

SOMEWHERE *in* FRANCE

*A Novel of the
Great War*

JENNIFER
ROBSON





SOMEWHERE IN FRANCE



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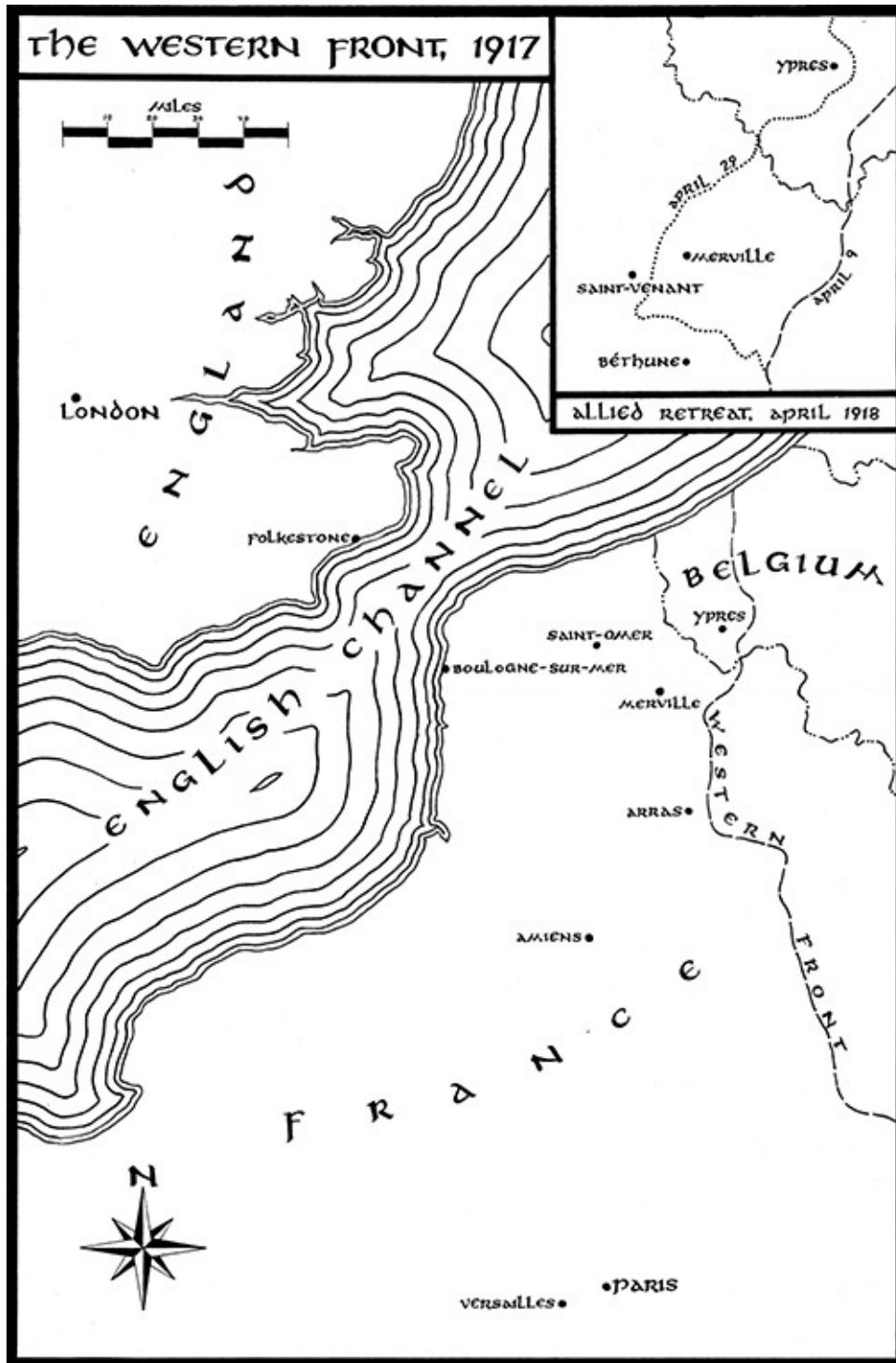
WILLIAM MORROW

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Dedication

*This book is dedicated to my father, Stuart Robson.
You are the finest historian and the best teacher I will ever know.*

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PART ONE

*The lamps are going out all across Europe;
we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.*

—Sir Edward Grey, foreign secretary of Great Britain (1905–1916)

Chapter 1

*Belgrave Square, London
July 1914*

It was past nine, past time, for the sun had set, the orchestra had begun to play, and hundreds of guests were streaming up the grand central staircase, their voices rising in an ebullient, ever-swelling chorus to the floors above. Past time to call for Flossie, and array herself in the gown her mother had chosen. If only there were armor for occasions like this.

