the rain had disappeared, leaving only a foggy chill behind. After hours of grueling marching, we finally arrived at Tremont in the evening. It was a nothing of a village located on a muddy stream. As the sun began to set, I saw the shadowed ramshackle houses and a mill on the water. The mill wheel moved sluggishly, and I could hear a low, wood-on-wood groan. It sounded like an old man rattling out a slow death. As we marched into the village square, a few of the local peasants stared at us. To them the war was a far-off thing, and they apparently did not like the British troops reminding them that people were dying to keep them free of German tyranny. As far as I was concerned, they could go rot.

I had Sergeant Dobson take the men to their billet while I went to find Lyons and Carter. They were in the village square outside a dirty little pub, both with cigarettes stuck in their mouths. Lyons waved me over to join them.

"Hello, fellows," I hailed them wearily.

"Grant, how did your conversation with that blasted general go?" Lyons said with a smile.

I could see he was taunting me. I merely said, "You know how staff officers are. I'm sure a few more of his type, and we would have a mutiny on our hand."

Carter chuckled. He seemed more at ease than I last saw him.

“So how did it go?” I asked him.

He blushed and said, “Everything went well.”

“What are you two talking about?” Lyons asked. “Aren't you going to let old Lyons into the secret?”

“Oh, there's no secret,” Carter replied with a grin. “It's just that I'm married now.”

“Well, I thought I knew everything that went on in our regiment,” my friend said in surprise. “You must have knocked up that pretty French girl Marie up, eh? We all wanted a go at her, let me tell you. Now whatever will your parents think?”

“That was just the thing,” I added my bit in. “I hope you wrote your parents, Carter.”

Carter stamped out his cigarette on the rough cobblestones. “I did at that. I have high hopes that they will answer my letter in the best possible way.”

“I'm sure they will,” I said.

He grew silent and said, “I trust you two won't tell anyone else about this. I had to spread quite a bit of the stuff around to get married in secret. The damned village priest needed a few francs to get him to give up that stuffy Catholicism for just a simple marriage.”

“Mum's the word,” Lyons said and touched the side of his nose. “Now to celebrate, I suggest we find ourselves a good stiff drink. Though to tell you the truth, this village looks a mite short on entertainment. I bet the wine tastes like piss, and the girls all have the clap.”

We then turned and walked into the local watering hole. It wasn't much of a place – a few low tables, some surly looking customers, and an old, scarred bar that had seen better days. I'm sure the locals found it a pleasant enough place, but it certainly was no Paris. The bartender was a big man with longish black hair and dark eyes. He didn't look too pleased to see us.

“You speak English?” Lyons asked.

“A little bit,” he said haltingly.

“Give us a bottle of your best wine, if you please,” Lyons said slowly in that way some speak to foreigners as if they were deaf.

The barman rummaged around the bar underneath and pulled out an old dusty bottle. It looked like it had been stored since the time of Napoleon.

“Do you have something better?” Carter asked.

The bartender shot him a scathing look and shook his head. “Twenty francs,” he demanded.

“Twenty francs?” I asked incredulously for that was at least twice the amount we would have paid at Deveaux.

“Twenty francs,” he grunted back and shoved the bottle our way. I could hear a few of the locals behind us begin to laugh.

Lyons picked up the bottle and hefted it in his hand. “Well, my fine friend, I'll give you five, and you'll be glad to take it. He dropped a five franc coin on the bar and began turning away. The bartender grabbed him by the shoulder and spun my friend back towards the bar. Lyons gave the fiend a devilish grin and then smashed the bottle over the brute's head. The glass shattered like an explosion, drenching the man with vinegary-smelling wine. The bartender slumped down and disappeared behind the bar with a final groan.

Ignoring the dumbfounded locals, we ran out of the tavern, laughing. It had served that poor bastard right to try to rip us off with that foul-smelling wine. I know that it sounds cruel, but after you've been in a fight for a country that showed so little gratitude, you feel the urge to get back somehow. Lyons always behaved like quite the gentleman, so I had to admit I was taken aback by his sudden burst of anger. Perhaps I was not that surprised – these were violent times we were living in.

“I hope the military police don't come looking for us,” Carter blurted out after we were done laughing.

“Oh, don't worry about that,” Lyons said. “There aren't any here yet. Anyways, I left him five francs for his trouble. Trust me, he'll be in a more receptive mood for English money the next time around. Now let's go find our billet.”

Our new quarters was an old house that had seen better days. But still, there was a nice low, wooden fence that went around the property and a small, well-tended garden in front. The owners were an old woman and her teenage daughter. Neither of them was too happy to see us. We were met with nothing but scowls. But they accepted our money easily enough. I had to share my bedroom with Carter while Lyons managed to take over the largest of the bedroom that had once been used by the old lady's son. Her son had been one of the first to die in the early part of the war. The bedroom was still setup exactly the same when the poor bastard had gone off to war. His favorite cigarettes were by the bedside, and his clothes were still hanging up in the closet. It was quite creepy.

After a supper of cold ham and dark bread, we sat around and talked a bit. But it had been a long day, so we soon made our way to bed. Carter quickly dropped off, but for the life of me, I couldn't fall asleep. I guess I had too many recent unpleasant memories. After a brief, useless struggle, I got up, crept past my roommate's bed and went out to the front garden to have a smoke. It was late, and the moon was high and full in the sky. Relaxed for a moment, I was enjoying the cigarette and thinking of what needed to be done tomorrow, when I saw someone walking along the road. It was a shock to see Corporal Childs.

He was walking as if he didn't have a care in the world. He didn't even notice me standing there. Luckily I still had my Webley on my hip, so I ditched my cigarette and began following him at a discreet distance.

He only picked the darkest roads as we made our way out of the village. We snaked around lit windows, past happy voices coming from the soldier-filled village homes, and finally made our way down a deserted country lane. I had to keep my distance since Childs would stop every few minutes acting as if he suspected himself of being followed. Once we had left the village, his manner had become more suspicious. Thanks to my hunting days, I'm pretty good at being quiet. I swear he never caught sight of me.

We went on that way for a mile or so when I saw a large country estate in the distance. It was a two-story tall, brick mansion made in some pre-revolution year. The windows were lit up. A high wall that was gated surrounded the grounds. Thick ivy clung to the sides of the old brick. Through the gates, I could see a number of parked military trucks and cars – this must be where Smythe and his staff had decided to set up shop.

I had no reason to be there, so I watched carefully as the corporal approached the guarded gate. He was quickly waved through and went on his way. I dodged off to the side, through the woods and sneaked along the wall. There I found a thick tangle of vines suitable for climbing. I began going up as quietly as I could. To my ears, every scramble up the wall sounded as loud as breaking glass. Poking my head over the top, I saw a supply depot had been placed on this side of the grounds. There were crates of ammunition and rations stacked high in wooden boxes. A tent was there and several oil lamps had been placed on the ground to provide light. A team of soldiers was loading up a lorry, and I saw Childs entering the tent.

Feeling obvious up on the wall, I pulled myself over and jumped down to the other side. I went flat on the damp ground and lifted my head to see if anyone had seen me. Not hearing anyone cry out, I began slithering through the long grass towards a stack of crates located in the back of the supply depot. I waited there for a moment in silence before moving on. So far I had managed to get the front of my uniform sodden, but it appeared I had gotten there undetected.

I began crawling through the maze of crates towards the tent. Within a few minutes, I had gotten to the canvas wall of the tent and stopped to listen. I immediately recognized Captain Wodenhill's muffled voice.

"You understand your orders?" he said.

"Yes, sir," Childs answered.

