

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

THAT GOOD EARTH

S.A. Meade

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

THAT GOOD EARTH

By S.A. Meade

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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THAT GOOD EARTH

By S.A. Meade

Photo Description

No photo

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I would love to read a sweet, kisses-only story about two British young men serving together during WWI. Surviving in the trenches, sitting out a long night under fire, etc. I also have a weakness for WWI pilots, if you decide to go that route. :)

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Hollis Shiloh

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: military, WWI, pilot, closeted, disabilities, sweet no sex, farming

Word count: 14,665

THAT GOOD EARTH

By S.A. Meade

PART ONE

I crawled through the thick, soul-sucking mud of no-man's land, glad of the sudden downpour that bought me enough time to escape from the smouldering wreckage of the Airco. I didn't even glance back; I needed to find shelter before the *Boche* realised I'd survived the landing and started shooting. God alone knew where the allied trench was. All I could see was mud, mud and more mud, pockmarked by the occasional crater, twist of barbed wire or blasted tree stump.

The fighting, such that it was, seemed to have stopped for the moment on that section of the front. The splatter and whisper of rain was broken occasionally by the faraway crump and whistle of mortar fire, followed by a stuttering barrage of gunfire but, mercifully, my particular bit of no-man's land seemed to be on hiatus—perhaps everyone was too busy gawping at the broken plane. I hoped that was the case. I'd always thought that I'd die in the air, shot down in a dogfight. It wasn't in my plans to drown in the mud or die the death of an infantryman. That's why I'd volunteered for the Royal Flying Corps, to soar above it all.

The downpour eased to a desultory, icy drizzle. I glanced over my shoulder. The rain had doused the flames, leaving a smoking pile of struts and charred wings. The *Boche* were already venturing out of their trench to poke around. Time to hurry up before they realised the pilot who'd bombed their trench wasn't dead in the wreckage.

I took a deep breath and surveyed my surroundings. The allied trench was a distant tangle of wire and sandbags. I doubted very much that they could see me inching my way through the mud. If the enemy refrained from firing, I'd probably make it. Until then, I was on my own.

The sudden whistle of an airborne shell jolted what little optimism remained in me. I threw my arms over my head and prayed. The ground

trembled and a fountain of soil bloomed into the dark, grey afternoon sky. I prayed a bit more when the enemy decided to open fire. The mortar's ultimate destination forgotten, I scrabbled on my hands and knees, haste dictated by the mosquito whine of bullets as they sprayed into the mud around me. Now everything was down to luck and sod all else.

“Hey! Over here!” a voice called out from somewhere to my left.

I changed course without hesitation, scrambling for purchase. I raised my head to see someone waving above the lip of a crater before they ducked down when the enemy acknowledged that person's presence with another burst of gunfire.

Ten or so feet remained between me and salvation. Crawling would take a lifetime. I scrambled to my feet and ran, then dove headfirst into the crater as bullets spat all around me. I tumbled arse over tit into a foetid puddle; cold water rank with the unspeakable stench of the trenches, of dead men, unshed tears and futility.

“Are you all right?” Someone grabbed my collar and hauled me up.

I wiped the filthy water from my face. “Yes, thanks. Nothing a nice hot bath wouldn't cure.” And suddenly, that's all I wanted. To be back home, reclining in a deep tub filled with steaming hot water.

My companion laughed bitterly. “I'd rather have a whiskey first.”

His well-modulated voice spoke of officer rank, not what I expected to find at the bottom of a bomb crater in no-man's land. The two pips on his epaulettes confirmed my suspicion, a lieutenant no less. His pale cheeks were cloudy with stubble and exhaustion etched grim lines around his mouth. Mud streaked his skin, making his blue eyes even more remarkable—silvery-bright and ringed with sapphire.

He extended a gloved hand. “Lieutenant William McCall.”

“Second Lieutenant Arthur Reed.”

His grip was warm and firm. The first human touch I'd experienced for weeks.

“What is an officer doing in this god-forsaken hole in the ground?”

McCall glanced towards the far end of the crater, at a huddled bundle of sodden wool. "Private Harris. He came a cropper when we tried to take the *Boche* trench yesterday. I tried to help him... I sat up all night but there's only so much one can do when someone's guts are spilling out of him. The medics couldn't get to us because of the bombardment. All I could do was sit with him until he died."

"I'm sorry." There seemed little else I could say.

"These things happen." He removed his helmet and ran one hand through short, blond hair. "Now I'm stuck."

"How far is our line from here?"

"About fifty yards but the enemy is particularly active here, which I assume is why you were sent to bomb them."

"It was. Sorry it didn't work. One of the bastards caught my engine. I had to put the thing down where I could. It was either in no-man's land or behind their lines. I didn't fancy spending the rest of the war in a prison camp." I wasn't sure that a bomb crater was much better.

McCall leant back against the crater wall. "It's all right. There should be another push just before dawn tomorrow. That's the plan. We can make a run for it then."

I stared at the lowering clouds as they boiled and swirled, driven by a cold wind. I wondered if I'd ever be warm again and wrapped my arms around my knees. "As long as we don't drown. I think it's going to rain."

"We'll be fine. Better to be here than up there. Hopefully by this time tomorrow, I'll be back in my trench and you'll be on your way back to your squadron."

I thought with longing of the squadron's makeshift HQ, a nice warm, dry shed. There'd be mugs of strong, hot tea and perhaps a sandwich or two. "I hope so." My stomach rumbled in memory of those longed-for sandwiches.

"You'd best make yourself comfortable. It'll be a long night."

As if I needed reminding. I stole another glance at McCall.

He reached into his greatcoat and pulled out a water bottle. "Want a drink?"

"Thanks."

He handed me the bottle. "Sorry there's not much."

I took a sip of the warm, brackish water then handed the bottle back. "I'm sorry. All I have is my sidearm."

"That's all right." He returned the bottle to his coat. "So, sir, why the RFC?"

"Because I didn't want to end up in the trenches. Because I'd always wanted to fly."

"I think the odds are a bit better down here in the mud from what I hear."

"You're probably right. It's just I spent most of my boyhood up to my knees in mud, helping out on the farm. It was just nice to think I could get away from it for a while. What about you?"

McCall shrugged. "Family tradition. The day war was declared it was expected that I'd sign up, join my father's regiment. I was as excited as the next fool, thinking we'd whip the *Boche* and be home in time for Christmas."

"I think we all fell for that. I couldn't wait to get out of the front door."

"Neither could I." He settled against the wall of the crater once more. "What will you do when this is all over?"

"I have no idea. There's the farm I suppose, but I'm the younger son. My brother will inherit it all and I'm not sure I fancy working for him for the rest of my life. You?"

He quirked his lips in a thin smile. "I am the *only* child. If I survive this mess, I'll be going home to look after the estate. Five hundred acres of arable land and a hundred or so sheep. So I suppose we're both country lads."

I raised an eyebrow. "I think you have a bit more countryside to your name than I do. A couple of hundred acres on a Cumbrian fell aren't quite the same."

"No, I suppose not. Wiltshire's a bit less... rough." His gaze grew distant.

I had no doubt where his mind had gone. I wish he hadn't asked about after the war. "Do you miss it?"

"Yes." Wistfulness had coloured his voice. The distance was still there in his eyes. "It's harvest time. They'll be mowing the wheat. The evenings are drawing in. There'll be a fire in the sitting room."

The clouds dropped a bit more and the air was suddenly filled with a fresh volley of gunfire. A shell whizzed overhead, leaving a trail of smoke, white against the darkening sky. I braced myself for the explosion. McCall covered his ears and hunched his shoulders. The ground shook and a shower of mud splattered into our dubious refuge.

"Bastards." McCall lowered his hands and glared at the sky.

Our side returned fire. Shells flew in the other direction. McCall pulled the collar of his coat up and shrank down into his coat. I shivered, not sure if it was from fear or from the cold, which arrived with the rain. I edged back and hunched myself up, hoping that less of the rain would reach me.