A scratch at the door; then: “Lady Elizabeth?”

“Flossie. I was just about to ring for you. I’ve left things rather late.”

“Your hair’s done already, so we’ve only to worry about your gown. We’ll have you ready in no time at all.”

After shedding her dressing gown, Lilly stood in her chemise and stockings, still as a mannequin as Flossie tightened and tied her corset. Then the maid fastened several petticoats around her waist, just enough to support the modest fullness of her skirts.

The gown itself had been set out on the floor, on top of a clean sheet, its bodice drawn wide so Lilly might step into it with Flossie’s help. Made of palest pink satin, it was overlaid by cream-colored net lace embroidered with lilies of the valley. Although it had not been her first choice, it was a pretty gown, and she loved the way the light caught and reflected the seed pearls and crystals of its embroidery.

She drew on her gloves, their kid leather so paper-thin it took forever to smooth them up her arms, and bent her head while Flossie fastened a pink sapphire and pearl choker at her throat; it was followed by a tiara, bracelet, and earrings from the same parure.

She’d never be the belle of the ball, for that role fell to mahogany-haired beauties like her sister. But she could admit, assessing her appearance with a critical eye, that she looked passable tonight.

Pretty, even. In her favor was her complexion, glowing and clear, without even a hint of freckle, and an acceptably rounded bosom, and an abundance of shiny brown hair.

It had been an age since she'd attended a ball. After her debut, two Seasons ago, she'd avoided such grand occasions whenever possible. Fortunately, this was the last event in honor of her brother Edward and his fiancée that she was expected to attend, at least until their wedding drew near. After tonight she could retreat to the quiet of Cumbria and enjoy what remained of the summer in peace.

The carriage clock on her mantel chimed the half hour. She had wasted enough time already.

"Thank you very much, Flossie. I'll ring for you when I come back upstairs."

"Yes, miss. You do look lovely."

"You're very kind. I'll see you soon."

Lilly took a steadying breath, as deep as her corset allowed, and hurried downstairs to the library via one of the back staircases.

At her arrival, Edward rose with alacrity from one of the wing chairs that flanked the fireplace. Her fiancée's father, Lord Halifax, was clearly suffering from gout and took longer to extricate himself from his seat.

Dropping a kiss on Lilly's cheek, Edward moved past her and surveyed the empty hallway. "Where on earth are they? Shouldn't they be here by now?"

"I spoke to Helena and Lady Halifax not long ago," Lilly reassured him. "I'm certain they'll be here presently." Seeking to divert his attention, she caught sight of the evening paper on a side table. "Has there been any news?"

"Nothing from the Austrians, though it's only a matter of time." Edward picked up his glass of port, drained what was left of it, and grimaced. "We'll all be at war before the summer is out."

"Is there truly no hope that an agreement can be reached?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"Best to get it over with," Edward said. "Like—how did you put it, Lord Halifax?"

"Lancing a boil."

"Yes, that was it. Quick and sharp; that's how we'll do it. We're sure to prevail, and once we do we'll finally be certain of peace."

A dismissive harrumph from the library door told Lilly that Lady Halifax had arrived. "None of your war talk this evening, gentlemen," the countess commanded. "You'll alarm the young ladies."

Edward smiled apologetically. "You're quite right, of course." Stepping forward, he kissed Lady Halifax's hand with a flourish. He then turned to his fiancée, who had been hovering behind her mother, and bestowed upon her the full, dazzling effect of his smile and regard.

"Helena, my darling, you look utterly beautiful tonight. I'm so very proud." He reached into his coat and pulled out a slim leather box from the inside breast pocket. "A small token of my esteem. I do hope you like it."

Helena opened the box, her gloved fingers fumbling with the catch, and gasped as she saw the diamond bracelet inside. She looked up at Edward, her heart in her eyes, and Lilly felt a brief, and disquieting, spark of envy. Was that what it felt like to love, and to be loved in return?

A discreet tap at the door announced the butler's arrival. Resplendent in his silk tailcoat, Mr. Maxwell led them up the grand staircase to the ballroom. As they approached the ornate double door to the room, the orchestra inside fell silent and the accompanying din of voices grew hushed.

Mr. Maxwell's sonorous baritone was perfect for such occasions. "The Earl of Halifax and the Countess of Halifax," he proclaimed. "The Viscount Ashford and the Lady Helena Montagu-Douglas-Parr."