"This is going to be a dangerous trip, Corporal," Wodenhill went on. "If anyone gives you any trouble, I had these papers worked up for you. Only use them if you have to – I would hate to have anyone else prying into our affairs."

"Yes, sir," Childs said. "What are you going to do about Grant? I'm getting sick of sulking around trying to stay out of his way."

"You won't have any worries soon enough," the captain replied smoothly. "There are steps being taken to make sure he is no longer a problem to our operations."

I felt my spine tingle with anxiety. My suspicions had been proven true. The only question was how high did this go, and what were they planning to do with me?

"Very good, sir," the corporal replied timidly. "You've always taken care of me."

"Do we have any choice? You've done your job perfectly until Captain Meadows came along and found that ledger of yours. We should have had you killed for that – keeping a log behind our back. Were you expecting to do a bit of blackmail?"

"No, sir," Childs said anxiously. "Anyways we've already discussed this, so I have nothing else to say of the matter. It was sheer bad luck that Meadows found it during inspection."

"The colonel may have believed you, but I certainly don't. If you ever pull such a stunt again, I'll see that you disappear from the face of the earth. Right now it is easy to dispose of a body."

My ears had pricked up when I heard the mention of the colonel. Smythe was the mastermind of their operation, alright. It only made sense – he had the ability to move the goods and create the paperwork to cover up any missing items. His poverty must have been enough to overcome any moral concerns.

"Don't worry, I'll follow orders," the corporal whimpered.

“You better have,” Wodenhill said icily. “Now go ahead and get in that truck and make sure to follow the map carefully. I don't want you getting lost and messing everything up.”

This was my cue to leave. I crawled a distance into the packed boxes before getting up and sprinting towards the wall. I found a foothold in the brickwork and began scrambling up the side. I practically fell over the wall and into a bush on the other side. I picked myself up and took off running through the bramble towards the road. I heard the roar of the truck engine starting. I picked up the pace, hoping to beat the truck to a spot I had seen on my journey to the mansion. There was a steep curve on the road leading away from the gate of the estate. The truck would have to take this part of the road slowly. If I could make it there in time, I could swing myself on the back of the truck and find out where they were going.

I was out of breath when I stopped at a copse of trees located near the curve. I leaned forward, holding my knees as I tried to regain my strength. My face felt raw from the countless branches I had gone crashing through. I saw the headlights bounce down the road. The driver down-shifted and began slowing to make the turn. The headlights danced past me, and I ran out of my shelter of trees. The back of the truck was canvassed on top and with a leap on to the back, I managed to grab onto the edge of the tailgate. My knees buckled, and I almost lost my handhold as the truck accelerated. With a grunt, I barely pulled myself over and fell heavily into the wooden boxes stacked in back.

My back slammed heavily into a corner of a crate and I gasped in pain. I rolled over on my stomach and hunched down on my knees near the tailgate. I hoped the noise of the truck covered the sounds I was making. The boxes bounced up and down as the truck went over the road. After a few miles of this, the truck slowed down and turned down a side road.

The path we were on was rough, so the truck downshifted into a lower gear. We crept more slowly down this rutted path. I looked down on the ground and saw nothing but tall weeds. The truck downshifted again and began climbing up a steep hill. We soon reached the top and stopped. The headlights went off and then flashed back on a few times. Fearing discovery, I jumped out of the back, and my feet sank hard into the loose soil. Running for a few paces into the deep weeds, I dropped on my stomach and turned to watch the truck. It was now some thirty feet away.

I saw the dark shadows of two men standing by the cab of the truck. A cigarette was lit. I could see the face of Childs in the sudden flare of the lighter.

“Think they will come?” I heard the other man say.

“Don't worry, Jones – they will.”

I could barely hear their voices over the ripple of the wind. The long grass blew like waves on the ocean. I wondered where we were. I suddenly saw a light in the distance and it slowly dropped like a leaf falling from a tree. I recognized a flare when I saw one. A few thunderous artillery flashes confirmed my suspicions – we were somewhere close to the front lines. They were perhaps a mile off, and I wondered what we were doing out here.

“I don't like being up here,” Jones said as he stamped his feet. It wasn't from the cold, but from nervousness.

“Neither do I, my boy-o. But we do as we're ordered, and there's a nice fat wad of cash coming our way if we do.”

“I still don't like it,” Jones said.

Childs said, “Shh, here they come. Be quiet and let me do all the talking.”

I heard a number of footsteps approach and a Germanic bark, “Hallo freunde.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I knew a little German from some engineering books I studied in my youth, but I certainly wasn't fluent enough to completely understand the conversation. But I understood enough to know this was the Boche behind our lines.

“Sein nutzen, um sie zu sehen,” Childs replied back fluently.

“Sie brachten das Essen und Gewehre?” the German said. He came closer to them, and I saw ten or so Germans standing further back. They were all looking a bit nervous, and I couldn't blame them. Neither side looked too favorably at enemy soldiers out of uniform. If they were caught, there was bound to be some quick executions.

“Ja Kapitän und Sie brachten das Gold?” Childs asked.

Gold? That word was clear enough, so my ears perked up as I tried to make sense of this new situation. Smythe had somehow managed to contact the Germans and began trading with them. But why would the Germans want our supplies? My mind reeled at the possibilities.

“Ja,” the German answered back and handed some kind of leather case over to the corporal.

“Laden Sie den Lastwagen aus,” Childs said.

The German pointed to the truck and his ten or so men began to unload the truck with a number of grunts and what I supposed were curses. Soon enough the crates were unloaded and stacked on the side of the truck. Then the men began moving in teams and took the boxes down the hill. While this was happening, I lay very still with the fear of being discovered. Their boots came close to where I was hiding, but luckily they did not see me. I thanked my lucky stars that I was wearing my brown uniform and had my hat slid low over my face.

Soon all the boxes had been cleared and the soldiers disappeared silently down the hill. I watched Childs through the waving grass, waiting for him to return to the truck. I wasn't quite sure where we were and wanted to try to hook a ride back to camp. The German was still there.

“That's everything then,” Childs said.

“Not quite,” the German replied in broken English.

“Was tut, meinen Sie,” the corporal said nervously. I saw him spreading out his hand and Jones took a step back.

“Wer ist diese Person da drüben?” I could see the German officer pointing my way.

“Who is that person over there? What do you mean?” Childs said.

I ducked my head down and went low to the ground, wondering how long the Germans knew I had been there.

“Sie sind ein Verräter.”

“I'm no traitor,” Childs exclaimed. “I don't know what you are talking about.”

The German turned with his pistol out and fired a shot in my direction. I decided it was time to go, and quickly. I got off the ground and began running

down the track as fast as I could. Three more bullets tumbled past me and went into the grass. I heard another Germanic shout, and then a few rifle bullets came my way. There was a shouted order, and then the shooting immediately stopped. I guessed that they didn't want to draw any more attention to the fact that they were there on the wrong side of the front line. But that didn't stop me from running at full speed until I had to stop with my sides aching. I breathed in several ragged breaths and took stock of the situation.

If Childs suspected who I was, then it was going to be dangerous going when I returned to camp: I knew Smythe was selling supplies to the Germans. These dark thoughts kept me busy as I tramped down the side of the road. I kept an eye and ear out for any coming trucks. I wouldn't be able to tell who it was, so I would have to hoof it into the ditch until I reached the safety of my billet. There I could tell Lyons and Carter what I had found out. They would protect me from Colonel Smythe until I could explain my story to the proper authorities. I didn't know if they could ever believe me, but I would have to try nonetheless. I had to do something about what I'd seen.