The firefight receded to a few desultory exchanges. Rain brought a swift twilight. I rested my chin on my knees in an attempt to stop the shivering. My companion was clearly miles away, no doubt thinking of a fire in the drawing room. There was no chance of a fire in the crater. If there'd been anything to burn, it would've been drenched. I closed my eyes and tried to think of warm things, of afternoon sunlight spilling through a window, of a summer morning in the Eden Valley. Anything other than the hell I'd found myself in. I prayed that sleep would find me.

"Reed?"

I lifted my head. "Yes?"

McCall shrugged out of his coat. "I think you need this more than I do."

"No, I couldn't. It's yours. I'll be fine." As much as I would've welcomed the warmth, it would've been selfish to accept such a generous offer. My own coat was a shredded mess, abandoned with the wreckage.

"Come on, man, I can hear your teeth chattering."

"I'll warm up soon enough."

“No you won’t. You’re already soaked to the skin. Come here.”

As a lieutenant, he outranked me. I couldn’t deny the order. I inched my way towards him. He leant forward and placed the coat over his head, then over mine when I settled beside him.

“Better?”

I resisted the urge to huddle against him like a child seeking comfort from its mother. His presence and the coat provided shelter enough. I didn’t wish to dwell on McCall’s proximity. It had been a long time since I had enjoyed the closeness of another. Even though he smelt of the trenches, of sweat, of death, I couldn’t ignore the sheer *presence* of him. “Yes, better.”

“Good.” He shifted until his shoulder rested alongside mine.

I drew my legs up once more and stared into the gathering darkness. The rain offered a constant whisper in the sudden silence, as both sides bedded down for the night. It seemed that sleep would be a possibility after all. I closed my eyes to shut everything out.

“Reed?”

I woke from my brief doze, cold once more. “What?”

“You were shaking again.” He put his hand on mine. “You’re bloody freezing.”

“Sorry.”

McCall put his arm around my shoulders. “We need to share our warmth.”

I edged closer until my body rested against his. “Yes.”

“I’d murder for a cup of tea right now.”

“So would I.” Hot, sweet, steam rising into the cold morning air. God, yes.

“When we make it to our trench, we’ll celebrate with a mug, yes?”

“Sounds good to me.”

“I have a little flask of whiskey in my dugout. I think we’ve earned some of that too.” I could hear his grin rather than see it.

The memory of whiskey stole through my mind, the gentle burn, the taste, the way it settled in my stomach like embers. I imagined sitting in a room somewhere, legs stretched out across the hearth rug, before a blazing fire. I'd be cradling a glass of whiskey...

"You're thinking of whiskey, aren't you? I'm sorry. I shouldn't have tempted you like that." McCall released a gusty sigh. He was close enough that I felt his breath caress my cheek.

I swallowed and fought back the sudden and unexpected surge of desire that bloomed within me. How long had it been? The summer before the war, a sunlit riverbank and... Richard. I pushed the memories away. Richard was long gone, killed at Mons, a mere six months after that idyll. "Yes," I lied, "I was thinking about whiskey."

I wanted to close my eyes again, to sleep and wake up in the morning. Then we'd be rescued and I could return to my squadron. I would hopefully never have to sit in the mud and stink again.

McCall shifted, settling closer, his leg pressed against mine. "Don't worry. By this time tomorrow, it'll all be over." His voice had been gentle, coloured with quiet hope. "I'd like the whole bloody war to be over. It's dragged on for far too long."

"Three years too long. I wish it had never happened, that we'd never rushed into it."

"You sound like you've lost someone to this war."

I considered my answer while I stared at the ghostly outline of his face. "Yes, I have."

"Childhood friend? College friend? I've lost so many." He turned away and looked towards the remains of his comrade. "That's the trouble with being a bloody infantry officer. It's not just friends, it's the men under my command. Harris is just one of many, but I feel each death, every sodding wound. So who did you lose?"

"A... good friend... at Mons. He was with the British Expeditionary Force. We met at college." My voice caught in my throat. For a moment, Richard was there, standing proudly in his uniform. The pain of that good-bye twisted in

my gut. Three years had passed, yet the sharpness of that knife never diminished. He'd been my first and was probably my last.

McCall remained silent, perhaps thinking of his own losses. I stared into the pitch-black night. The cold rain fell on my face. For once, it was a relief. It washed away the tears I'd been trying to fight.

A shell screamed overhead, leaving a streak of light in its wake.

"Bloody hell." McCall threw himself over me, slamming me into the mud.

The ground trembled violently. The previously empty and silent sky filled with debris, which rained into our refuge. I heard it slam into the mud even beneath my companion's laboured breaths. He flinched, fingers tightening on my shoulders. "Shit."

Another shell, presumably one of ours, passed over. The night descended into a chaos of gunfire.

"I think I've been hit." McCall pulled himself off me. Pain had tightened his voice.

I sat up. "Where?"

"Leg." He took my hand and guided it to his thigh.

I smelt blood, felt it.

He hissed when I touched the wound.

It bled too freely for my liking. "Do you have something I can dress this with? I can do that. It needs to be covered up." I fumbled in my pocket and realised that my scarf had been left behind in the plane.

"A filthy handkerchief, that's about it."

"Hang on. I know." I unfastened my tunic in a hurry, then pushed it away. I hadn't realised how many layers of clothing I'd put on until I had to strip them off. Finally, I pulled my undershirt over my head. "This will have to do."

"Put your clothes back on, man. You'll freeze to death."

"You could bleed to death." I tore into the garment. "Can you drop your trousers?"

He rose unsteadily and unfastened his trousers, before pushing them down carefully.

“I wish I could see properly. There might be shrapnel in there.”

“I don’t think there is. I think it just sliced through. It doesn’t feel like there’s anything in it.”

“I’m not about to try and pull anything out in the dark anyway, especially with that racket going on ahead.”

McCall sat back down. I knelt before him, barely making out the gash on his leg. There was no time or water for the niceties of wiping the blood away. I wrapped the torn fabric around his thigh as tightly as I dared. He placed his hands on my shoulders and gripped tight when I applied pressure to the wound.

“Christ.”

“Sorry. It needs to be secure. With any luck, the bleeding will stop.”

“It bloody hurts.”

“I’m sure it does.” I finished dressing the wound to the accompaniment of sporadic gunfire and the occasional distant roar of the big guns further down the line. “There, hopefully that will help until you can get a medic to have a look at it.” I was almost sorry to have lost the excuse to touch his skin, the hardness of his thighs beneath my fingertips.

The grip on my shoulders eased as his hands fell away. “Thank you.”

I climbed to my feet and wiped my hands on my trousers, regretting the absence of his touch.

McCall scrambled into his trousers then refastened them. Beyond the crater, the noise of battle faded away. My companion retrieved his coat and placed it around us as the rain returned with a miserable vengeance.

“Are you all right?” I huddled against him again more, seeking warmth.

“I’ll be fine.” His voice had sounded tight. He put his arm around my shoulder once more. “We should try to sleep. We’ll need our wits about us in the morning.”

I closed my eyes. Silence returned to the battlefield as both sides bedded down for the night.

“It’s all right,” he whispered. “You can rest your head on my shoulder. It’ll be more comfortable. If you don’t find it repellent.”

I complied, grateful for the comfort. “Not at all.”

“I thought as much. You didn’t shrink away before.”

“Why would I?”

McCall shifted. “Most men would.”

“I’m not most men.”

“Your friend... the one who was killed at Mons... he was...”

“Yes, he was more than that.”

“I’m sorry.” His hold tightened and, for the briefest of moments, I felt the feather-soft brush of fingers on my cheek. “It’s hard to lose someone you care for.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say. The events of the day finally caught up with me. In spite of the hellish discomfort of our refuge, I fell asleep.

I woke shivering and to a light touch on my hair.

“Reed,” McCall whispered. “Are you all right? You’re shaking.”

“C-c-cold.”

“I know.” He gathered me close and wrapped his coat around us both.