Lilly stood well back, waiting until the watching eyes of the crowd were elsewhere, then slipping into the ballroom all but unnoticed. She made her way around its perimeter, greeting those guests whom she'd already been introduced, repeating the same inanities of weather and health each time. And each time, as she met their eyes and shook their hands, she was beset by the conviction that the interior life of the person to whom she spoke was utterly unknown to her. They might as well have been animated silhouettes, so profound was the effect they had on her. Not that she was likely to have made any more lasting an impression on any of them.

She made her way to the blue drawing room, intent on finding a quiet corner where she might sit and sip at a glass of lemonade. Then she saw him.

Robert Fraser. Robbie.

She had only met him once before, when her brother had invited his best friend from Oxford to stay for the long Easter weekend. Her parents had disapproved, of course, appalled that Edward would choose to associate with the son of a Glaswegian dustman. But Edward had insisted on bringing his friend to Cumbermere Hall for the holiday, and what her brother wanted he very nearly always got.

Though seven years had passed since that weekend, she recognized Robbie straightaway, though she could discern little of the boy he'd once been. He was as fair as ever, his hair the color of honey and his eyes were the same bright blue of her memories. But he carried himself like a man, with none of the gracelessness and bluster of youth, and held himself so confidently that he overshadowed every other person in the room.

He looked wonderful in formal dress. Worn by a lesser man, the conventional ensemble of black silk tailcoat and trousers, stiffly starched white shirt, waistcoat, and bow tie was frequently unflattering. Lilly had seen more than a few oversize penguins tonight. But not Robert Fraser.

Heads turned as she approached him, one hand outstretched in greeting. "Good evening, Mr. Fraser."

He didn't respond. Just stared at her, his gaze quizzical. "I beg your pardon," he said at last. "I don't believe we've been introduced."

He didn't remember her.

"I'm Edward's youngest sister. Elizabeth."

Comprehension dawned on his face. Ignoring their whispering, gawking audience, he took her hand in both of his and held it as gently as if she were made out of porcelain.

"Lilly?" was all he said. He had the oddest expression, as if he were pleased to see her, but also somehow, perplexed. "Of course. I do beg your pardon, Lady Elizabeth. How lovely to see you again."

“Thank you, Mr. Fraser.”

He smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners, and her heart skipped a beat or three. “I feel as if we’re on display,” he explained, leaning toward her fractionally. “Is there anywhere . . . ?”

“I agree, it *is* excessively warm in here,” she said in a carrying tone. “Would you be so kind as to escort me to the balcony?”

At his nod, Lilly offered her arm and led him through the crush of guests to the sanctuary of the balcony. Stepping outside, she let the cool evening air wash over her for a moment before speaking again.

“That’s better, isn’t it? Now we can talk and have no fear of interruption, at least for a few minutes.” She walked to a bench at the far end of the balcony and sat, hoping she looked more composed than she felt. He sat next to her, his eyes never leaving her face.

“You must think me the worst sort of fool,” he said presently.

“Of course I don’t—”

“You grew up. You were a wee girl when I saw you last.”

“Not so wee as that. I was nearly thirteen,” she reminded him.

“You wore your hair pulled back in ribbons,” he insisted. “Your face was covered with freckles.”

“That was seven years ago.”

“As long as that? How have you been?”

“Very well, thank you. And you? I believe you’re a physician now, are you not?”

“I’m a general surgeon at the London Hospital in Whitechapel. I’ve been there for a little more than six years.”

She already knew, for Edward talked about his friend from time to time, and she was an attentive listener. Once, she had looked up the hospital on a map of the city, and had been surprised to see it was hardly more than five miles from Belgrave Square. From the way people talked about the East End, she’d have thought he lived and worked in a foreign country.

“You never thought of returning home to Scotland?”

“Once or twice. But I’m happy enough at the London.”

“What sort of work do you do at the hospital?”

“I spend one or two days a week in surgery, learning from the senior doctors at the hospital. The rest of my time is divided between the postoperative wards and the receiving room. But I don’t want to bore you. Tell me how you’ve been.”

“Quite well, thank you.”

“I feel sure your brother would have told me, but you haven’t married, have you?”

“Not yet. Rather a disappointment to my—”

She broke off, her words catching in her throat as she saw her mother advancing purposefully toward them, her gaze sweeping from one side of the ballroom to the other. As Lady Cumberland drew ever closer, Lilly realized she wasn’t alone. “Oh, no,” she groaned under her breath. “Not him again.”

“Who?”

“The young man with my mother. Bertram Fitzallen-Carr. He’s a cousin of my brother-in-law Louis.”