These nagging worries were interrupted by the sound of an oncoming vehicle. The engine rumble became louder before it rounded the corner. I leapt into the ditch. The mud and water came up to my knees with a sickening squelch. I told myself I had been jumping into holes in the earth for far too long. The truck went by slowly. My heart pounded hard in my chest until it had disappeared around the corner. The flash of the headlights had briefly lit up the road, and luckily I recognized this stretch from our earlier march of the day. I guessed I was only three miles away from Tremont. So I got out of the ditch, my pants legs sticking to my skin, and got to walking.

When I finally reached Tremont, there was a glimmer of dawn in the east. I was cold, hungry, and felt like I could have slept for a week. But I had gotten there without seeing any other truck along the road. The town looked sleepy enough since not a single lit window could be seen. It was quiet except for the rush of the stream and the creak of the town mill. Not one soul was out. It gave me a creepy feeling as if I was being watched.

I took a little tree-lined lane to our billet and saw a trickle of smoke coming from the chimney. Someone was up. Unlocking the garden gate, I walked cautiously to back of the house looking for anyone ready to waylay me. I didn't see anyone, so I went to the back door and found it locked. I swore to myself. I traced my steps back to the front door. I reached for the door handle and suddenly felt uneasy. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a shadow rush towards me. I turned, but it was too late. A heavy blow hit me on the side of the temple. I fell into darkness.

Chapter 13

By any right I should have been dead. Needless to say, I was rather surprised when I started to slowly swim back into consciousness. My head ached something terrible. I was angry that it had being used so poorly the past few days. My eyes

fluttered open to take in my surroundings. A light shone brightly into my eyes. I snapped them shut again from the blazing pain. I then realized I was sitting upright and propped up against a hard chair.

"He's coming around," a voice said. It took me a moment to realize it was the voice of Captain Wodenhill.

"I didn't tap him that hard in the head," Childs answered back.

"Hard enough," I muttered and sat up with a groan. I wasn't tied down, but when I opened my eyes, I saw the corporal was fingering a sharp-looking bayonet. He gave me a wicked grin.

I was in a gaudily-appointed room. The long window curtains were drawn back to reveal a wall running around a well-manicured lawn. The chair I was sitting in looked old enough for the last King of France, and the desk before me was quite overdone as well. I let out a little giggle and caught myself from laughing out loud. I certainly felt a little punch drunk from the blow to my head. The surroundings were just a little out of place for my predicament.

"So you're still alive. Quite the pity in my opinion," the captain said.

I turned my attention to him and saw him smirk at my predicament. I rubbed my head and said, "I don't remember asking for your opinion. But tell me, why I am still alive? I would have thought you would have had me buried away somewhere by now."

"As you should be," Childs said.

"Quiet you," Wodenhill snapped. "I'll do the talking around here. Don't forget that you're just a corporal."

Childs put his eyes down and took a step back. However, I noticed the bayonet was still at the ready.

"Well, Lieutenant Grant, you've certainly have been a spot of trouble for us. I could see that from day one, but the colonel wouldn't listen. He never does, but I think you've figured that out by now."

"Figured what out?" I said dumbly. His hand lashed out and struck me on the side of the jaw. It hurt terribly, and I saw stars dance in front of my eyes. I almost slid off the chair, but I just managed to hold myself upright. I wasn't about to give him the pleasure of seeing me fall over to one of his blows.

"Figured out that the colonel is a stubborn man," he said without emotion as if he hadn't struck me at all. "He wants to find out what you really know. If he didn't, then Childs here would have tapped your skull a little harder and made sure you disappeared for good."

"Surely Lyons and Carter will want to know what happened to me," I said. At this point they were my only hope.

"I'm sure they would," Wodenhill said with a sadistic smile. "In fact, they've been out all night looking for you. They even came to see me, but what information could I give them? Even I didn't know where you were until the corporal here returned and told me what you had witnessed. We may have let you live for a bit longer if it wasn't for that."

I let out a bit of a laugh and said, "You've been doing your damn best to kill me. Who sent Reese out to make sure I was dead?"

"We thought it best if you were taken care of before you connected the dots together. That was obviously a mistake, because we should have killed you even earlier." Wodenhill said

"Mistake or not, at least I'm not a traitor dealing with the Germans. You'll certainly be shot for this."

His hand swung out again, but at least this time I was ready for the blow. I made it look as if it hurt worse than it really did. Not that it took too much acting on my part. My head was still reeling. But Wodenhill was a weakling who had never faced the rigors of true trench living. He was a coward too. At least those words sounded good to my ears. I really had little hope of getting out of this alive.

The captain slowly nodded. "So it really was you out on that hill. Well, my friend, you have just signed your own death warrant."

"Your treason will be your own death warrant," I raged at him. I saw Childs move towards me with the bayonet at the ready. I had to buy some time and see if I could escape. "Before you kill me, could you at least tell me why you sold our supplies to the Germans?"

"You must understand, my boy," the voice of the colonel boomed out. He must have been standing in the doorway behind me. He strode past and sat at the desk, looking over me with an appraising eye. "You've been causing me plenty of trouble and I should have listened to Wodenhill here from the start. But I thought you wouldn't discover anything further about our little money-making operation."

"But why, Colonel?" I asked.

He laughed and replied, "Men will do many things for money. When I was a child, I saw my father squander his fortune away. After he died, there was nothing left for me but the debt. I could barely hang on to the family home, and I had to beg with my very own relations to survive. Not what kind of life is that for a man of my background?"

I flicked my eyes over to Childs and saw that he had taken a step back and was leaning nonchalantly against the wall. His knife had disappeared from sight too. Perhaps I could make a break for it and find a place to hide before the military police rounded me up. Smythe still had his authority, so I knew I would have a hard time convincing anyone I was innocent of whatever trumped-up charges I faced. I bought a little more time, shrugged my shoulder and said, "I wouldn't know anything of the aristocracy."

"Of course you wouldn't know," Smythe said. "You Americans and your silly ideals. Let me tell you how the real world works - men take what they need and damn anyone who gets in their way. Luckily Childs here had a German father who worked the coal mines in England. Through his family, he was able to provide me with a contact high up in the German command. It took some time, but we came to an agreement that will be beneficial to both our countries."

"What could that possibly be?" I asked.

This war has gone on far enough. You've seen the senseless bloodshed that has taken countless lives."

"I've seen more than I would care to recount," I admitted.

"And you know it is all useless. If the Germans were to win and win quickly, it would be so much better than having the men under my command die anymore."

“Selling weapons and uniforms to the enemy is supposed to save lives?” I asked incredulously. “It seems like a justification for murder and a chance to make your own fortune.”

He raised an eyebrow at me and said to Wodenhill, “Give the lieutenant here a cigarette.”

He scowled and fished out a Dunhill from a crumpled pack. He lit it and handed it over to me.

“Thank you,” I said and drew a lungful of smoke.

“Wodenhill here wants to have you killed,” Smythe continued on. “Personally, I think there has already been too much bloodshed. Now if you were to forget this little secret of mine and work with me, then I think you will agree this would be best for everyone involved.”

“I still think he is a danger,” the captain said.

I ignored him and said to Smythe, “What will the Germans do with the material you have given them?”

“We've been battering against their defenses for a long time without any success. The plan has always been to get through their lines and break out in the open space behind. Once we got behind their lines, it would be a simple matter of attacking their defensive positions from the rear and rolling up their entire army. Now you know the Germans must be thinking the same thing.”

“So?”

“If they could get the element of surprise and move enough men over to our side, it would break our lines in half. A regiment of Germans wearing our uniforms and using our equipment would provide the means. They could achieve total surprise and before you know it, they would be free to roam behind our lines. We would be forced to retreat out of France and leave it for the French. What do you think of that, my boy?”