The rain had finally stopped, leaving an inky sky glittering with icy stars. Back home, the tang of autumn would be in the air, all wood smoke and damp leaves.

McCall rested his chin on my head. I hid my face in the warmth of his neck and prayed that those peaceful moments would last.

“Sometimes, even in war, there are good things,” he murmured.

“Is this one of them?”

“I think it is.” He slid one hand beneath my chin and tilted my face up. “May God forgive me. Perhaps it’s because I’m exhausted beyond all measure and I can’t think straight, but I feel a... bond between us.”

I returned his steady gaze, seeing only the glint of his eyes in the fickle starlight. I could no longer deny the attraction, the comfort of his touch and the promise of his parted lips. “I think so too.”

He lowered his mouth to mine. There was nothing tentative in that first touch. It was all fire and desperation. I responded in kind, curling my fingers into his short hair, seeking purchase, something to hold onto. He forced his tongue between my lips and I yielded, welcoming the intrusion. For a few moments, I forgot that I was sitting at the bottom of a foetid, sodden crater in the middle of no-man’s land.

“Lieutenant McCall! Are you there?” The fierce whisper from somewhere beyond the lip of the crater broke us apart.

McCall pressed his forehead to mine and cradled my face in his hands. “Bugger. I guess it’s time to make a run for it.”

Fear rose inside of me, quelling the desire instantly. “I suppose so. Will you be all right?”

He rose stiffly and hissed. “It might be a bit painful.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll help you.” I would’ve carried him if I had to.

“Don’t put yourself at risk for me.” He shouldered his rifle, then turned to face me. “One last kiss?”

“Yes.” I slid my arms beneath his coat and drew him close.

We took our time, even though time was something we didn’t really have. Someone waited beyond our refuge, someone who could guide us to safety.

When McCall released me, he sighed. “Let’s go.”

We scrambled up the slippery side of the crater. McCall grunted in pain with almost every movement. I made myself climb faster and bellied up into the churned mud at the top before he was even halfway. I reached down and held out my arm for him. He pushed himself forward and seized my hand. I braced myself and pulled him over the edge and into the mess beside me.

“Lieutenant?” Someone slopped through the mess towards us. “Are you all right? Are you ready to make a run for it? They’re going to start the shelling soon.”

We both got to our feet. McCall leaned into me.

I put my arm around his waist. “The lieutenant caught a bit of shrapnel during that last round of shelling. He’s going to need our help.”

“Oh, sorry, mate... I mean, sir.” The soldier must’ve seen the pips on my epaulettes. He hurried to McCall’s other side. “Right, Lieutenant, are you ready?”

McCall took a deep breath and smiled at me. “Are you, Reed?”

“Yes.” I just wanted to be out of there before the *Boche* realised what was afoot and before the mortars started flying.

“Come on then,” our cheerful saviour said.

We broke into an uneven run, trying to find our way through the maze of tangled, broken wire and craters. McCall gripped my shoulder and I knew that if I could see him clearly, his lips would be compressed with the pain. He maintained a stoic silence as we hurried towards our trench, closer now. Close enough that I could hear the *snick* of guns being made ready, the whisper of men moving into position. A thin, pale sliver of light coloured the eastern horizon.

My back prickled. I wasn’t sure if it was from fear or precognition. I quickened my pace, pulling McCall with me. We tumbled headlong into the trench as the first round of shells flew towards the enemy trenches.

“I’m going to fetch a medic for you, sir.” Our rescuer saluted and wheeled around, heading off into the mass of soldiers.

“Quick,” McCall shouted, “to the dugout.” It was his turn to take the lead, pulling me past the rows of waiting men, splashing over warped duckboards.

Those who weren’t manning the parapet were rushing for cover in anticipation of returning fire. We were caught up in the rush, winding through the maze of trenches until McCall wrenched me off to one side into a small, dark space.

“Thank Christ.”

I heard him fumbling about, then a whiff of sulphur and a sudden flare of light. The delicate clink of glass was just about drowned out by the roar of an incoming shell. A lamp flared into uncertain life as clods of dirt tumbled into the dugout.

“That was close.” McCall handed me a tin helmet. “You’d better put this on, just in case the buggers manage to hit us.”

“Thanks.” I watched my companion slump onto his cot, wincing as he touched his wounded leg. “Shall I go and see about that medic?”

“No, it’s all right. I daresay he’ll be along when he can. I’ve survived this long.” He nodded towards a battered chest at the foot of the cot. “I promised you some whiskey. You’ll find a flask in there. I’ll light the stove so we can have that mug of tea. The lads will be too busy to be fetching us biscuits.”

I opened the trunk. A thin, elegant silver bottle rested on top of neatly folded jumpers and scarves. It sounded and felt reassuringly full. McCall lit the stove and poured water from a jug into the kettle. Then he took a small tin from the top of an upended crate, opened it then spooned tea into an incongruously pretty teapot.

“I’ll make it good and strong.”

“Yes, please.” I handed him the flask.

He opened it and splashed generous measures into two chipped and scratched enamelled mugs. The aroma of whiskey stole through the tiny space.

Another shell shook the dugout.

McCall glanced up at the boards that separated us from a tonne or two of dirt. “The sods are getting altogether too good at this shelling lark.” He rummaged around on the top of the crate, through a haphazard collection of jars and tins. “Ah, here it is.” He opened a tiny tobacco tin. “The sugar. Do you like your tea sweet? I think we need sweet after all we’ve been through.”

“Please.”

“You can sit down, you know.” He patted the empty space on the cot.

Outside, the rifles roared into action with a relentless volley of shots. I didn't think the medic would be along any time soon.

I sat, grateful to sit on something dry and comfortable.

McCall carried on sorting through his jars until he found a small blue jug. He raised it to his face and sniffed. "Good, it hasn't gone over." He poured milk into the mugs and retrieved the kettle from the stove.

I tried not to flinch at the racket taking place outside. My host seemed impervious as he went about the age-old ritual of making tea—adding water to the teapot, gently shaking said pot and pouring the liquid through the strainer when he judged the tea was strong enough.

"Here you go." He handed me a mug.

I cradled the chipped and worn cup in my hands, relishing the warmth of it. The whiskey's presence was obvious. I raised the mug to my lips and took a cautious sip.

McCall watched me, half a smile on his face. "All right?"

The whiskey hit my guts like a steam train. "Excellent. Just what I needed. Thank you." Warmth rushed through me. I felt my blood begin to circulate again.

"It bloody well is." He set his tea down, then reached beneath the cot. "Here we go." He picked up a biscuit tin and gave it a tentative rattle. "I think I've some biscuits left."

"Perfect."

McCall popped the lid of the tin and held it towards me. "Biscuit?"

I picked out a digestive and realised I was starving.

The gunfire ceased outside.

Someone shouted, "Hold your fire, lads! They're pulling back."

I glanced at McCall, who blew on his tea.

"Thank Christ for that," he muttered. "Bastards."

We drank in silence. The whiskey settled like a comforting fire in my gut. I wanted nothing more than to lie down on the creaking cot and sleep for days. I

wanted McCall to lie beside me so that I could rest in the shelter of his arms. I wanted to wake to his kiss and to the stunning wintry blue of his eyes. Instead, I resigned myself to the fact that we would never see each other again, that war would inevitably see to that.

McCall sighed and set his tea down. “Do you think you could write to me? Would you do that?”

I grabbed onto that little bit of hope, that tenuous link we could share. “Yes. I’d do that.”

He smiled, his eyes warm. “Good.” Once more he searched for something, this time under his thin, flat pillow. He drew out a small leather-bound book and opened it. A fountain pen tumbled out. He picked it up and gave it a shake. “I think it should have enough ink left.” McCall licked his thumb, then dabbed at the pen’s tip before scraping the nib across the paper. “Here we go.” He found a blank page and scribbled away, then tore the sheet out and handed it to me. “My address for here, and my home address. Hopefully, when this whole sorry mess is over we can still keep in touch.”