“He looks like a pleasant enough fellow.”

“Pleasant, yes; interesting, no. He’s absolutely hopeless at conversation, to begin with. No matter what one says to him, his response is either ‘oh, really,’ or ‘you don’t say.’ ”

She was suddenly aware of the pressure of her tiara and the hairpins that secured it. Massaging her temples with her forefingers, she willed the thrumming pain to subside. In a moment her mother would be at the doors to the balcony and there would be no escape from Bertram’s blarney ministrations.

Just then, the orchestra finished the sedate waltz it was playing, and almost immediately began a second waltz, this time in the livelier Viennese style. Robbie stepped back and extended his hand to her.

“May I have this dance, Lady Elizabeth?”

In a heartbeat they had stepped through the French doors and were drawn into the throng of couples swirling around the ballroom.

Chapter 2

With each step Robbie felt his grasp on reality slip further away. He'd always hated dancing, for he'd never, by his own estimation, been much good at it, but this was sublime.

Lady Elizabeth could not have been more different from the girl he'd met seven years ago in Cumbria. The Lilly he'd known then had been all freckles and pigtails, elbows and knees, hesitant and gangly and endearingly unpretentious. If he'd ever thought of her in the intervening years, it was as that awkward child. Never like this. Never as a woman grown, a woman so beautiful she stole the breath from his lungs.

Memories crowded upon him. They'd gone on a picnic the weekend of his visit to Cumbermead Hall, a picnic so colossally elaborate that he had, at first, been dumbstruck by the sheer extravagance of it. High in the fells above the great house, an army of servants had erected an enormous pavilion which had been furnished with tables and chairs and even a chaise longue; underfoot, priceless Oriental rugs had been scattered over the rough ground of the heath. The entire two-room cottage where he'd lived as a child, where his mother still lived, could have fit inside with room to spare.

A second, smaller pavilion had been devoted to the food for their luncheon. There'd been platters upon platters of beef, chicken and game, innumerable pies and salads, and even, he recalled, a silver tray piled high with chilled, dressed lobster. For those with a sweet tooth, there were cakes and custards and mountains of exotic hothouse fruits. And everywhere there had been footmen, perspiring in their livery, with bottomless magnums of champagne.

After the meal, he and Lilly had gone for a walk to some nearby ruins. She'd confided to him her dreams for her future, her eyes bright with delight and anticipation. She had talked excitedly of Marie Curie, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, Beatrice Webb. She had told him that she planned to travel the world, attend university, and then become a scientist, or perhaps a crusading journalist; she hadn't yet made up her mind. The trouble was that her parents were unwilling to even think of her going away to school, but she was certain she would wear them down in time.

He had listened, yes. Listened and hadn't dared to tell her the truth, for he'd seen what happened

the pedigreed sisters of his schoolmates. Girls like Lilly didn't go to school. They didn't go on adventures and they didn't grow up to be women like Marie Curie. They made their debut, they married, they had children, and that was more or less it.

Unwilling to be the one to deflate her dreams, he'd instead suggested she ask her parents for an academically minded governess, one who would implement a more rigorous course of study than his existing featherbrained tutor could manage. He'd even gone with her to talk to Edward about the plan. But then he'd returned to Oxford and had forgotten all about her.

His insides curdled with shame. What kind of man had he been, to listen and sympathize and then walk away without a backward glance? Though he was ignorant of the details of her life in recent years, he was all but certain that her youthful dreams had not come true.

The proof was in her eyes. Their remarkable light had dimmed; certainly he saw little evidence of it tonight. Caution, not hunger, now informed her gaze.

The waltz finished with one final flourish, and he noted with relief that the formidable Lady Cumberland was nowhere in sight. "Let's go sit in the blue drawing room," Lilly suggested. "We can talk there without being overheard."

They found a window seat at the far end of the room, wide enough for them to sit at an acceptable remote distance from each other.

"I gather there is no fresh news from Vienna," she began.

"No, not tonight. What do you think will happen next?"

She looked surprised, as if no one had yet thought to ask her opinion. "I'm not sure. Edward thinks war is inevitable."

"It's only inevitable if enough people believe it to be so."

"Yes, of course. I only wish . . . it's just that everyone seems so set on it. As if it will somehow be the solution to our differences with Germany. As if it's something that will make *us* better."

"Only men who've never been to war can think it noble. And as it's been more than a decade since South Africa—"

"I know. But it's not only the young men who think so."

"You mean Kipling and the like."

"They speak of it as something beautiful, but how can it be beautiful? Has any war ever been fought where no one was killed?"