I leaned back and blew some smoke up into the ceiling. I saw that Childs and Wodenhill were watching me expectantly. They were hoping I would refuse so they would have an excuse to cut my throat. I finally said, “I'm not sure what to say. It seems like plenty of men on our side will die if the Germans gain the upper hand.”

“You've seen the morale in the trenches. The English Army will scatter in front of a strong army quicker than you think.”

I pretended to give this some thought as I looked over my captors once again. They seemed more keyed-up than expected like they were waiting for something. Perhaps they thought I had already reported my suspicions to the military police. If that was true, they would want to know if their own necks were on the line. Perhaps that was the only reason they were keeping me alive.

Smythe said impatiently, “Look, my boy, I've been given the word that casualties will be kept to a minimum. They're sick of this war as much as we are. There just has to be some way of stopping the stalemate. Would you agree at least to that?”

“Yes, sir,” I lied. “I've seen enough death and very little glory. I see little reason why we should fight on any more.”

He positively beamed at me. With a friendly smile, he said, “You hard-headed Americans are always concerned with business. You are also quick to realize when you are on the losing side. It is best to cut your losses and move on to another stock. I can even give you a cut of the money being made. Would that satisfy you?”

I nodded and snubbed out my cigarette on the ash tray. I stood up slowly and glanced at Childs to see if he was going to threaten me with that bayonet of his. "Well, if that is all, sir, I think I will get back to my company. There still is plenty of work I need to do, and I'm sure Lyons and Carter will want to know where I have been."

Smythe reached across the desk to shake my hand. His hand was wet with perspiration. "You're a good man," he said. "I'll see that some type of promotion goes through for you. You've been brave and resourceful out on the front lines. Surely your hard work must be rewarded in some way."

"Just part of the job," I said nonchalantly.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Wodenhill tip Childs the wink. The corporal broke out a false smile and reflexively touched his sheathed bayonet. I've fought enough bullies to know I was looking at some trouble. They were keeping me happy until they could go ahead and lower the boom. Why would they want to start some trouble here when I could easily be dealt with somewhere outside? I had no reason to trust these three as I edged towards the door.

"I'll have Wodenhill walk back with you," Smythe said kindly.

"That's quite alright," I said. "I know the way."

"Let me show you a quicker way, Lieutenant," Wodenhill said and took me by the arm.

I saw Childs falling in step behind us. We walked down an opulent hallway with a number of dusty paintings and dried-out plants. A small servant's door led to the outside where I found myself on the side of the house. In the distance, I could see the wrought iron gates. They were unguarded, but hanging slightly open. When I started that way, the captain gripped my arm hard like a vise.

"Here is a quicker way back to the village." He pointed to an iron door set into the brick wall that surrounded the estate. "This will take us to a path that leads right to Tremont." His voice was high as if he was suddenly nervous. It is amazing how these staff officer types can never be counted on in an emergency. Reaching out, he grabbed the door, and it creaked noisily open as if it was the entrance to a tomb. The forest pathway beyond was dark with shadow.

There was no way I was going down that path. Childs would cut my throat at the first chance. I would never be seen alive again. My mother would never know what happened to me. I would just be another forgotten victim of this terrible war. With a twist of my arm, I broke free and began running towards the gate.

"Stop him," ordered Wodenhill.

I looked over my shoulder and saw that Childs was chasing me. His face was already blotched red with anger.

"Stop him!" the captain screamed again.

I kept on running towards the gate. I brushed past the half-closed iron gate, but I was slowed down enough that the corporal caught up to me. He tackled me by the feet, and I felt my breath go out from me when we landed heavily on the ground. I kicked out and caught him hard in the chest. He fell backwards, but grabbed onto my left leg with one hand. I saw Childs draw out his bayonet.

I pulled away, crawling as hard as I could. Wodenhill was there now and came over to give me a solid kick in the ribs. His Webley was out, and he nodded to his man. "Finish the job," he ordered.

"No!" I shouted and kicked out at Childs again. The bayonet fell from his hand and onto the muddy road. We both went for it, the blade slick with mud. He was closer to it and reached for it first. I grabbed his wrist, but a swift kick by Wodenhill caught me in the ribs again. It was a hard kick, and my side exploded with pain. I felt as if I couldn't breathe at all. Then a hard pain shot up my right leg. I screamed with what little strength I had left. Glancing down, I saw that the bastard corporal has plunged the knife deeply into my calf. The knife went up again. It struck my leg again, biting deep into my flesh. There was nothing I could do but lash out again with my free foot. The boot caught Childs full in the face. He fell back clutching his nose. The hilt of the knife was stuck in my leg. It throbbed something terrible.

Lifting my head up at Wodenhill, I saw him grinning sickly. His Webley was pointed straight at me, but his hand was shaking.

"Go ahead and shoot, you coward!" I yelled at him.

"Damn you," he croaked out. His finger was on the trigger, and it started to squeeze, but he couldn't hold the gun straight. The pistol fired. I winced as the bullet stuck in the mud near my head. The gun fired and missed yet again - he was a paper pusher, not soldier. It was then that I heard the running of feet towards us.

"What's going on here?" a voice called out. I turned over and to my relief, I immediately recognized Prentice. Carter was also with him. They both had their pistols drawn and looked at me with amazement. I must be quite the sight with a bayonet stuck deep into my leg and covered from head-to-foot in mud.

"They tried to kill me," I cried out.

Wodenhill dropped the gun, and it fell in the mud next to me. I was going to shoot the bastard. I reached for it instinctively, but Prentice scooped it up before I had a chance.

He waved both guns at Wodenhill and said sternly, "Shooting a fellow officer? I wouldn't expect anything less from you." He turned his wrath on the corporal, who started to scuttle away. "And you, you imbecile, how dare you raise your hand against an officer? You'll be lucky if you don't see the wrong end of a firing squad."

"Yes, sir," Child croaked and stood up, holding his bloody nose.

Carter got down and started to lift me up from the road. "Are you alright, old man?" he asked.

"Help me up," I said through gritted teeth. I had to lean heavily on him since I could not stand on my wounded leg. My pants leg was awash with blood, and I felt sick to my stomach. Prentice reached down and without a word to me, pulled out the bayonet. The pain was electric. I felt suddenly woozy and staggered.

"Steady on," Carter said. "You're going to need some stitching up before this day is through."

"Take him to the doctor," Prentice said.

I'm afraid I didn't get that chance to see that doctor since Colonel Smythe appeared at the gate with a dozen guards with him. He looked over the scene and then said, "Lieutenant Grant is to be arrested."

"On what charges, sir?" Prentice asked.

“For attacking a superior officer, of course. We still have rules in this army no matter how many times he tries to thwart them. You of all people should know that.”

Prentice spat out, “Sir, even if Grant here did attack Wodenhill, there was no reason for Corporal Childs here to stab him. And there certainly was no reason for Wodenhill to fire his gun in such a situation.”

“I wasn't talking about Wodenhill,” Smythe glowered. “I was talking about the personal attack on me.”

“That's not true,” I blurted out.

Prentice looked back at me and said, “Do you know what he is talking about?”

“I saw Childs there meeting with some Germans up by the front lines. When I came back to Tremont, I was knocked out before I could tell anyone else. They brought me here and tried to question me. They told me I could go free, but I suspected I was going to be killed instead. So I ran for it.”

“Clearly you can see that this man has gone insane,” Wodenhill chimed in.

“Exactly,” Smythe added. He snapped his fingers and his guards pulled me away from Carter who just stood there dumbfounded.

As I was being led away, Smythe said, “Be kind to Lieutenant Grant. He must have snapped from the stress of battle. See that he is well taken care of.”