I took in the regimental address and the grander one for home, then folded the paper and placed it in my pocket. He passed me the pen and book. I spelled out my addresses and handed the journal back to him. He studied it for a moment, then returned the book to its place beneath the pillow.

“I hope we see each other again.” McCall moved his hand over the coarse wool blanket and threaded his fingers through mine.

“So do I.” I wanted that touch to last for a long time and hoped that the medic was occupied with other injuries. However, the slop of feet through wet mud outside made things otherwise.

“Lieutenant McCall?”

“Come in.” He sighed and withdrew his hand.

I felt cold once more. The effects of the tea had faded quickly. I glanced up as a soldier stepped past the sacking that acted as a door, accompanied by a harried-looking medic. We all saluted each other.

The soldier turned to me. “Sir, we’re standing down now. Someone will take you to your squadron HQ. So if you’d like to come with me.”

I nodded. There wasn’t really anything I could think of saying.

McCall extended his hand and shook mine, all formal and an Infantry officer once more. “Good luck, Second Lieutenant Reed, and thank you.”

I saluted him again. My throat hurt. “Good luck to you, sir.” I took those few too-short moments to memorise as much as I could, comforting myself with the fact that I would never forget his eyes or his kiss.

The soldier waited, holding the sacking back for me to pass through. I followed him out, leaving McCall with the medic and leaving a bit of myself behind.

Dear Arthur,

Well, I’ve managed to survive another offensive, this time without having to take shelter in a hole in the mud. I’m sure you’ve heard all about it anyway. Every time I hear the rumble of a plane, I look up and wonder if it’s you, if you’re looking down at us poor sods in the trenches and looking for me, if you’re my guardian angel with canvas wings. I hope that you have your own guardian angel, keeping you airborne, keeping you safe from the guns and the mess.

Then, here in my dugout, when I can grab a few precious hours alone I reflect on our friendship and am grateful for that quirk of fate that brought us together. Anyway, I’m sorry this note isn’t longer. I can hear someone shouting for me. Good old Lieutenant McCall will sort it all out, yet again.

Please write and let me know that you’re safe and well.

I remain your most faithful friend...

I tucked the smudged and travel-worn postcard into my tunic pocket, close to my breast. I silently cursed the beady-eyed censors for ensuring that

William could do little more than write something polite and as free of emotion as possible. God forbid that anyone read something more revealing.

“All right, Reed?” Squadron Leader Willmott stared at me over the top of the dog-eared book he’d been reading for the past three months.

“Yes, sir.”

The lowering, thick mist had put paid to any sorties for the day, which left us kicking our heels in the shed.

He shrugged and raised his book. “Could’ve fooled me. You look a bit gloomy.”

“Sorry, sir.” I stared through the cobweb-draped window and was glad for the feeble warmth of the small stove. It could’ve been worse. I could’ve been in a muddy trench somewhere. I wondered how William was doing, whether he was snug in his dugout or resting somewhere behind the lines. I would’ve traded the shed for that dugout in a heartbeat, even though I had no reason to think that what accord there was between us was little more than gratitude to each other after surviving that damp, miserable night. I couldn’t help wishing that there was something else and wanted to read more into that postcard than had probably been intended.

“Why don’t you read a book or something?”

“I think I’ll write a postcard since nothing seems to be happening today.” I rose then walked over to my footlocker. I had saved a few blank cards. There was no harm in replying. I dug my pen out of my diary then settled down on my cot to write.

Dear William,

I was pleased to hear from you and know that you are keeping well. All is well here. We keep busy as you can imagine. I’m not sure about the guardian angel. I’ve certainly been lucky. If a well-placed bomb helps to keep you alive then I have done my job. I must confess, I do prefer being airborne, in spite of... well, things. At least I haven’t lost my bottle.

I, too, cherish our friendship and reflect on it often. I hope that we may one day have a chance to spend some time together in more comfort than our previous encounter.

Until that day I remain,

Yours faithfully...

I set the pen down and stared at the feeble words I'd written. The constraints of space and censorship made it impossible to write anything other than banalities. But, if it kept the tenuous connection between us alive, then it was worth it.

"That didn't take long." Squadron Leader glanced up from his book.

"It's only a postcard. Can't say much of any import."

He sighed and set the book down. "It's frustrating. I'll be bloody glad when we're done with this war. Three years in and look at us, still alive against the odds. Do you ever wonder when our luck will run out, Reed?"

"I try not to think about that, sir."

"I don't blame you. It's a damned depressing business."

I returned to my chair. "Yes, sir."

He rose then stalked across the room to the stove. "Do you want tea?"

"Yes, sir, that would be very nice."

"All I want to do is go home. I miss my Edith. She misses me."

I'd never heard the normally upbeat Willmott so gloomy but declined to point that out to him. "I can imagine."

"Is there someone you miss, Reed?" He poured water into the teapot.

I considered this. "Not really. Just my family. But they'll be too busy to miss me."

"I can't believe that."

I thought of my father. He would be getting the winter quarters ready for the sheep, preparing to bring them down from the fell before the snows started. There'd be walls to repair, forage to be stored. The wind would roar down

from the fell, the type of wind that felt like it could cut a man to the bone. No, he would be too busy to miss me, not while he had his mind on the coming winter.

Willmott handed me my tea. I tried not to grimace at the lack of sugar. The chipped enamel mug delivered me to another place.

“I’ve been thinking.” Willmott settled back into his chair.

“About what, sir?”

“About after... assuming we survive, that is. I’m going to keep flying. I can’t imagine not flying. I have a job waiting for me back at the aerodrome. Would you be willing to join me there? We always need good pilots, steady ones who can teach others to fly. Would you consider that, Reed?”

I took a sip of tea and stared at him for a moment. “Where, sir?”

“Berkshire.” He shrugged. “It’s not much of a place. We’ve a hangar or two and a decent landing strip and some keen enthusiasts. There’s a town nearby, so you’d find somewhere to live easily enough. I wouldn’t ask any of the other lads. I know you’d be an excellent instructor. What do you think?”

I considered the alternatives and found there weren’t any. Berkshire was close to Wiltshire. That was enough. There was every chance that I would see William again. “Yes, thank you, sir. I’d be delighted.”

Willmott grinned and leaned over, hand outstretched. “Excellent.” He shook my hand. “We’ll do good things there, and you’ll enjoy it.”

“I think I will, sir.” I thought of William and prayed.

Dear God, let us both survive this mess of a war.

The engine faltered and flecks of oil quickened to a vigorous bleed, spraying across my face and into the cockpit. I wrestled with the stick, trying to nurse my stricken plane back to the airfield. The rudder control didn’t seem to want to cooperate, even when I grabbed it with both hands. Pained spluttering from the engine told me that I wasn’t going to be airborne for much longer. The plane dipped and swerved drunkenly. The ground loomed closer, a sweep of green. Wind replaced the sound of the engine, rushing past me,

shaking the wings. It was all happening too swiftly for me to feel frightened—I was too busy trying to ensure a gentle landing. After some argument, I finally managed to bring the nose up, just before the ground rose to meet the plane. It bounced and pirouetted across the field. The world whipped past me in a blur of grass and mud. The wing struts juddered and split and the landing gear whirred and screeched as the plane careened towards the trees at the far end of the runway. The rudder snapped, sending the machine into a mad spin. I braced myself and prayed. When everything went black, it seemed a mercy.

“Second Lieutenant Reed?” a gentle, feminine voice slipped into nightmares full of chaos and splintering wood.

I could still smell oil. Everything ached. It even hurt to open my eyes to a flood of sunlight. I waited for my vision to clear, for me to realise that a nurse with bright red hair stood at the foot of a bed... a bed I appeared to be in. I stared at her, struggling to get my thoughts from my head to my mouth.

“You’re in the field hospital.” The nurse offered me a smile full of good cheer. “Don’t worry, you’ll be fine.”

“I don’t feel fine.” My voice escaped in a croak.

“You had a bit of a rough landing.” She moved to the side of the bed before patting my hand. “You’ve broken your right leg and there’s a fair bit of bruising, but the doctor thinks you’re going to be all right.”