"You don't think it noble to die on the battlefield?"

"Nobler to die in one's bed after a long and happy life."

"I agree with you. Likely I'm the only person here who does."

"What will you do, if it comes to war?"

"I'll join the medical corps. What else could I do? I'd make a terrible soldier. What will you do?"

Once again, his question appeared to take her by surprise. "I beg your pardon?"

"Will you do any sort of war work? Join a voluntary aid detachment, that sort of thing?"

"I hadn't . . . I mean, I've never considered it. I doubt *I* could do anything to help."

“Because you’re a woman? Rubbish. This is the twentieth century. Women can achieve anything they set their minds to do. Once we’re at war and the men are off fighting, women will be needed here at home to do all sorts of important things.”

“I should love to help, really I would, but—”

“Elizabeth! There you are!”

Lilly’s mother was advancing upon them, her voice glacial with irritation. “I have spent an entire quarter of an hour searching for you, Elizabeth.”

Robbie stood, offering his hand to Lilly as she rose, then turned to Lady Cumberland. “Good evening, ma’am.” Seven years had not served to improve the countess’s temperament or character, he thought dispiritedly. If anything, she was even worse than he’d remembered.

“Mr. Fraser,” she greeted him. “How good of you to join us this evening. Pray forgive me for the interruption,” she continued, “but I cannot allow Elizabeth to waste her evening in idle chitchat.” Lady Cumberland turned to the young man at her side. “Mr. Fitzallen-Carr, I believe you’ve been searching for a partner for the next dance. Be so kind as to escort my daughter into the ballroom.”

There was nothing to be done. The odious Bertram took Lilly’s hand and propelled her across the room, though it was clear she didn’t want to go; was, in fact, resisting with every step. And all Robbie could do was stand there, impotently, and watch as she was led away.

AS SHE AND Bertram began to waltz, Lilly strained to catch a glimpse of Robbie and her mother. It was difficult to see them at this distance, but they seemed to be speaking. Or were they? Mama was not even looking at Robbie, and actually seemed to have turned away from him. He was looking straight ahead, his eyes unseeing, his expression set and grim. Lilly craned her neck, straining to see more, but only succeeded in stumbling badly.

It took several minutes for her to extricate the heel of her shoe from the train of her gown, then further precious seconds to successfully plead exhaustion and make her escape. She tried not to run, but when she entered the blue drawing room, only to find that her mother and Robbie were nowhere in sight.

Telling herself not to panic, she moved from one reception room to the next, scanning the crowd for a glimpse of his golden hair, hoping against hope to find him in the green drawing room, or perhaps the hall, or the far side of the ballroom, or the balcony. But he was gone.

Disappointment, acute and bitter, rose in her throat. Was it something she had said, or done? What on earth had he left without saying good-bye? Longing, now, for the evening to be at an end, she returned to the ballroom, intent on making her way upstairs. She’d only taken a few steps when she heard her name being called. She turned, her heart pounding, and saw that it was Edward.

“There you are, Lilly. Champagne?”

“Yes, please.” She took the glass he offered and downed its contents in a few gulps.

“Steady on. I don’t want to end my evening by carrying you upstairs. Is anything the matter?”

“I’m fine,” she reassured him. “Just thirsty. I was wondering . . . have you seen Robbie?”

“Oh, right. I was supposed to tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“He was very sorry, but he had to leave.”

“Did he say what it was?”

“No, just that he had to go, wished me and Helena all the best, would see me soon, et cetera. What do you ask?”

Lilly inspected her champagne coupe, wishing intensely that it weren't empty. “No reason, really. It's only that . . . did he seem at all upset?”

“No, not at all. Seemed perfectly fine.” Edward looked at her closely, his interest piqued. “Anything the matter?”

“I can't help worrying . . .”

“About what?”

“Mama saw us sitting together, and of course she interrupted. She had that awful Bertram Fitzallan-Carr with her—”

“Louis's cousin? The one with practically no chin?”

“Yes, him. She sent me off to dance with him. And I'm almost certain I saw her speaking to Robb after we left.”

“They could hardly stand next to one another and not exchange a word.”

“Yes, I know. But he had the oddest expression on his face. It was almost as if she'd struck him a blow.”

“And now you're concerned that Mama might have said something unfortunate?”

“Yes, and that ruins everything, because we were only having a friendly chat with one another.”

“I shouldn't worry about it. Most likely he looked upset because of something entirely unrelated. Perhaps he remembered something he was supposed to do, or some patient that needed his care?” Edward squeezed Lilly's hand reassuringly. “You'll soon see him again. There's the wedding, to begin with, and after that I'm sure we can contrive a meeting or two.”