I looked pleadingly at Prentice and said, “Help me.”

“Don't worry, Grant. If anything, I owe you my life. I'll see that justice is done.”

Chapter 14

As I reached the end of my story, Ellen blinked a few times and reached over to hold my hand. Her skin was smooth against mine, and I hate to admit my heart began to race.

“You poor man,” she was all that she could say.

I could see that my story had an effect on her. “Don't worry,” I said bravely, “They haven't convicted me of anything yet.” One always puts on a brave face if you're in love.

She said angrily, “But you have no evidence and no witnesses to tell your side of the story. What can you do if you're trapped here in this hospital?”

“I know Lyons and Prentice will pull through for me. I'm almost glad of this leg wound since it has bought me a little more time.”

“Have you heard anything from your friends yet?”

“No, I haven't heard a word from them. I suspect they are busy looking about for clues.”

“Did I hear someone mention my name?” Prentice said as he knocked on the open door. I wasn't sure how long he had been standing there, but I was happy to see him. After doffing his hat to Ellen, he came over and shook my hand. He was looking haggard as if he had been up all night.

“It is good to see you.”

"Yes it is," he said almost shyly. "Look, I'm sorry that you and I never got along in the first place. I just wanted to thank you for saving my life. I will do what I can to return the favor."

"No problem," I said. I felt overwhelmed by his gratitude, but thankful for his support.

Prentice continued on, "Lyons filled me in a bit on what happened to Captain Meadows. At the time, Meadows didn't tell me much detail of what he was investigating, but I can tell you he was interested in the number of supplies coming into the depot. He ordered me to get what reports I could dig up at the depot and compare them to our company usage. He seemed to think that someone was stealing them."

"Well, he was right. Someone wanted to be sure he wouldn't tell anyone. It must have been Childs."

"I agree. If only we could round up the corporal and question him. I think we could make him crack with a little pressure."

"Is he still at Tremont?"

"I'm afraid not. I've tried asking Wodenhill where the corporal is, but he just evades my questions. He does outrank me, you know. The only thing I've learned so far is that Childs is no longer with the Regiment and has been transferred."

"Transferred where?" Ellen asked.

"That's just the thing – no one seems to know," Prentice answered.

"He has to be around Tremont," I said with exasperation. "Colonel Smythe needs him as the contact man to the Germans. They wouldn't just let him go when he knows so much about their operations. They would have to keep him close at hand."

"Not unless they had him killed off to protect their own skins," Prentice suggested.

"True," I admitted, "But barring some miracle, finding him is my only hope of getting out of this war alive."

"I'll help go look for him," Ellen offered brightly. I could see a gleam of excitement in her eyes. This was her chance to be the heroine.

"You can't do that, it's certainly not safe for you to go," I said protectively.

"I'm afraid Grant here is right," the lieutenant agreed. "These towns are filled with soldiers, and you won't be safe in their midst."

She let out a little laugh and said, "I will hardly fear the attentions of a few men. I'm used to it here. I can't tell you how many officers and doctors here have decided to fall in love with me. It is all foolish nonsense, of course."

"Of course," I replied dryly. I wanted to tell her these past days how much I had fallen in love with her, but now was not the time with Prentice hanging about.

She smiled brightly at me and said, "Don't worry, William, I have a way with soldiers. Perhaps I could find someone who knows the whereabouts of Corporal Childs. He couldn't disappear from Tremont without someone seeing him go."

"I don't like it. It is too dangerous," I pleaded.

"Perhaps if Lieutenant Prentice here would accompany me. He could see to my safety."

"I don't think that is a good idea either," I said.

Prentice said, rather too brightly for my tastes, "Actually, it couldn't hurt if she snooped around a bit. We could make up a little story that she is inspecting the troops for some disease or another. I'm sure she can think of something terrible enough to get the boys lined up for an inspection."

"Oh yes – that is a good idea," she said, playing along.

"I'm not so sure," I said.

"Don't worry, it will work out just fine. I'll keep a close eye on her and make sure she doesn't get into any trouble."

"I'm sure you would," I said coldly.

Ellen ignored my objections and said, "So it's settled then. I'll go pack a medical bag, and then we can go." She stood up and straightened out her uniform. Then to my surprise she leaned over and gave me a shy kiss on the mouth. It was totally unexpected, but I couldn't help but smile woozily.

"Thank you," I said in a low voice.

She whispered in my ear, "Don't worry, my love. I'm doing this for you. I'll be back before you know it. William."

Those words sent electric shocks down my spine, and at that moment, I hated to see her walk out that door. I felt butterflies in my stomach and wished we could have had some more time together. Before I could say anything else, she hurried out of the room.

"You've got it bad," Prentice said.

"What?"

"You can't fool me," he laughed.

"Does it show that badly?"

"Well enough, but you're a lucky fool. By the way, how is that leg of yours?"

"It is feeling better every day," I lied. In fact it hurt like bloody hell. I had been fighting off the pain with every breath. But still it had to get better soon. It was only a little knife wound, so it should heal up with time.

"Good, I just thought you were looking a little peaked. I'm glad you're healing up. The doctors told me I was lucky to have kept mine." He slapped his thigh. "Luckily that bullet missed a vein and went clean through."

"Yes," I said uncomfortably. His leg had looked much worse than mine, but why was I feeling so poorly?

"Well, you look like you need a little rest. I'll be on my way." He shook my hand and before leaving.

I sat there and started to feel sorry for myself. If only I could have gone with them. Instead I was left behind with nothing to do but think. I gave a little groan as I shifted my weight uncomfortably on the bed. It was starting to hurt just lying there, and I wished I could get up. The room seemed damned hot, too.

I must have fallen into an uneasy sleep. When I woke up, I was in a sweat. My leg was throbbing something terrible. I felt feverish and sick. Pulling back the covers, I foolishly tried to pull myself off the bed to get some help. As soon as I placed weight on my bad leg, I fell down heavily onto the floor. The impact was sudden. I remembered screaming in pain before being swallowed up in a wave of swelling darkness.

I must have passed out for only moment. I was suddenly surrounded by doctors in white aprons. I was lifted back onto my bed. I could barely focus on the knot of

faces above me. An injection stabbed me in the arm. I felt the pain in my leg begin to recede. It must have been a big dose of morphine. I grew ever so tired. The voices above me became distant babbling. Someone's ugly face was shoved right into mine and started to speak. I had a hard time making out the words, so he shook me, bouncing my head against the pillow.

"Lieutenant, we're going to have to take it off," the face said.

Wanting the annoying voice to go away, I just nodded and shut my eyes. The babble of words eventually faded away into darkness and unconsciousness. I felt as if I was floating away on a cloud. I welcomed the quiet.

Chapter 15

Ellen's Story.

The man who headed the hospital's motor pool was an old curmudgeon, unfit for front line duty, but with the use of my womanly charm, I managed to procure a car. A few gracious smiles, a good story, and he gave me the keys to some old claptrap. Prentice wound the starter and looked up in surprise when he saw me get behind the wheel.

His mouth was agape. "You know how to drive?" he asked.

"Father had a Rolls that I used to bandy about in. I've driven plenty."

"Perhaps it would be better if I drove," he said as he looked nervously about. "I don't know what the soldiers would think if a woman drove up to the town with me as the passenger. I'm not sure I could ever live it down."

"You men are so stuffy," I said with a pout.

He looked quite uncomfortable. I got some odd satisfaction out of this. He soon gave in and said, "Alright, but please drive carefully."