“My leg?”

“You were very lucky, I’m told. It could’ve been a lot worse.”

“If you say so.”

“You’ll be going home soon.”

“Home?” I tried to digest the words.

“Yes. The doctor says it’s going to take a little while to heal. You’ll be sent to a lovely place to recover. You’re an officer. You’ll get to rest and recuperate in comfort.” She touched my hand again. “You need to rest, Lieutenant. It will do you the world of good.”

I’d heard about rest homes. One or two of my comrades had enjoyed a comfortable few weeks nursing their blighties in the comfort of somebody’s

home, one of many that had been converted to house convalescing officers. “I can’t remember the last time I went home.”

“Bless you.” The nurse tucked in a bit of my bedclothes. “Enjoy your little break. There are a lot of men who’d give a good deal to be where you are now.”

I glared at the shape of my leg, hidden beneath the thin, antiseptic-smelling coverlet. The throbbing, stabbing pain seemed quite a price to pay for a few weeks of being pampered. “I suppose so.” I wished I could feel some joy at the prospect. All I could think was that it would take me farther away from William.

“Shall I get you some tea? I should think you could use a cup of tea.” She sat me up and fluffed the pillow behind me.

I nodded. “Could I have a postcard? I need to write to someone. Let them know what’s happened.”

“Of course. Let me get your tea sorted and I’ll get someone to bring you what you need.” She disappeared in a flurry of footsteps, heels clacking on the wooden floor.

I leant back against the pillow and surveyed the room. I shared a ward with several other men, most of them occupied with their own business—reading, dozing, staring out of the window and, in one instance, talking rapidly and softly to himself as he rocked back and forth.

A few minutes later, another nurse arrived with a mug of tea and a postcard and pen. I scribbled off a quick note to William, informing him of my misfortune and that I would be shipped back to England to recover. It seemed to be all I could do. Returning to England just took me farther from him, away from any chance of seeing him again.

Dear Arthur,

The gods certainly smiled on you, my friend. I’m sure you don’t feel lucky or blessed with your broken bones, but I envy you the respite. I’m just relieved that you didn’t come to any

serious harm. I hope that your recovery goes well and wish you comfort and peace.

Everything here is much the same. I grab sleep when I can, I keep my head down and my feet dry. What gets me through is the thought that one day this will all be over and we can meet again.

I remain,

Faithfully yours,

W.

Dear William,

Thank you for your kind words. I am now comfortably settled in the Ivy House Convalescent Home. I have been given a sunny room overlooking the garden and feel like I'm getting far more than I deserve. The ladies here are very kind and food is quite an improvement on the usual. I daren't say any more for fear of sounding smug and self-satisfied.

I feel rather guilty. All I did was crash my plane. Nothing heroic. Nothing to earn me this rest. As comfortable and safe as this place is, I'd rather be back in France helping to get the job done so that we can all be safe and have sunny gardens to admire.

Stay safe, my friend.

A.

Dear Arthur,

Just a quick note from me. We've work to do here so I've just time to wish you a speedy recovery and to let you know that you're in my thoughts, as I hope I am in yours. I will write soon.

Yours, as always

W.

“Good morning!” Mrs Hawthorne, one of the volunteers at the convalescent home, carried a tray into the room. “Here’s your breakfast and the morning post.”

Something inside me lifted. “Post?” I hadn’t heard from William since his last, hastily scrawled note. That, combined with news of a big push had left me fretful and worried at the lack of correspondence. I’d told myself that he was probably just too busy to write.

Mrs Hawthorne set the tray down then handed me a small bundle of envelopes. I sorted through them, hoping for a postcard. One tumbled onto my lap, addressed to me in a hand I didn’t recognise. I turned it over.

Dear 2nd Lt. Reed,

It has fallen to me to deliver bad news. Lt. McCall had asked me that, if anything happened to him, that I was to let you know. Last week we had a bit of a push on our section of the line. Needless to say, Lt. McCall decided to go over the top himself. He was always a brave soul and would never ask his men to do anything he wouldn’t. They were making excellent progress when a Boche shell hit quite close by. It was chaos. By the time it had all settled, the Lt. was nowhere to be seen and we couldn’t send out a search party until we’d secured the enemy trench. As of this moment, we have found no trace of him.

He spoke of you fondly, as a dear friend. I am sorry.

Sincerely,

Captain Harold Bartlett

The close, tidy writing dissolved into a blurry scribble. I stared at the card for several moments and tried to will the words away. A chill settled deep into my bones.

“Second Lieutenant?” Mrs Hawthorne touched my arm. “Are you all right?”

I swallowed and forced myself to look at her. “Just some bad news, that’s all.”

Her face was all sympathy. “I’m very sorry. Can I get you anything?”

“No, it’s fine.” I had no right to grieve. A chance meeting, a stolen kiss and a handful of postcards didn’t entitle me to feel grief. I mourned the loss of the promise, the chance of seeing him again. “I’ll be fine.”

“Let me pour you a cup of tea. That’ll help.”

I nodded. I didn’t have the heart to refuse her kindness.

She gave the teapot a gentle shake, then poured the tea into the cup. Once she’d added milk and sugar, she handed it to me. “It’s nice and strong. Just what you need.”

It wasn’t what I needed but I took a sip anyway. All the hope and light had drained out of the frosty autumn morning.

“Is there anything else I can get you?”

A bottle of brandy and a glass.

“No, thank you. I’ll be fine. I think I just need some peace and quiet.”

“I understand.” She patted my shoulder. “If you need anything you have only to ask.”

I doubted her generosity ran to brandy. “Thank you.”

Mrs Hawthorn departed. The sunny room I’d been so grateful for lost a little light as a cloud drifted over the sun. I drank my tea and stared out of the window hoping to find some joy in the autumnal colours of the garden. I ached inside, mourning something I’d never had. All that remained was a handful of postcards, tucked into my diary. I closed my eyes, ignored the tightness in my throat and tried to forget the man with the blue eyes who’d once kissed me.

PART TWO

“Arthur, there’s someone here to see you.”

I withdrew my hand from the Bleriot’s engine and looked around. “To see me?”

Willmott stood in the open doorway of the hangar. “Yes, he’s waiting outside the cafe. I left him with a mug of tea and told him you’d be right there.”

“I can’t imagine anyone would be looking for me.” I did my best to wipe the oil from my fingers. My overalls, marked with the evidence of many long hours arguing with recalcitrant engines, were beyond redemption. I hardly looked like anyone’s idea of a pilot. “Perhaps he’s wanting lessons?”

“I doubt it. Poor bugger has a game leg. Sticks straight out when he sits down.”

I tossed the oily cloth aside. “Oh well, best go see what he wants, eh?”

Willmott patted my shoulder. “Give yourself a rest, man. There’s only two more lessons today. I’ll take ’em and when Simms gets back from town, he can take a look at this damned Bleriot. You’ve been working too hard.”

Only because I can’t think of anything else to do with my time.

“Thanks. There’s a book or two at home that I wouldn’t mind reading.”

“What an exciting life you lead, Arthur. I’ll see you in the morning. Take your bloody book and sit out in the sunshine.”

I headed for the small, ramshackle shed that served as the aerodrome’s clubhouse and cafe. Watson, the proprietor, had placed a handful of tables on the grass out front. The April sunlight was kind but the breeze held the promise of rain—hardly the nicest of days to be sitting outside watching the planes.

He cradled a mug of tea between his hands. The crook of a cane rested over the arm of his chair. Fingers of breeze sifted through his pale hair. I swallowed at the lump in my throat, wishing it was true, wishing he was there. But the vision remained. William glanced up and smiled.

“Arthur?”

I advanced towards him on faltering feet, following the siren’s call of the illusion, willing to humour it—and myself. “William?” My voice was little more than a reedy, disbelieving whisper. “William?”

The illusion rose, seizing its cane and leaning heavily on it as it sank into the soft, green grass. “By God, you’re a sight for sore eyes, man.”

