

There was a long, drawn-out sigh, followed by the tearing of the air, and the surrounding darkness was split by a flash of white light. Sam expected to see the lights on the promenade twinkling off into the distance, the wings of the angel statue silhouetted against the moonlit sky, the cliffs standing sentinel at either end of the town. But what she expected no longer existed.

Stretching out ahead was a vast wasteland; a filthy, oozing sea of mud studded with the blackened stumps of lifeless trees. Craters, filled with slimy water, touched and overlapped all the way to the horizon. Beaten down into this mess were scraps of equipment, helmets, rifles, coils of barbed wire, even a military tank.

A gold ring, embedded in a piece of rock, lay beside her feet. She looked more closely. The piece of rock wasn't rock but a human finger. As she looked even more closely, the finger connected itself to a hand, a hand attached itself to an arm, a head stuck itself onto a neck, the neck onto a back with two shoulders. The bones jerked and a rat, as big as a cat, tore itself out of the ribcage of a man who used to be somebody's husband.

The sea of mud wasn't that at all. It was a sea of blood and bones. There were arms, legs, heads and hands, some still wearing clothes, some still with eyes and hair, layer upon layer of them. And the blood and the bones weren't all dead. Some were still alive and still suffering. Their cries rose up all around her.

A head lifted out of the mud. A pair of blue eyes blinked. And blinked again.

'Jess...'

A hand reached out towards her.

'Jess...'



ONE

IF THE FOUR OF them had been entered into a competition to see who could scream the longest and the loudest there would have been no contest; Shelly would easily be ‘Outstanding Screamer of the Year’.

They’d been on the Orbiter, the Freak Out, the Booster, and now it was the turn of the Tagada. They were sitting, side by side, on the slippery plastic bench, their arms hooked over the bar behind their backs, while the giant bowl spun round and round, and up and down, faster and faster. Up and round, down and round it went, with Shelly screaming her head off, Lou moaning on and on about feeling sick and Katie shouting out lists of instructions nobody could hear.

Round it went again, and looking up at them, laughing and waving, were four faces. Male ones. And Katie and Shelly and Lou were laughing and trying to wave back while keeping one arm hooked over the bar. So these were the boys. And which of the four was the one who wanted so much to meet her?

Was it the very tall one in the Hawaiian shirt; the very short, stocky one who kept punching the air; the one wearing dark glasses even though the sun had gone down over an hour ago; or the very thin, pale, freckly one with red hair. The ride was slowing down. It stopped.

The thought of going out, being kissed, perhaps even going to bed with any of the knock-kneed, spotty-faced male specimens, dribbling the ball up and down the school’s football field, was just too hideous. But Shelly had been there,

done it and survived. Although the great love affair to end all love affairs had lasted less than four weeks.

‘Guys...’

And Katie was throwing herself at the very tall one. Shelly had her arms locked round the waist of the short, stocky one. And Lou was nibbling at the neck of the one in the dark glasses. His face, the little that Sam could see of it, was the sort of grey that comes from staring at computer screens for twenty hours a day.

‘I’m Leo...’

She hated red hair almost as much as she hated freckles.

‘Hi, I’m Sam.’

The ghost train siren wailed. There was a crash, a shriek, and then the first cab, with Lou sitting beside the boy in the dark glasses, skidded down the slope towards a set of double doors.

‘Who’s he?’

Katie and the boy in the Hawaiian shirt were draped around each other in the cab directly ahead.

‘That’s Josh...’

The boy in the Hawaiian shirt took a swig from a bottle.

‘He wants to be a doctor. At least that’s what he tells the girls...’

The cab rolled down the slope towards the double doors.

‘Girls like Katie?’

Their own cab juddered forward. Leo put his arm around her.

‘Yep, you’ve got it, girls like Katie...’

The doors slammed open and they were hurtling through a narrow tunnel with black ceiling and walls. A skeleton with glowing red eyes lunged down. Sam shrieked. Leo laughed and pulled her towards him, tightening his arm around her shoulder.

The cab careered round a corner and through another set

of doors. If it had been dark before then this was really dark. There was rattle of iron followed by a wail and a shrouded figure clanked out of an alcove. Cobwebs brushed across Sam's face. Through another set of doors and in front of them, dangling from the roof, was a cage. Inside, its hands and feet bound in chains, was a decomposing body of a man. The corpse raised its head, rolled its eyes and grinned. Round another corner, and now they were plunging down a slope and through another set of double doors.

Moonlight, silence and a flickering sky replaced the crashing and banging and wailing of the ghost train. She was no longer sitting beside Leo. She was standing on the platform of a station. Carriages, the old-fashioned kind she'd seen in black and white films, with red crosses painted on their sides, stretched down the platform ahead of her.

Men in military uniform and women, wearing ankle-length dresses and long white aprons, red and grey capes draped over their shoulders, walked up and down, whispering instructions; one stretcher was directed here, another there, another was loaded onto a truck parked at the side of the platform. There must have been hundreds of them.

A young woman, wearing a blouse, skirt and coat rather than a nurse's uniform, was walking down the platform towards her. Head down, looking from side to side, she checked each stretcher, before moving on, down the row, to the next, and the next. There was a cry. The woman walked on. The cry was repeated. The woman stopped. She turned.

TWO

August 1914

‘THERE WERE NO ANGELS.’

‘The soldiers saw them at Mons. The newspaper said so—’
Her mother couldn’t read.

‘Newspaper? What newspaper?’

But neither could her father.

‘At the grocers, in the window, Jess read it out for me...’

Today was Saturday and on a Saturday her father always got back from work early enough for the family to have tea together.