With a smile, he jumped in. I shifted into gear and soon we were off. It felt good to have the sun on my face and fly down that dirt road away from the stench of the hospital. Everywhere there were soldiers marching haphazardly down the sides of the road, staying out of the line of traffic. A supply lorry would pass the other way and kick up a cloud of dust. A few of the soldiers would see me in the car and began to wave and cheer. I laughed and gave them a wave back.

Prentice snarled, "We're not on a parade."

"You are rather a stuffed shirt," I shouted over the sound of the wind whistling past my ears.

"You're not like any other girl I've ever met before - you're so headstrong. Tell me, does it run in the family?"

I let out a little laugh. "I should think not. But there is no reason you should act so shocked."

"I'll try not to," he said and shot me a momentary smile before I returned my concentration back to the road. We drove on a few more minutes, winding our way past a slow-moving lorry. Prentice then said hesitantly, "I hate to ask this, but I have to know - is there anything serious between you and Grant?"

“Why do you ask?” I said as I felt my cheeks grow hot with embarrassment.

“I would just like to know where I stand if I decided to pursue you.”

“I don't know where Lieutenant Grant and I stand. We have never talked about our relationship at length.”

“But you do love him, don't you? I heard you say so in the hospital.”

“Those words were not meant for your ears,” I said. I turned my attention back to the road, trying to evade his eyes.

He lapsed into silence. In the meanwhile, I wondered to myself did I really love William, or was I taken with the adventure of it all? For now, those were questions to be answered for another day. Right now we had to prove the poor man's innocence.

Taking a side road, I drove us over a rickety bridge and then into the town of Tremont. At first sight, I wasn't too impressed. Grant was right, it was a mean-looking place, and the inhabitants only stared unpleasantly at us as we drove by. I saw a slow-moving water wheel in the distance that creaked with a terrible groan. The streets were laid out with well-worn bricks that needed a good sweeping. In the distance, a dog repeatedly barked at no one in particular. Some British soldiers could also be seen, and they looked rather bored to be in such a place. I couldn't blame them.

I pulled the car over. Prentice hopped out and went around to open the door for me.

He said, “I hate to say that I haven't been here long. I'm still learning my way around. I do believe Childs's old company is billeted somewhere over there.”

He took me by the hand and led me down a path that led to the outside of the village. We opened a creaky gate into a field where a big barn sat. It was sagging on one side, and the wood was weathered gray with age. Two soldiers smoking cigarettes dawdled near the wide-open door. When they saw me, they broke into grins, but when they saw Prentice they quickly stiffened up with a quick, formal salute.

“Where is Sergeant Dobson?” Prentice drawled easily.

“He's inside, sir,” a sallow faced soldier answered back. I couldn't help notice that his eyes lingered on me for quite some time.

“This way, nurse,” the lieutenant said and gently took me by the arm to lead me inside.

The interior of the barn smelled of sweat and urine. Men were sitting on the stacks of hay, smoking and talking amongst themselves. They all looked sickly and undernourished. A rough voice bellowed out, “Officer present. Everyone at attention!”

The talking stopped, and the soldiers all rose to turn their glance at the lieutenant. He cleared his throat and said, “The nurse here has come for a medical visit to make sure you're all fit.” Someone let out a chuckle, reeking of familiarity. That was cut off quickly once Prentice gave a cold stare in that direction. “Men are to proceed outside and remove their shirts. You will then get in line. You will then be examined by the nurse inside here.”

“You heard the officer,” the sergeant shouted. “So off with them shirts and move outside on the double!” The soldiers quickly had their braces off and were

removing their shirts. A few men grinned shyly in my direction while the whole group had moved outside like a herd of cattle.

While I set up the medical apparatus on a bale of hay, Prentice said, "I know a few of Corporal Childs's cronies. When one of them comes in, I'll tip you the wink."

The sergeant came up and asked, "What is this all about, sir? I haven't heard of any visits by a nurse. This isn't going to be a short-arm inspection is it? The boys won't like a nurse doing that job."

Prentice took him by the arm and said, "Special case, Dobson. I was told that the colonel was worried by a breakout of a particularly nasty strain of influenza. He asked the local hospital to help out due to the amount of potential patients. We want to nip this in the bud before we are swamped with sickness."

"I see, sir," the sergeant said seriously. He saluted and then said, "I'll get the lads through to see the missus here as fast as I can."

"Very good, Sergeant, carry on." He winked at me, and we watched as Dobson went outside. We could hear his voice shouting for the men to line up.

The first soldier came in. He was a thin, young-looking man who seemed afraid for being the first inside.

"Name?" Prentice barked.

"Timson," he whimpered.

"Very well, Timson, take a seat in front of the nurse and follow her directions."

He looked rather healthy if a bit undernourished. I went through the motions of listening to his breathing with my stethoscope. After a minute of questioning him about flu symptoms, I sent him on his way. The boy looked rather relieved since he nearly ran out the barn door.

One after another they came in. Some were worse than others, and I was rather taken aback by their poor health that would have hospitalized a normal man. These were tough soldiers, fighting in the worst conditions, but still facing their misery with stalwart hearts.

Finally an older man with graying hair came in. Prentice winked in my direction and said, "Name?"

"Peterson, sir," he said sulkily. He looked around the barn suspiciously as if expecting the worst.

"Go listen to the lady there and answer any questions she may have for you. It is important, mind you."

"Yes, sir," he answered. Peterson then sat down in front of me. His gut bulged over his belt. He looked particularly well-fed compared to the other men. I listened to his chest and heard his heart thumping hard against his chest. This one was ready for the knackers, and I wondered at his age. He looked old, but he could have been anywhere between fifty and sixty.

"You seem to be healthy enough," I lied.

"Thank you, miss," he beamed pleasantly at me.

"Tell me, do you know a Corporal Childs?"

"Why do you ask?" he asked, his tone suddenly suspicious.

"It's a matter of his health," I answered innocently.

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, miss," he said as he shot a glance back at the lieutenant. Prentice was standing off to the side, pretending to take little interest in the proceedings.

“Well, there has been a nasty case of influenza going about. I'm afraid one of the patients at the hospital said he may have gotten it from Corporal Childs.”

Peterson's face turned white as a ghost. Not that he was all that tan to begin with, but I definitely saw him pale with the news.

“Are you sure, miss?”

“I can only tell you what I've heard,” I said. “The patient in question died before we could learn anything more. It is important that we find Childs before he infects anyone else.”

“Well, miss, I'm not sure why you're asking me,” he said defensively. “I hardly know the man.”

Prentice stepped in and said, “He is in your company. I know for a fact that you chum around with him. Do you want more of your friends here to die because of you?”

“No, sir,” he said, his voice quavering.

“It will mean a court martial if you don't come clean.” Prentice's voice was now thick with anger. I could only stare at the sudden change of the man. He was a fine actor.

With a nervous twitch, Peterson's eyes darted between the two of us. He was about to stand up when the lieutenant's hand clamped on his shoulder and pushed him back down again.

The man cautiously said, “I saw him, sir. He told me that he is hiding out near the regimental headquarters. He wouldn't tell me why, but it must be because he's sick.”

“When did you see him last?” Prentice snapped.

“It was just two days ago. I saw him sneaking through the village. He told me not to tell anyone. He told me he wasn't supposed to be about, but he was only out to get some liquor and tobacco.”

“You did the right thing telling me this, soldier,” Prentice beamed at him. “Now it will be best if you don't tell anyone else about this. It is important that we don't have the whole town in a panic.”

“Is there any chance I could be infected?” he asked, his eyes wide with fear.

“The nurse here has checked you out. He's healthy enough isn't he?”

I nodded. “There is no sign that he is infected. I don't think he has anything to worry about.”

“Thank you, miss,” he said gratefully and shook my hand fervently. With a quick salute, he darted out of the barn as quick as he could.