The voice was as I remembered, slightly gravelly but beautifully modulated. The fatigue of battle had long since fled his eyes, replaced with a brilliance I didn’t recognise.

“It really is you? William?” All I could hear was the frantic pounding of my heart. “But...”

“I’m sorry, it’s a long story.” He held out his hand.

I took it, seized it and felt the living warmth of his palm pressed to mine. His touch reignited memories, stirred the embers of a life I’d almost given up on. “My God, it’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you too, Arthur.” He released my hand, fingers trailing slowly away. “Fancy a tea? No whiskey I’m afraid.”

I followed him numbly to the table and sank into the other chair. The damp wicker creaked and whispered. I stared at him while steam from his tea rose between us.

Mrs Simms brought another mug and a plate of cakes. “Here you go, Mister Reed. I knew you’d be wanting your tea and I brought some cakes for you both.”

“Thanks.” I reached for the tea when all I really wanted to do was reach for the hand that rested so close to mine on the sun-warmed tabletop.

“I can see you’re full of questions.” William retrieved his mug. “Do you have time?”

“I have the rest of the day off.” I wanted to be away from the airfield, from dear Mrs Simms peering through the shed window. I wanted to be somewhere where I could touch his hand and reassure myself that he was really there.

“Good. Then let’s find somewhere a little more comfortable.”

“I have a place in town, it’s not much, just a flat but it’s warm and there’s whiskey.”

“That sounds just fine.”

I glanced at his cane and at the leg stretched out beneath the table. “It’s a bit of a walk. Will you...?”

“The doctor says the more exercise I get the better.” He rose stiffly. “Come on then. We’ve a lot to talk about and I’d rather do it somewhere a bit more private.”

By the time we reached my place, William’s face was flushed and his limp far more pronounced. He slumped into the armchair and wiped his brow with his handkerchief while I disappeared into the kitchen in search of refreshments. I found a couple of bottles of ginger beer and some bread and cheese, which I set on the small table beside his chair.

“That’s better.” He poured his beer into the glass I’d given him.

The scent of ginger rose from my glass, the smell of the summer to come. I took a mouthful and settled into my chair, waiting. Not sure whether to ask questions or let William speak for himself.

He took a long drink and stretched his good leg out alongside the damaged one. “I don’t know how much Bartlett told you in his letter.” His eyes grew distant.

I knew that stare; I’d seen it on the faces of so many survivors of the mess that was the Great War. “We’d headed off across no-man’s land, a mortar landed close by. I was blown clear. To be honest, I don’t remember much at all. I know when I came to, I was being hauled through a trench full of *Boche* on a stretcher, with my leg in shreds.”

“The *Boche*? They captured you?”

William set his glass down. “Yes, they did. They patched me up and they sent me behind their lines to a prisoner of war camp.”

“You were lucky. They could’ve killed you!”

“They could’ve, but they treated me well.” He rubbed his thigh. “Pity their doctors couldn’t do much about this, mind.”

“What happened to your leg?”

“Sodding shrapnel sliced right through a tendon. Their doctor did what he could, but it was a field hospital full of his own wounded. He probably saved my life because I was bleeding like the proverbial stuck pig. I was shipped out of there as soon as I was conscious and spent the next few weeks convalescing in the prison camp infirmary. Again, not much they could do for me there but keep it clean and help me to start walking again. They were kind but I’ll have this limp for the rest of my life. But at least I’m alive.” He turned towards me. “We both made it, Arthur.”

“Yes, we did.” I wanted to touch him, to know that he really was there, in my armchair, drinking beer. “What happened after the war?”

“We weren’t released until about a month after the Armistice. We were turned over to the Red Cross and they made sure we made it back here. First thing my mother did when I got home was pack me off to a proper convalescent home where doctors poked and prodded and decided that there’s nothing they can do. Then, after Christmas, I went home and I more or less hibernated for the rest of the winter.” He sighed and studied a crack in the worn leather upholstery. “I’m sorry, I should’ve tried to contact you then but I needed time to become the old me again, as much as I could find of him anyway.”

“I understand.”

“I missed you.”

“I thought you were dead.”

“I’m sorry. I suppose I was in a way.” His voice had been hoarse. “I wrote to you and your parents told me where I’d find you and here I am. I don’t have any right to expect anything of you.”

“It depends what you’re expecting.”

“To get to know you. A few letters and a night sharing a crater don’t really count, do they?”

“They’re a start.” Something inside me sang. “It’s enough that you’re alive. That you’re not a ghost.”

He laughed softly. “Your face was a picture. I’d thought of that moment for some time. I’d lie in my cot in that camp and imagine seeing you again. So, I want to get to know you, Arthur. I want to know why I missed you so much, why I ached to see you again. Does that make sense?”

“Yes.” Desire rose in me like fire. I pushed it away, knowing that we had time.

“I never thought I’d...”

“Nor me. How long are you here for?” I didn’t want him to leave, afraid that if he did, he would cease to exist.

“I’m staying at the Stag and Hounds, just tonight. I thought we might dine there.”

“I can’t remember the last time I ate in a restaurant. I’d like that.”

“Excellent. Then that’s what we’ll do.” He reached for his beer.

I retrieved mine and enjoyed the novelty of company. Silvery afternoon light fell across the tired rug. The sky beyond the window was almost white and the smell of rain drifted through the open window. William looked like he belonged there, resting in that chair in his rumpled linen suit. Peace settled in the room, broken only by the plaintive call of a mourning dove and the fierce chattering of sparrows. I wished the span of the rug didn’t separate us. It was enough that he was there.

Evening brought a gentle drizzle. It whispered against the windows of the hotel dining room, where lamps flickered on the tables and liveried waiters glided silently amongst the diners bearing trays and hospitality. People spoke in soft murmurs, filling the shadowed room with whispers and muted laughter.

William leant back in his chair and pushed his empty plate away. “That wasn’t half bad.”

I scraped the last bit of potato from my plate. “No it wasn’t. I haven’t eaten so well in ages.”

“Do you fend for yourself then?”

“Let’s just say I eat simply.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“If I can cook it in a frying pan, then I’m fine.”

He shook his head. “No wonder you fell upon that like a starving man. I’m inviting you to Drake’s Hill to stay, if you can get away. You need feeding up. Mrs Clinton’s cooking will soon sort you out. Can the aerodrome spare you for a few days?”

“Willmott’s been nagging at me to take some time off so I’m sure it could be arranged.” I hoped that I’d managed to keep the excitement out of my voice.

“Then you must. As soon as you can arrange it, let me know.”

“I’ll talk to Willmott tomorrow.” I’d worked several months without a break, preferring to drown my grief in planes and being airborne. “I’m sure he’ll manage fine without me for a few days.

“Good. Some country air and a rest will do you the world of good.” He reached for his glass and brushed his fingers over the back of my hand for the briefest of moments. “We can finally enjoy the peace we fought so hard for.”

Something inside fluttered at his touch. “I’d like that.”

“So will I.” William smiled and raised his glass to me. “So here’s to finding our peace.”

The Renault trundled along the lane, leaving clouds of dust rising in its wake.

William slowed the car to a crawl, then turned to look at me. “Not far now.”

I glanced at the low hill ahead of us, rising in a lush sweep of green and topped with a copse of beech trees. Fields on either side of the track were alive

with sheep, ewes and lambs that dozed at their mothers' sides or chased each other across the grass. The warm breeze hurried clouds across the sky and their shadows raced over the downs, blotting the sun.

I breathed deeply, smelling spring and sunlight. "It's beautiful."

"And peaceful." William urged the car forward and it laboured noisily along the lane, into the cool violet shade beneath the trees.

Bluebells spread in a misty blue carpet between burgeoning saplings and the smooth, solid trunks of the beeches rising in a canopy of shifting leaves above us. For the first time since returning from France, I felt calm and content.