“But once we're at war, and you're all gone to Europe—”

“For a matter of months, no more. We'll all be home and wreathed in glory by Christmas at the latest.”

“I suppose you're right.”

“Of course I am. So stop fretting and go dance with someone.”

“I don't know, Edward. I'm feeling very tired. Would you mind if I said good night?”

“Not at all. I'll cover for you with Mama if she comes looking.”

“You are a dear.”

“I try, Lilly. I do try.”

HE'D FOUND EDWARD and made his excuses; had retrieved his coat and hat and made his way into the street. Had walked the half mile to Victoria Station, produced tuppence for an Underground ticket, and boarded the first District line train heading east. He would have preferred to take a taxi home, but

finding a cabbie who could be persuaded to make the trip into the East End, he knew from experience was next to impossible.

The stations blurred by, a tangle of fizzing electric lights, garish advertisements, and the impassive faces of strangers.

St. James' Park. Westminster. Charing Cross.

Lady Cumberland had been polite enough, but he'd seen the spark of triumph in her eyes. His daughter's engagement would be announced soon, once the festivities for Edward and Helena were concluded. The young man, Quentin Something-Something, was the son of dear friends. Practical family already. So very suitable for Elizabeth.

Temple. Blackfriars.

He ought to have expected it. Lilly was beautiful, charming, and sociable, the sort of woman any man in possession of his senses would wish to have at his side. Perhaps she had simply forgotten to mention her fiancé. Perhaps he'd only imagined the glimmer of discontent hiding behind her smile.

Mansion House. Cannon Street.

He'd stammered his congratulations. Known he couldn't bear to stay for another minute.

Monument. Mark Lane.

Almost home now.

Aldgate East. St. Mary's.

He'd look in on his patients. Write up that stack of charts on his desk. Try to forget. Put from his mind the memory of Lilly's beauty, the sound of her voice, the warmth of her lovely eyes.

Whitechapel.

At last. He was back where he belonged.

Chapter 3

5 October 1914

My dear Lilly,

Yes, this letter still finds me in the delightful surroundings of Barrow-in-Furness. What could be more charming than a wet, cold, and very smelly encampment full of men who are bored senseless of drills, drills, and yet more drills? Every last one of us is champing at the bit to be done with this. We know it won't be long—it can't be long, given the state of affairs in France and Belgium. But still we wait for our orders to pack up and take ship for France, and an endless wait it is.

I've been promoted up to captain—no idea why, really. Likely they thought the lieutenants were a bit thick on the ground and needed thinning out. I only hope it doesn't mean they're fitting me up for a desk job behind the lines. Of course I wouldn't put it past Mama to try to ensure something of the sort, but I'll fight it to my dying breath. My place belongs alongside my men and she ought to know it.

Thank you, my darling girl, for the parcel of books and magazines and the seedcake from Cook. I have the scarf you made tucked around my neck as I write. I know you said you aren't a champion knitter, but I think it's perfect, dropped stitches and all.

If you are speaking to Helena, please apologize that I haven't yet responded to her letters. Though bored, I am nonetheless very busy and haven't as much time for correspondence as I would like.

Almost forgot—you asked after Robbie. Lucky man is in France already, working at a hospital in Versailles. (Not the palace proper!) No doubt he'd be glad to hear from you. Capt. Robert Fraser, RAMC, No. 4 General Hospital, 1 boulevard de la Reine, Versailles, France.

I'll sign off now—will let you know straightaway when we get our marching orders.

It was difficult to believe that little more than two months had passed since the declaration of war. When Lilly's father had announced the news to the family, at breakfast that August morning, her instinctive reaction had been one of horror. She didn't know much about war; had no memory of it, for she'd been a little girl at the time of the hostilities in South Africa. But she was certain its outbreak should not be an occasion for rejoicing, despite her parents' delighted reaction to the news.

It was a relief, to be sure, after all the months of waiting and wondering. And it was hard not to be pulled along by the joy that greeted the war's arrival. Cheering crowds and marching bands, and even poets proclaimed it glorious, so who was she to doubt?

Before the week was out, Edward had joined up. Deaf to their parents' protests that he might safely wait out the war, he became a lieutenant in the Cumberland battalion of the Border Regiment and was posted forthwith to Barrow for his training. Mama had taken to her bed for an entire two days after his farewell.