Prentice laughed and said, “That was a very convincing lie you fed that man. You had him eating right out of your hand.”

“Thank you,” I said. “You did a rather good job at playing the bully.”

“I'm rather good at that when I want to be. It comes with the rank. We had better look at the rest of the men, but make it quick. I want to go and see if we can find Corporal Childs.”

I gave the rest of the company only a cursory glance, asking quick questions and making brief examinations. It only took another half an hour, and we were done. I packed up my bag, and then the lieutenant took me by the arm to guide me through the men waiting outside. They watched me walk out across the field

and a few whistles and hoots followed me as I went. I felt my ears burning red in embarrassment.

“Don't mind them,” Prentice said, “They're just appreciating the ravishing looks of a beautiful woman.”

I giggled and said, “Oh, I don't mind. I suppose I should feel flattered.” I gave the men a wave and got a ragged cheer back.

We got back to the village, where the lieutenant led me down the road towards the regimental headquarters. It was a quiet place. The summer wind brushed gently against the top of the trees. A few cicadas buzzed noisily and the bees were working busily in the fallow fields. My heart began to thump hard with the realization that I was now alone with Prentice. I had just met the man, and I wondered how far he could be trusted. William certainly did, but how well did he really know him? It was too late to run away, so I continued to plod along next to him.

“The manor is just around the corner,” he said. “We had best hit the trail going into the woods here. We have to make sure that we are not seen by the guards. They would certainly wonder what we are doing here. I'm not sure if I could come up with a reasonable enough explanation.”

“Very well,” I agreed and followed him off into the woods that surrounded the manor. It must have been the hunting grounds of the aristocratic family that had loaned their house to the colonel, for the woods were dotted with well-kept trails. It felt more like a park than anything else. We walked in silence, listening to the birds singing to each other and keeping an eye out for a patrolling guard. Soon enough, we could see the walls surrounding the manor. Over the wall, I could see the second story of the great house tucked within.

“I'm thinking they must have stashed Childs at the groundskeeper's house or something like that.”

I pointed to an iron-sided gate built into the brick wall. “That must be used by someone.”

“Good eye, Ellen,” he said, and we started to work our way in that direction.

There was a well-worn trail leading away from the door, and it snaked off into the woods. Prentice put his finger on his lips to make sure I was quiet, and then we went cautiously down the dark pathway. It was very quiet in that part of the forest. I felt nothing but dread with each step we took. Eventually we came to a small clearing where a little hut sat. We hung back in the woods to take a look. It was a dilapidated hut with only two windows and a single door in front. A stack of firewood sat on the side, and a wisp of smoke curled up from the chimney. I couldn't think of why anyone would have a fire going this time of year unless they were cooking something.

“I think we found him,” Prentice whispered to me.

“Now what?” I asked. “Do we go get the police now?”

“If we do that, then Childs could be gone by the time we get back. I will have to stay here while you go get help.”

“But I don't even know where to go,” I whispered back.

He thought for a moment and said, “Go get Lyons instead. He has to be back at Tremont in our billet. He can come here and help me out.” He gave me some hurried instructions on how to get to the billet.

“Are you sure you will be alright?” I asked doubtfully.

“What can Childs do to me?” he said bravely. “I just want some help disarming him in case he has a gun in there.”

“Don't do anything foolish,” I warned him.

He just smiled and gave my hand a squeeze.

I turned and ran back towards the Manor, going as quickly as I could. Making it past the brooding house undetected, I ran back to the road in haste. I was afraid that Prentice was going to be discovered, and who knows what could happen to him. Ahead, I saw a figure walking down the road towards the manor. My heart skipped a beat with joy when I saw it was Lyons. I waved my hand towards him, and he ran up.

“Why in the devil are you here?” he asked in surprise.

“Thank god you're here,” I gasped out.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It is Corporal Childs – Lieutenant Prentice and I discovered where he is.”

“I see,” he said quietly. “Show me the way and I'll see what I can do.”

Chapter 16

I awoke. It took a long time to finally open my eyes. I was greeted by darkness. I felt oddly out of place, dizzy, and even moving my hands took great energy. My body was floating, and any pain was just a muted throb. What had happened to me? It was difficult to think. I just wanted to fall back asleep. My attention was suddenly drawn by the sound of a soft footstep and then the sound of my door gently closing.

“Who's there?” I whispered. My voice sounded weak and unsteady.

The steps came closer and stopped at the foot of my bed.

“Who's there?” I whispered again. I suppose I should have been feeling some kind of fear, but I was too dazed to really care. Was this just a nightmare?

A flashlight flicked on. I was momentarily blinded by the sudden brightness. To my relief, the light quickly moved away. When I opened my eyes again, I saw Lyons standing there. He was looking down at me with pity.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Now that is a good question,” he replied and sat down on the end of my bed. “A good question indeed. Well, my old friend, I've decided to come and visit you again.”

“But why now?” I asked weakly. I was beginning to feel tired again and just wanted to drift away into unconsciousness.

“Anytime is a good time when a friend is visiting. Tell me, how are you feeling, chap?”

“I'm fine, but I sure would like to get some more sleep.”

His flashlight played against the end of the bed. “I can see why. Those damned doctors did quite the number on you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked as the bile began rising in my stomach. My forehead beaded wet with perspiration.

“You mean you don't know? I'm sorry to be the one to tell you, but they went and sawed off the end of your leg.”

I suddenly felt awake and noticed an odd numbness at the end of my wounded leg. I really hadn't noticed it until now. I tried to wiggle my toes, but felt nothing. Sitting up made me dizzy, but I reached down and felt my legs. The left one was all there, but the right one suddenly stopped at the end of my knee. The only thing there felt like a thick bandage. I suddenly felt a shudder of sickness and turned my head to throw up on the floor.

“Why? Why?” I moaned when I was finished vomiting.

“Don't worry, Grant, this will just make my job all the easier.” He whipped out his Webley and pointed it at me. “From the very beginning, you've been too much trouble.”

“I don't understand,” I said. My mouth felt as if it was full of marbles.

“I suggest you stay quiet and let me speak to you for a moment. You see, I was quite hoping you would be sleeping, so I could do my job without being disturbed. But now that you're awake, you might as well hear my side of the story before I kill you.”

“Good god, Lyons, what are you talking about?” I asked. But I was beginning to get a glimmer of the truth. I had been a fool not to see this before.

“Keep your voice down, Grant,” he said and waved the gun in front of my face. “I wouldn't want the night nurse to be woken up by your shouting.”

I closed my mouth and listened.

Setting down the flashlight on the table, Lyons got his silver cigarette case and took out two. He placed one in my mouth and lit it for me. Lighting his own cigarette, he blew a thin trail of smoke into the air. “You see, Grant, there is one thing you didn't know about me - I'm actually related to Smythe. Believe it or not, that bastard of an officer is really my uncle. He had no children of his own, and I'm legally considered his heir. When I was a child, I spent many of a summer day at his house and he treated me like his own son. Dear old uncle was never rich from the start, but he did have the property. Even with the pittance of the inheritance he received, he somehow managed to keep the house and land. All he needed was some money, and he could have been respectable enough.

“I was already enlisted when the war broke out it. I had joined the army thinking it would be a safe place to earn a name for myself. Little did I know what a foolish mistake that was. The war was tough going. I saw men die by the hundreds and for what? I began to question the need of the whole mess. Something changed inside of me. I couldn't go and run away - quite the dishonorable thing to do in the eyes of my brother officers - and I had to consider my own future. No one wants to associate with a coward. But I thought that if I could make enough money, then I could go and buy my way out of the war. Corporal Childs has been with me since the beginning. I knew his father was German, and we got to talking.”