The woods gave way to a broad carpet of lawn. William turned the car onto a gravel drive which led towards the house, built of mellow red brick. Lead-paned windows glinted from behind a wild veil of wisteria and ivy. It was a rambling, asymmetrical collection of odd rooflines and facades, telling of many additions and changes over many years. It looked as if it had grown out of the earth itself, so comfortable and right did it look in its setting of lawn, ancient woodland and brilliantly coloured flowerbeds.

"Welcome to Drake's Hill." William turned off the chuntering engine and smiled before resting his hand on my knee for a moment. "It's good to know that you're here at last. I thought the day would never arrive."

"Neither did I." I couldn't think of anything else to say. I felt close to bursting with happiness at just being there, a possibility that I thought had gone forever.

He climbed out of the car and I followed suit.

"Don't worry about your things, Barnes will bring those in and put them in your room." William led me towards a shadowed porch wreathed in ivy. "My mother will make a fuss. She has been wanting to meet you."

"What on earth have you said to her?"

"It's all right." He touched my arm then opened the door before ushering me into a shadowy hallway, which smelt of beeswax and flowers.

“Will? Is that you?” A woman’s voice floated along the corridor, followed in short order by the soft tap of footsteps on the flagstone floor.

“Yes, it’s me and Arthur. He arrived in one piece.”

Mrs McCall hurried into view and drew me into a perfumed embrace. “Welcome, Arthur, it’s so lovely to meet you at last.” She stepped back, keeping her hands on my arms. “I’ve heard all about you. Will thinks the world of you, you know.”

“It’s nice to meet you too.” I hadn’t been prepared for the effusiveness of her welcome.

“You must be tired after your journey.” She glanced at Will. “Why don’t you show Arthur his room, dear. I’ll ring for some tea and cake. Mrs Briggs has been busy in the kitchen all morning. She does love it when we have houseguests.” Mrs McCall released me.

“Good idea, Mother.” William nodded in my direction. “Follow me.”

“Tea will be in the drawing room,” Mrs McCall called after us as we headed towards the stairs.

“We’ll be there.”

I followed William up the staircase, our feet whispering on the carpet. The oak balustrade was smooth and warm beneath my fingers. The treads creaked softly. My host paused at the top on a broad landing. Sunlight fell through a window, crowning his head with gold. My heart stopped for the briefest of moments, then the sun passed behind a cloud and he was just William once more.

“It’s just here.” He stepped across the landing and opened a door. “Just over the landing from mine.”

The room was as large and bright as the room I’d recovered in at Ivy House and the view was similar, opening onto the lawn and the trees beyond.

“Will it do?” William leaned on his cane.

“It’s very nice.” I thought of my spartan flat overlooking a tired little garden on one side and a busy road on the other. I’d already decided that it would be hard to leave Drake’s Hill.

William took a step forward and lifted his hand to my cheek. “I like having you here. I feel like I’m finally home and safe. Does that make sense?”

“Yes. I feel a lot like that myself.” I did. The war had ended months before, yet here there was peace, a deep, restful peace unlike any I had ever known or even longed for.

A muffled knock on the door broke the silence.

William lowered his hand with a sigh. “That’ll be Barnes with your things. I’ll leave you to settle in.” He backed towards the door. “I’ll see you in the drawing room, it’s at the far end of the downstairs corridor. You will be treated to the best cakes you’ve ever tasted. Mrs Clinton is the queen of all kitchens.”

“I’ll look forward to it. It’s been a while since I’ve had good home-cooked food.”

“I guarantee you won’t want to leave.”

It was too late for that. Drake’s Hill was already curling itself around me, drawing me in, tying me to that good earth, the downs and the sheltering woods.

It felt exactly right when William wove his fingers through mine while we walked through the woods. “So what did you think of Mrs Briggs’ baking.”

“I won’t dispute that she’s queen of all kitchens.” I found so much hope and comfort in his closeness. “I’m afraid this visit will spoil me for anything else, especially my own cooking.”

“Then don’t go back. Stay here.”

I stopped, surrounded by beeches and bluebells. A cool breeze whispered through the trees, bringing with it the distant, contented bleating of sheep. It tugged at William’s hair, lifting strands of it.

“I can’t just... live here. What would I do?”

“Manage the farm with me, unless you’d miss flying too much.” He glanced at the arc of sky above then looked at me.

“I spend most of my time repairing the bloody planes. The airfield owner doesn’t like spending money.” I stared at him, trying to absorb the implication of those two words. “You want me to stay here?”

“Can you think of any reason why not?”

“Of course not... but it’s a big move. Can I think about it?” I knew my answer would be yes but I didn’t want to rush headlong into it the way I’d rushed headlong into war. “It’s been a while since I’ve worked on a farm.”

“Don’t you miss it?” William stepped closer and lifted his hand to my cheek.

“I don’t miss repairing stone walls on a fell side when it’s sleeting and blowing a gale.”

He laughed softly. “We have plenty of people to do the donkey work. I promise that repairing walls and fences wouldn’t be on your list unless you wanted it to be.”

I gazed at his parted lips and moved towards him. It had been two years since that first and last kiss. I wanted to be sure that it would be the same, or better. A beech wood washed by May sunlight was a far better place than a muddy bomb crater in the middle of no-man’s land.

“Arthur.” William’s voice trailed away to a whisper, a touch of warm breath on my cheek. He curled one hand around the back of my neck and pressed his lips to mine.

I pulled William closer and wound my fingers through his hair, savouring every shared breath, every long and wistful sigh.

When he broke away, he rested his forehead against mine and smiled. “If we carry on at this rate...”

Desire rose within me. I wondered how private those woods truly were because I wanted nothing more than to drop to my knees and relieve his obvious need, the need that pushed insistently against my own. “I know. Can we...? I want...”

“I want you too. But this is neither the time nor place.” William placed a gentle kiss on my brow. “But have no doubt, I intend to act on our mutual

desires. Just not here.” He slid his hand down to mine and squeezed it. “But I don’t wish to influence your decision as to whether to accept my offer or not. Just know that it is made with the best of intentions.”

“I know.” I touched his face. “And I will give it a great deal of thought.”

He smiled. “Good. Now let me show you the rest of the farm.”

I was glad to escape the stultifying dullness of the vicar’s Sunday sermon. Mrs McCall had insisted on going to church and, of course, we felt obliged to accompany her. The church was in a nearby village and sat on top of a small rise overlooking a broad green. I leaned against the rough bark of a yew tree and waiting while William and his mother chatted with acquaintances. I watched people drift across the green and enjoyed the bucolic peace. After two days at Drake’s Hill and, given the opportunity to think during the long sermon, I had decided that I would be a fool not to take William’s offer. I ran through my words of acceptance in my head and waited.

William’s sudden and loud laugh caught my attention. I glanced over my shoulder. Mrs McCall was talking with the vicar whilst William had drifted to one side of the flagstone path and was deep in conversation with a young man. The way William had his head inclined towards him made me turn. The way he rested his hand on the man’s shoulder made something inside twist and sink. William was apparently absorbed in everything the fellow had to say.

Perhaps not such a good idea after all.

I swallowed the dry, harsh lump in my throat and managed a smile when Mrs McCall strolled towards me. She paused to touch her son’s arm, I assumed to remind him that he had someone waiting for him. He nodded briefly, leaned close to his companion and whispered something before catching up with his mother. I shoved my hands into my pockets and waited, forcing myself to appear unperturbed. Perhaps spending the rest of my days up to my elbows in airplane engines wasn’t such a bad thing. Perhaps I wasn’t meant to live with another. I had learned to live with my own company and it would suffice.

“Are you all right?” William asked.

“Fine.”

“I’m sorry. I’m afraid the vicar’s sermons can go on a bit. At least we’ve done our duty, eh? Let’s get back to the house. Mrs Clinton will have prepared a splendid Sunday lunch. We can eat like emperors and then fall asleep in the drawing room.”

Mrs McCall shook her head. “Some things never change. Your father was just the same, God rest his soul.”

William winked at me and I did my best to return his smile. His raised eyebrow in response told that I’d failed.

“Are you all right?” William settled onto the drawing room settee. “You seem a bit preoccupied.”