‘Five days of marching with no sleep? Of course they were seeing angels. So would you, Mother, so would I, so would Jess, all dressed in white, with wings, sitting on horses...’

Along paths, up lanes and over hills, he would always find a perfect place for a picnic. Today they were sitting beside the river, in a meadow, just a short walk from the cottage.

‘And the swords...’

‘Swords? What swords?’

‘The angels were carrying swords...’

Jess took a bite. The bread was warm, the cheese tangy, the pickled onion crunchy.

‘All big and flaming...’

A whistle echoed from further down the valley. Jess jumped up. She ran across the meadow and leapt up the steps, two at a time, onto the narrow, wooden bridge. To her left, the river tumbled down a weir while, to her right, it flowed, slow and smooth, towards the sea.

A belch of black smoke, another whistle, the grind and rattle of metal on metal, and the train was thundering past. She waved and waved until her arm ached. It wouldn't be long before she was a giggling servant girl, with a job in the big city and money in her pocket, on her way down for a bit of fun at the seaside.

But there were no plump-cheeked, giggling servant girls hanging out of the windows. Not a single one. Soldiers now stood, squeezed together, shoulder to shoulder, along the length of the train. They didn't see her standing there on the bridge waving. Or if they did, they didn't nod, smile or raise a hand.

'They're off to France. To fight for king and country.'

She had to ask her father the question. Even if the answer was the one she was most dreading.

'Will you have to do your duty?'

"England expects that every man will do his duty" had been the headline, the day war was declared.

'Will you have to go to France?'

A thump, thump, thump of drums was followed by the blare of trumpets.

'It's a band...'

Her mother was packing up the picnic.

'Like at the seaside...'

The sound of cheering drifted across the meadow.

'Don't want to miss it.'

The four of them, Jess running ahead, her father and then her mother, carrying her baby brother, followed the path across the meadow, through the rickety iron gate and up the steep lane, lined on either side with stone cottages. They joined the other men, women and children walking towards a platform draped with red, white and blue bunting.

'Are you, you and you...'

The band fell silent.

‘Are you really satisfied with what you are doing today? Do you feel happy as you walk along the streets and see other men wearing the King’s uniform?’

A man was standing on the platform. He was dressed in a suit, with a neat moustache and slicked back hair. A line of soldiers, sweating in tightly buttoned khaki, stood below him.

‘What will you say in years to come when people ask, “Where did you serve in the Great War?”’

In a country she’d never heard of, hundreds of miles away, somebody who was not at all important had shot somebody very important. A country had invaded another country, a different country had invaded another country, and so it had gone on, until it seemed that the whole world was at war.

‘What will you answer when your children grow up and say, “Father, why weren’t you a soldier too?”’

And now this Great War had arrived in her village.

‘Who made this little island the greatest and most powerful Empire the world has ever seen?’

The man opened his arms.

‘Your forefathers.’

There was a cheer from the front of the crowd.

‘Who ruled this Empire with such wisdom and sympathy that every part of it, of whatever race or origin, has rallied to it in its hour of need?’

A young man raised his hand.

‘Our fathers.’

It was Robert Tucker, the vicar’s son. He had visited their cottage when her mother had been taken ill. He had come over to where Jess was sitting, hunched in a corner. He knelt down beside her, took her hand, held it tight and told her, promised her, that there was no need to be frightened. And he’d been right. Her mother had recovered.

Another hand was raised.

‘Our fathers.’

‘That’s Dr. Crow’s boy, isn’t it? Thought he was going into his father’s practice...’

‘Not now, he won’t, Mother.’

A soldier guided the two young men over to a table where another soldier was waiting.

‘Who will stand up to preserve this great and glorious heritage?’

The man on the platform looked down at Norman Smith and Dick Butler.

‘Lads?’

They raised their hands.

‘We will.’

Stan Booth raised his hand.

‘I will.’

The man on the platform pointed down at the three of them: Norman, who could score a goal from any angle; Dick, who had kissed every girl in the village; and Stan, the gentle giant who always gave Jess a bunch of flowers, freshly picked from the hedgerow, on her birthday.

‘You will.’

Three soldiers walked towards the three boys. Jess’ father pushed through the crowd.

‘Stan, your parents, what about the farm?’

‘The harvest’s in.’

Stan was always happy.

‘Your parents?’

Nothing that anyone said or did could ever stop him smiling.

‘I’ll be back by Christmas.’

And it was the same now.

‘They need you—’

A soldier held her father back.

‘Leave the lad alone. He can make up his own mind.’

‘He’s not eighteen.’

‘Looks old enough to me.’

The soldiers, going out to fight in France, were no longer strangers, standing shoulder to shoulder, on a passing train. They were the men who lived in her village; the boys she’d gone to school with, grown up with.

‘Justify the faith of your fathers.’

The man on the platform smiled down at her.

‘Earn the gratitude of your children.’

She grabbed hold of her father’s arm.

‘You can’t go. I don’t want you to go.’

He squeezed her hand.

‘We’ve all got to do our duty.’

A soldier was walking towards them.

‘He’s too old, my father’s too old...’

She’d read it in the newspaper.

‘He’s thirty-...’

She had to remember.

‘Thirty-six, my father’s thirty-six.’

‘Come on, lass. Let him go.’

‘She’s right. My daughter’s right. My husband was thirty-six,’ her mother spat the words out, ‘four months ago.’

The soldier released her father’s arm.

There was a thump, followed by a blare and the crowd cheered as the boys, heads held high, arms swinging, marched down the main street. The conquering heroes, their war won, would be home in time for Christmas. Beer was drunk, flowers were thrown and the National Anthem was sung, again and again.