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5TH JUNE 1916

A grunting, gasping, clanging chaos of engines. Bursts of white smoke that remind me of shell vapour streaming across a foreign field. The platform at St Pancras swarms with railway porters and staff officers checking and loading supplies bound for the Front: tinned food, canvas tents, barrels of rum, scratchy blankets, crates of ammunition packed by lemon-skinned girls poisoned by their work in the munitions factories. Meanwhile, parents stand behind the ticket barrier, summoning their last scraps of courage, letting go of their sons with lingering handshakes and tearful smiles.

I turn away from the compartment window and flick open my grandfather's pocket watch. Quarter to five. We're already running late. I snap the casing shut, grip the warm metal tight in my fist. Force my hand to stop shaking. I think of my mother at our garden gate, like those other parents behind the barrier, her face tear-stained as she pressed the watch into my palm: *I meant to give this to you the first time you left, but everything happened so quickly back then, it slipped my mind.*

My father had remained inside the vicarage, though he kept the front door ajar. I can picture him now in the shadows of our hall, an expressionless, unmoving presence. Mother had given me the watch but I had left my own parting gift in Father's desk drawer, hidden under his books of prayers and sermons. The Military Cross I had no use for, the citation enclosed inside its little cardboard box: *Awarded to Second Lieutenant Stephen Wraxall, for conspicuous gallantry during an enemy raid on a British trench.*

I hadn't shown it to my father during my sick leave. Hadn't

wanted praise from those puritanical lips. But Grandpa's watch I will treasure, for as long as I live. Perhaps a month? The average officer's life expectancy at the Front is about twelve weeks, and I have already eaten up eight of those during my first deployment to France.

I tuck the watch into my tunic pocket and take an unsteady breath. The air feels hot, mucky somehow, stale with the sweat of unwashed men. The train is packed with Tommies and officers, either heading back to the Front after leave or youngsters who have just reached the age of conscription. Youngsters. I glance at my reflection in the compartment window. I'm only a kid myself, aren't I? A boy of barely nineteen, put in charge of a platoon of forty men, most of them years older than me. Shouldn't that be a joke of some kind? Well, no one seems to be laughing, least of all my old platoon, all of whom are now buried under the stinking Somme soil I am returning to.

I look away from that pale face and glance at the empty seats around me. Backs and shoulders bustle against the glass dividing my compartment from the corridor, but it seems no one wants to join me. I know why. I'm a reminder to the soldiers who've already been in France of what horrors await them and a warning to those nervous new recruits of the terrors to come. To look at me is to enter the war earlier than any of them wish to.

Still, eyes flicker over me like flames. I can feel them through the glass. I resist touching my right ear – or the place where my ear used to be – and instead run my hands over the writing case in my lap. A small brown leather suitcase made specially to fit the metal box that sits snugly inside. A box painted black and gold, my initials – *S. J. W.* – engraved on the lid, a silver key to fit the lock. Inside, slots for stationery – blue writing paper, field

postcards, envelopes – a tray stacked with a regiment of coloured pencils. Another gift from Mother, this time remembered before I first left home. I trace my initials with my forefinger. I could write to her, I suppose. Express my thanks for the watch. After all, I have no one else to write to.

Not now.

I picture my father again – the first words he said to me when I hobbled into the house after a fortnight in military hospital, my ‘Blighty wound’ still raw and aching: ‘The Greaves’ boy is dead.’ In that moment, I’d wished that the German grenade that had swatted away most of my ear had also deafened me. But I heard him perfectly, and those five words knocked the air out of my lungs. ‘Thought you ought to know, despite everything,’ Father added, before leading me into the parlour where tea had been laid out. Seed cake, doilies, the best china. Somehow, I had got through all the small talk that followed without screaming.

I had lived to see Michael again. Had killed so that I might survive in order to see him. Now I wished that I had dropped that bloody revolver before I ever aimed it; that I’d let the young German shoot first, and that I too was now rotting alongside Geordie, Phillip Danvers and the rest of my platoon.

Michael was dead. My friend.

My best friend.

The following day I crossed the village green, past the old school where Father still preached as chaplain, where the song of the choir rang out from the chapel, some bright chirruping tune. It was a fine spring morning. People tending their gardens, chatting to the postman, children playing skipping games. A rope *crack-crack-cracking* against the pavement like the distant sound of gunfire from an enemy trench. I kept my head down, ignored the

greetings, the concerned questions, the hearty congratulations that I was still (more or less) in one piece. A gummy-eyed major from some ancient conflict – the First Boer War, I think – struggled to catch up with me, desperate to share tales of the battlefield. But his war and mine were very different. How do you begin to explain to a soldier who fought with sword and musket what it is like to see a single machine gun cut down fifty men in the space between heartbeats? I might as well be speaking another language.

The Greaves' cottage stood at the edge of town, past the railway station and down by the brewery. Pauperville, as it was known to the snobs at school. Michael had been a day student, a scholarship boy. Not one of us. A fact he was reminded of on a regular basis, both by his classmates and the masters.