“So you struck a deal with the enemy?” I asked with amazement.

“Oh, not me - I wouldn't dare do such a thing myself. But I convinced my uncle to do it. He is in desperate straits financially, so I'm afraid it didn't take much to talk him into it.”

“How did you convince Wodenhill?” I asked.

“That little weasel was brought over easily with the promise of cash. He's the type who would sell his own mother for a farthing. Have you ever noticed that those kinds of men always end up away from the battles? Perhaps he is smarter than he looks.” He let out a low laugh at the thought.

“Who killed Captain Meadows then? Was it Childs?”

“Childs?” he chuckled. “That good-for-nothing? No, I'm afraid it was me. You see, I was hoping to remove anyone who suspected Childs of pilfering from the stores. That fool corporal was supposed to have finished off Prentice out in No Man's Land, but the good lieutenant got himself shot in the leg before Childs could do his part. While you were out rescuing that fool Prentice, I went hunting for Meadows. He was standing at the parapet watching your heroics. I slipped behind him ever so quietly and shot the bastard in the back of my head with my Webley. He fell over like a sack of potatoes, I'll tell you.”

“You villain,” I said weakly.

“You may call me that, but honestly, I tried to keep you alive as long as I could. You see, I took a shining to you. You're a good chap to drink with, but you kept interfering with our business like Meadows and Prentice did. I'm afraid we had to take care of you.”

I thought of all the times I had confided with Lyons and how he had tried to keep me off the scent. It made sense now. I finally said, “And on that hill? Who shot at Owens and me while we were hunting?” It may seem like I was asking a lot of questions for a man facing certain death, but I was trying to buy whatever time I could.

Lyons said, “Of course it was me. I brought along that incompetent Childs to help me hide your bodies away. But you lucked out, and I missed my shot. I don't often miss, mind you. That damn corporal went running at the first chance he got, and you and your sergeant took off in pursuit. I hid in some bushes and was within ten feet of you when you went by. I was glad that you didn't see me, or I would have had a deuce of a time with Owens. He was quite the hunter.

“You escaped me again in Paris. I had hired some men to take care of you after we left that pub. But you ended up with that whore instead. And your luck held out yet again out in No Man's Land. I thought you were a goner when I saw you fall into that shell hole. But I had to be sure, so I sent Corporal Reese out to see. But he wasn't tough enough, and you came back instead.”

“You couldn't go yourself?” I asked. “Typical for a coward,” I added to egg him on. I felt as if I was running out of time, so I had nothing to lose now.

He smiled wickedly and said, “Me? Of course not. That's too dangerous for a man of my temperament. You've stirred up too much trouble for me. Major Radford has been sniffing around in Tremont to see if there is any truth to your story. Thanks to Prentice and that bitch nurse of yours, he got to Childs. It will only be a matter of time before he gives us up. But, my friend, it's too late for you.

“Please don't,” I said hopelessly.

“You know amputation is a tricky business, and there can be complications.” He quickly ripped the pillow from the back of my head and stuffed it on top of my face.

I kicked and tried to scream, but my mouth was muffled by the thick pillow. My hands flailed against the side of his head, but he was too strong. I started to weaken as I fought for my breath. All I could think of was that this was a silly way to die. I had been surrounded by death for weeks, and now I was going to be murdered in a hospital bed.

Just as the blackness began to overwhelm me, I heard a sudden loud crack. The pressure on my face suddenly lessened. I felt the weight of Lyons fall on to my chest and then roll off the bed with a crash. Pushing away the pillow, I opened my eyes. The overhead light suddenly flicked on. Standing at the light switch was Major Radford with a cosh in his hand.

He beamed at me and said, “How are you feeling, Lieutenant?”

Between gasps, I said, “As good as can be expected, sir.”

“I’m sorry for that little scare, but I wanted to use you as bait. Lyons here told me more than I expected.”

“What about Ellen and Prentice? Are they safe?”

“Don’t worry, they are safe. I found them in Tremont, trying to track down Corporal Childs. I had two of my men follow them at a discreet distance. They saw Lyons meet up with your Ellen and luckily stopped any meddling he could have done. But he knew that Childs had been taken. What he didn’t know is that Childs broke quickly under questioning. The man has no spine, so he was eager to get out of the hangman’s noose. In the end, his story collaborated much of yours. We immediately arrested Colonel Smythe and Captain Wodenhill.”

“What about Lyons?” I asked.

“I’m afraid he got out of Tremont before we knew of his involvement.”

“Then how did you know that Lyons was coming out to kill me?”

“You should really get some more rest, but I’ll tell you anyways. I know most of your story from what you told Miss Pennington. You see, Lyons was your pal, or at least he made it look that way. But you needed help, and he never managed to come up with anything for you. Not one single good idea or lead. I was curious, so I dug into his background and found that he was related to the colonel. That was enough to make me suspicious of him. Once I found that your story was true, I knew that you were in grave danger once Lyons disappeared from Tremont. I rushed back here by car, relieved the guards of duty and began watching your room from across the hallway. He waited until the night came. Once he was in, I just listened at the door. What he had to say was quite remarkable.”

I felt incredibly tired but asked, “What is going to happen to him?”

“If there is any justice in the world he will be tried and executed. But we shall see how this plays out. I’m afraid the judges will still have a hard time putting the black cap on when it comes to a member of the aristocracy - even a poor one at that.”

Nodding sleepily, I leaned back into my bed and let out a sigh of relief. I was going to live through this war after all.

Chapter 17

It was June and a fine Sunday afternoon. I decided to sit out on my back porch and enjoy the sun. My right leg ached something terrible from the rain we had the night before. But today the sun had broken through the clouds, so now I did not mind the pain. I watched the wind rustling through the fresh leaves in the branches overhead.

“Are you alright?” Ellen shouted from the kitchen. She was always looking out for my well-being even though I didn't need any help. Well, I didn't mind in the least. Learning to walk with a prosthetic leg has been difficult, but I could now move unaided.

It had been hard for her to make the change from nurse to civilian but she was managing just fine in our new home here in Chicago. Her father had been disappointed when she had decided to marry me and live in America, but he did not raise any serious obstacles.

“I'm fine,” I called back. And it was true. I had gotten my old job back and had no urge to look for adventure again.

She came out to join me with a pitcher of lemonade and two glasses. She sat next to me on the bench and poured out the drinks. We smiled shyly at each other as we drank.

“You're looking lovely today,” I commented. And she was at that.

Patting her pregnant stomach, she grinned at me. “You're a sentimental man,” she said.

“I think I deserve it.”

She pulled a letter off from the tray. “This came in the post today.”

I took it and looked over the envelope. It was posted from England and bore the name of Marlowe Carter. I ripped it open and began reading the contents.

“Go on,” Ellen said impatiently, “What does it say?”

“Why that randy bastard,” I said out loud.

“Mind your mouth,” Ellen said, “I don't want my children picking up your army language.”

“He writes that his wife Marie is expecting her second child this March. And he goes on to write about the new house in the country they just bought. It seems he is doing quite well with his bank work too - I always thought banking was beneath a true English gentleman.”

“Two children,” Ellen murmured. “They're quite blessed.”

I put the letter back down on the tray.

“Tell me, do you ever miss being there? You know, now that the war is over?”

I rubbed my right thigh. “I miss Owens. I miss the use of my leg, but with you I gained more than I ever wanted.”

“You really are a sentimental man,” she said and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

“And I have every reason to be so,” I replied and put my arm around her. She rested her head against my shoulder. We watched as the wind swept through the branches overhead. It was a fine day.