Lilly had been fearful, too, but had done her best to hide it when Edward had said good-bye. Her father and all his friends, seemed to regard the war as a great lark. To them it was a blessed chance to do, or to act, to be forged by the crucible of war into better men. An improbable notion, Lilly was sure, though she could understand its appeal. What had any of them actually *done* with their lives thus far, despite the riches and privileges heaped upon them?

She wasn't surprised to learn that Robbie had joined up and was putting his considerable talents to use. If there were one man she knew who had made something of his life, it was Robbie. And she wasn't alarmed to learn that he was in France, for he wouldn't be fighting; would, instead, be working behind the lines in a hospital, as safe as any man might be in a country that was at war.

It would be imprudent to write to Robbie. Her parents would be appalled by her audacity, should they ever find out. Busy as he must surely be with his work at the hospital, he might be none too pleased to receive a letter from a near stranger.

And there was the sticky question of what she would actually say in a letter. What did she have to impart that would be of interest to him? Descriptions of bandage-rolling parties and the sudden scarcity of petrol hardly made for a fascinating correspondence.

She hardly knew him. He was Edward's friend, not hers. He'd thought so little of her, the night of the ball, that he'd left without saying good-bye.

But he'd been so kind. On that Easter weekend so long ago, he had treated her not only as a intelligent person but also, astonishingly, as an equal. His words, his confidence in her abilities, had inspired her.

With the help and encouragement of Miss Brown, the governess Edward had found for her, she'd applied herself to her studies. She'd read as widely as her parents' limited library and her even more limited pocket money had allowed. When her father had objected to her unseemly interest in his dai-

newspapers, she'd convinced Mr. Maxwell to have them rescued before they were put in the rubbish. Cocooned in her room, she had read *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* and daydreamed about journeying to the exotic, far-off places described in their pages.

None of her dreams had come true. She hadn't traveled the world. She hadn't gone to university. She had yet to do an honest day's work and probably never would. If Robbie thought of her at all, it was probably as a failure. She'd been graced with every imaginable material and social advantage, and what had she done with such good fortune? Nothing. Nothing at all.

And yet . . . he had seemed delighted to see her again. He'd welcomed her questions and his interest in his life. Surely it couldn't hurt to send a brief letter, one that asked after his health, his work. It wouldn't take him long to read and it might, just might, offer him some small comfort at the end of a long day.

31, Belgrave Square

London SW1

7 October 1914

Dear Captain Fraser,

Just now I received a letter from Edward with your direction in France, and as he suggested you would be happy to receive a letter or two from home, I thought you might be glad to receive this. Of course I am sure you are terribly busy taking care of the wounded and haven't much time at all to yourself, but all the same I hope you know how very proud we all are of you and your colleagues.

Life here goes on much the same as always, though the streets are full of men in uniform and the cost of things such as petrol and sugar and meat have increased out of all expectation. Still I suppose it is the price we must pay if our troops are to have the foodstuffs and equipment they require.

Edward is keen as mustard to be over in France, as I imagine are most men in uniform right now. The papers still seem quite certain that the war will be over soon, but it seems to me that such a prediction is unlikely to come true, though of course I know little of such things. If the war is to end, one of two things must happen: both sides must come to the mutual conclusion that the fighting must stop (this I think impossible given the level of enmity) or one side must conclusively prevail over the other on the battlefield. One hardly needs to be a major general to know that has not yet happened nor is it likely to occur anytime soon.

I do hope you are well and not too exhausted by your work. Are you in need of anything to read? I only just sent Edward a parcel of books and magazines and should be delighted to do the same for you.

Yours faithfully,
Lilly

Chapter 4

“Captain Fraser?”

“Yes, Corporal?”

“You’ve some letters from home, sir. I popped them on top of the other papers on your desk.”

Another stack of post, God help him. He’d only been here six weeks and the letters from home had been unceasing. All well meaning, all blissfully ignorant of what was really happening in France and Belgium, and he’d had to force himself to reply.

After a while he’d begun writing essentially the same letter over and over. Thank you for your good wishes. Yes, I am busy, but the hospital in which I work is a fine one and handsomely equipped. No, there is nothing I require by way of personal items or supplies for the hospital. Thank you again for thinking of me, yours faithfully, and so on and so forth.

He’d known it would be bad when he signed up, having read enough about the commission in the recent wars to expect the worst. The problem lay in his expectations and the way in which they’d been flattened by the reality that faced him in the wards each day.

As a surgeon, he knew how to right what was wrong, repair what was injured, and find a way to create something whole out of something broken, even if the damage at first appeared irreparable. But how could he fight against an enemy that was invisible?