My heart thundered in my chest at the thought of meeting his mother at the door, of trying to find any words to console her. She knew about us, Michael had told me on one of our last meetings before we both headed off for training – me, a 'proper' public schoolboy, to the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst; Michael, son of a blacksmith, to the 'Tommies' training camp at Heaton Park. After our secret had been discovered, he had confessed in their parlour, tears streaming down his face, hands pressed between his knees. His mother had wrapped him in her arms and told him that she loved him, just the way he was. I had envied Michael that. God, I had envied him.

In the end, I hadn't got as far as the cottage door. A black-edged card in the front window confirming the family was indeed war-bereaved had sent me reeling into a neighbouring alleyway, shuddering, gasping, clutching at the wall for support. My best friend. It had only been a moment: a touch of nervous fingertips in the summer house, mouths brushing lightly, tongues sliding

together. And then the discovery. That expressionless presence standing in the doorway, a dozen damning verses bubbling behind biblical lips. And later, a trial in my father's study and a sentence passed: *Join up now or forever be a stranger to me and your mother. Go do your duty, son. It will stamp out these degenerate impulses and make a man of you.*

Now, in the train carriage, I take out some writing paper from the case and flick through the empty blue pages. We'd exchanged letters. Both during training and after we were posted to France. Chatty, everyday stuff with only the odd innocent hint of affection that wouldn't arouse the censor's suspicions. Like me, Michael had ended up in the Somme valley at the southernmost tip of the British line, in the trenches between the towns of Maricourt on our side and Montauban behind the German Front; a thin strip of No Man's Land separating the two. But with hundreds of troops surrounding us, and with our platoons being pretty much pinned down to their own small sector of trench, we hadn't had a chance to see each other. The couple of rest days we'd each been allocated had never coincided, and so letters were our only way to communicate. His last to me had arrived on my final day in military hospital:

*So take care, old chap, and give my regards to
Blighty. I'll keep up the good fight in your absence,
and perhaps I might see you again when my leave
comes round. I long for the day. In the meantime,
know that I am very proud of my old schoolmate –
the MC, no less!*

Ever yours, Michael.

I replace the paper in its slot, keeping back a single sheet. I don't write to Mother. Instead, I take a pencil from the tray and, resting the paper on the lid of the writing case, I begin to draw. Slowly, line by line, shade by shade, it becomes the likeness of a boy I once cared for, framed in the cobwebbed window of an old summer house. With each pencil stroke, my heart swells. We had never exchanged photographs, of course. How would it look for a man to be carrying another's snapshot in his wallet? But a sketch is different – just an idle, innocent drawing of a lost friend. A face I was scared might already be vanishing in the mist of my memory, fading away, but I have managed to capture him again here . . .

'Ear, ear, would you look at that! Danny, oi, Danny boy, come take a butcher's. Although to be honest, it looks like a butcher's already been working at that poor bastard's lughole. You know what, he'd make a pretty good exhibit in one of your fairground freak shows. Behold the one-eared wonder!'

I grunt at the sound of the voice, dragging myself from fast-dissolving dreams. I feel drowsy, heavy-headed. Hadn't realised I'd drifted off. A glance shows me we're still in the station. *Still*. I pull Grandfather's watch from my pocket and thumb it open. Almost six-thirty, we're going to be late for the boat.

'Leave off, will you, Davey.' A whispered warning. 'Can't you see the pip on his sleeve? That's a lieutenant. Do you want to be had up on charges before we even get over the water?'

The door slides back and a boy about my own age enters the compartment. A Tommy with his cap under his arm, short but strongly built. He has a bright, open face dusted with freckles, an upturned button of a nose, the dimples in his cheeks deepened by a broad, attractive grin. Some clumsy training camp barber has recently made an uneven crop of his shiny chestnut curls.

‘Hello, sir,’ he says, his grin broadening further. ‘My name’s Danny. Daniel. McCormick. Sorry about that idiot friend of mine. He didn’t mean no offence.’

He holds out his hand. He has clear blue eyes with little violet flecks at their edges. I notice this as he leans down, his hand unshaken, and picks up something from the floor. My drawing. My drawing of Michael.

His gaze plays across the sketch. ‘Did you do this?’ he asks, his tone almost musical. Difficult to put an accent on it. Cockney with a touch of Irish? ‘You’re very good. The expression you’ve captured . . . He looks happy and sad, all at the same time. Do you—’

I jolt forward and snatch the paper from him, burying it in my writing box, banging down the lid.

‘I’m a *second* lieutenant,’ I tell him, tapping the single star on my sleeve. ‘Lieutenant Wraxall.’ Then, harshly, ‘Hasn’t anyone taught you to salute when you’re in the presence of an officer?’

He stands back, startled, then straightens his spine and gives a sloppy salute. ‘Sorry, sir.’

I shake my head. ‘Better buck up your ideas, Private McCormick, or you won’t last five minutes at the Front.’

They are hard words. My eyes sting at the echo of them and I have to turn my face to the window.

A whistle sounds. Doors clack shut.

At last, we begin to move.