Some called it gas gangrene. Some called it enteric fever. No matter the name, it was his enemy and it was killing his patients, one after another, no matter how long and carefully he labored to repair their wounds.

A day, a week, a fortnight after surgery, often for the most minor of injuries, the fever set in. Then came the infection, feral and relentless, poisoning its victim inch by agonizing inch.

They’d tried everything to eradicate it, scrubbing the wards from top to bottom every day, burning the uniforms the men arrived in, washing their skin with carbolic solution before surgery; they’d even set up special isolation wards for men who showed signs of fever. All to no avail.

He sat at his desk and took up the bundle of letters. One from his mother, two from colleagues

the London, and the fourth . . . he didn't recognize the handwriting. Feminine, almost calligraphic. He turned over the envelope and saw the address embossed on the back: Ashford House, Belgrave Square, London.

Now, this was something entirely unexpected. A letter from Lilly.

He tore it open and read it through, too quickly. Why had she written to him? Was it out of a sense of duty or Edward having asked her to do so? Or had she taken it upon herself to write, to establish some kind of contact with him?

He read it again. No mention of the fiancé.

No matter the reason. She had written, she seemed to be sincere, and so he might as well reply.

No. 4 General Hospital

Somewhere in France

16 October 1914

Dear Lady Elizabeth,

Thank you for your letter. You do find me well, and not especially tired, although I'm at a low ebb because of some difficulties we are encountering in the postsurgical treatment of soldiers at our hospital.

I've been in France for a little more than a month, having been sent here via Le Havre after three weeks of officer training. Drill, endless rules and regulations to memorize, and, worst of all, target practice, at which I took great pride in my poor showing. When I left for France I packed my service pistol into my locker and I earnestly hope it remains there for the duration.

In our spare moments we performed medical inspections on recruits, with only the finest physical specimens accepted for duty in France. His Majesty's Army is choosy now, but the day will come when it will gladly accept any man between sixteen and sixty, no matter his height, health, or accomplishments. Mark my words.

The hospital where I work is located in a hotel that's been taken over by HM Forces for the duration. It's by far the grandest building in which I've ever lived or worked, not the equal, of course, to your father's houses but at least a thousand times nicer than my little flat in Whitechapel or the aging wards of the London. Certainly the supply of hot water to the bathrooms is far more reliable.

All the furniture and artwork was removed before we set up here, but the building itself is beautiful, with high ceilings and immense windows (well taped in case of stray enemy munitions) and gardens that stretch nearly as far as the eye can see.

As quarters, I have a smallish room, set on a high floor, with a fine view that I do not admire as often as I should. I share it with one other surgeon, a decent fellow, but he talks in his sleep and has a snore that would wake the dead. Fortunately most nights I'm tired enough that I have

no difficulty falling asleep.

The food here is good—cooked, alas, by RAMC canteen workers and not the kitchen's original French staff—but there is plenty to eat and they always have something available when we work into the wee hours.

With that I'll say good-bye for now. We have another lot of wounded coming in and I should probably take care of some paperwork before I go into theater again.

As I said, I am delighted that you wrote and I look forward to our correspondence.

*Yours faithfully,
R. Fraser*

31, Belgrave Square

London SW1

27 October 1914

Dear Captain Fraser,

I was delighted to receive your letter, all the more because we are just now returned from Portsmouth, where we bid farewell to Edward yesterday. We were only able to visit with him for a few minutes, it was so busy at the port, but I was glad of the chance to see his face and hear his voice before he embarked for France. He told us his battalion was likely to be attached to one of the Indian brigades, as several have recently been recalled to Europe, but beyond that he had little notion of where he was to be sent next. Simply "somewhere in France," as the saying goes.

It was pretty hard to see him go, though as Edward deploras tears or any kind of fuss, I was careful not to allow myself to become overset. But knowing what he faces in the coming months, the kind of danger he will encounter, the horrors he will see—all of that weighed upon me quite dreadfully as I said good-bye.

Of course my troubles are as nothing compared to your present worries. You mentioned some difficulties regarding the care of patients. Do you have all the equipment and supplies that you need? Are there enough doctors and nurses to care for the wounded? I so wish there were something I might do, some way in which I might help. Even if it is only to listen, and in some way bear witness to the hardships you are suffering.

I do have some welcome news, for yesterday I received a letter from Miss Brown, my former governess and my dear friend for many years. She became a part-time nurse with the VAD before the war, in the spring, when the call first went out for volunteers, but recently decided she ought to be doing more. So she gave her notice to Miss Rathbone (a city councillor in Liverpool for whom she has worked since leaving me) and, with that lady's blessing, has been

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