I stretched my legs across the worn hearth rug and stared at my hands. “I’ve come to a decision.” That decision sat in my gut like a heavy stone. I told myself that it was for the best.

He sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Something tells me it’s not one I’ll like.”

I swallowed then took a deep breath. “I think it’s best that I return to Berkshire. I owe Willmott. He offered me that job while we were still in France. He needs me.”

William ran one hand through his hair, leaving it tousled. “That’s not what I wanted to hear. I’d hoped...”

For the briefest of moments I wanted to take those words back. “I know. But I need some independence. It’s not a luxurious life, but I think I need to be on my own.” It was a terrible lie but I couldn’t think of anything else. To tell him the truth—that his brief encounter with his acquaintance had somehow convinced me that I would be nothing more than hired help—seemed pointless and silly. I had expected too much and did not want to admit that.

He sighed and nodded. “I understand. At least I’ll try to.”

I rose. “I’d better go and pack. I don’t want to outstay my welcome.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I know. But it’s best that I go sooner rather than later.” I knew if I stayed my resolve would weaken.

“Of course. I understand.” He remained seated when I left the room and headed for the stairs.

We stood on the station platform. The sunshine of the previous handful of days had disappeared, swallowed by a leaden pall of clouds that promised rain. William leaned against a pillar, hands thrust into his pockets. The damp breeze touched his hair, brushing it over his forehead. His gaze was distant and, I convinced myself, a little bit sad.

“Why?” A sigh had coloured the question. “Did I do something?”

The track rumbled with the approach of the eastbound train. “I think perhaps... that I had the wrong impression... that you wanted me there for a different reason than I had hoped.”

The train clattered into the station, steam hissing as it slowed to a stop. I picked up my bags then walked across the platform. William’s footsteps echoed behind me.

“What do you mean?”

My cheeks flamed. I turned around. The air was filled with the slam of carriage doors. “In the churchyard... I realised I had hopes that were misguided.” I opened a door and placed my luggage into the carriage before climbing on board. “Good-bye, Will. I enjoyed the visit. I hope we can stay in touch.”

The conductor blew his whistle.

“Wait! What do you mean? Do you mean Edward?”

“I mean that I hardly know you and, yes, Edward, if that’s the person in the church yard. It just made me realise that I’m not ready to take this leap in the dark.”

The train lurched forward with a hiss of steam.

William quickened his steps as the train gained momentum. “There’s nothing for you to be concerned about. He’s a friend. We’ve known each other since we were children. For God’s sake, Arthur, he’s getting married next month.”

“It doesn’t matter. That’s not what this is about.”

William trailed away, unable to keep up. He raised his hand then let it drop. He dropped his head and his shoulders slumped. Dark guilt choked me, burnt my eyes. I turned my gaze from the rapidly receding platform, suddenly unable to see anything.

“Christ, I thought that rest would do you good.” Willmott helped me push the plane back into the hangar. “You’ve not said a word since you returned two weeks ago.”

“I realised that it wasn’t for me.”

He stopped pushing and glared at me. “What wasn’t? A rest? You’ve hardly stopped since you started working here. If you’re not flying, you’re tinkering with bloody engines and bits. You look fit to drop, not the least bit rested.”

“I’ll be all right. I was bored. I need to keep busy. Sitting around wasn’t for me.”

Willmott sighed and shook his head. “You’re mad. I suppose you’re going to spend all night with your head in a bloody engine too.”

“That had crossed my mind.”

“Well, you can’t.” He took my arm and steered me away from the plane and towards the door. “I’m locking it tonight. You are going home and you are going to rest. You are not allowed back here for a week. I’ll not have you dropping with exhaustion.”

I’d served with Willmott long enough to recognise that set to his jaw, the twitch of a muscle there, the chill in his eyes. It was the same look he got when he’d been about to go hunting the enemy. I shrugged his hand away.

“All right. I’ll rest. Better yet, give me two weeks and I’ll go to Cumbria. My parents keep asking when I’m going to pay them a visit.”

“Good idea.” He wheeled my bicycle towards me.

I took it from him and straddled it. “I will. I’ll see you in a fortnight.”

“And not a moment before.”

“Don’t worry.” I pedalled towards the post office to send a telegram to my parents. For the first time in years, the wild, windswept fells held some appeal.

I slotted another stone into the gap in the wall. My father had sent me up onto the fell to repair one of the walls and I welcomed the chance to busy myself. June was a relatively quiet month, a lull between the chaos of lambing and the backbreaking labour of shearing. Being high up on the fell with nothing but grazing sheep for company seemed a far better prospect than getting under my mother’s feet while she bustled about the house. My brother, Matthew, had gone to Penrith Market and my father remained down at the farm, repairing one of the sheds. That left me alone, to lose myself in the fine art of repairing stone walls.

The land dozed in an amber haze. Everything seemed to move slowly in the heavy, humid air. Clouds towered above the crest of the fell, their underbellies dark with the threat of a storm. I chipped around the edges of another stone, crafting the next piece of the puzzle. The heat was tempered by a damp breeze and it caught at the perspiration on my skin, cooled me enough to keep me comfortable while I worked. I let myself become lost in the task—it was better than remembering the lonely life I faced when I returned to Berkshire. A life I’d stupidly chosen for myself.

The long train journey to Cumbria had given me too much time to think, to realise that my decision had been hasty and based on nothing more than a moment’s oversensitivity in the churchyard.

Too bloody late now, Reed. You’ve made your bed...

I tried to tell myself it wasn’t worth dwelling on. As William hadn’t written since my hurried departure from Drake’s Hill, I’d decided that he

clearly thought I wasn't worth a persistent effort on his part. Too bloody late, indeed.

Another stone into the wall, the breach was shrinking piece by painstaking piece. I stepped back and took a moment or two to admire my handiwork, then look at the sky. The sun was lost behind long streamers of cloud, the advance guard of the approaching storm. The wind rose a little, whispering through the grass. Buttercups trembled while foxgloves flattened themselves to the wall, as if seeking shelter. I gathered the tools together then shoved them back into the shoulder bag, along with the remnants of my lunch. By the time I made it back to the farm, my mother would doubtless have a bottle of beer and a piece of cake ready for me, to tide me over until teatime. It was enough of an incentive for me to pick up the pace.

“Arthur?”

The wind played tricks on me, calling my name. A murmur in the grass, almost lost beneath the bleating of lambs. I carried on putting things away, then tidied up the pile of stones.

“Arthur?”

I straightened up and turned around.

William shivered in the sudden chill of the wind. He leaned heavily on his cane and regarded me with a wary, hopeful gaze. “Hello, Arthur. Your father told me I'd find you here. It's a bit of a climb.”

I stared at him, fumbling for words, wondering if I'd spent too long working in the heat. “William?” I thought that if I spoke his name he might disappear and leave me alone with my regret. I wasn't sure which would be worse.

He took an uncertain step towards me. “I went to the airfield. Willmott told me you were here, so I took a chance.”

I shouldered my bag. “Quite a big chance.”

“I thought it would be better to talk to you than try and write. I'm sick of letters.”

“Talk about what?” I glanced at the sky. “Whatever we need to talk about, we should probably head back to the farm. It’s going to rain and we don’t want to be caught up here in a storm.”

William sighed and fell into step beside me. We walked in silence, with nothing but the song of the wind and the bleating of sheep for company.

“It’s beautiful here,” William said after a while.

“It is at this time of year. On a cold winter’s day, it’s not quite as pleasant.” I glanced at him. His mouth was set in a thin, pinched line as he limped along, clearly struggling with the unevenness of the ground, his cane getting snagged now and then by clumps of grass and bindweed. “But you didn’t come all this way to talk about the weather.”

He paused, his chest rising as he drew a deep breath. “No. I came to ask if you would reconsider your decision.”

My heart leapt at the second chance, a chance to fix things. “Can’t you find someone closer to look after your farm?”

Something flickered in his eyes. “It was never about looking after the farm, it was...” He stared past me into the distance, where the sky had darkened. A veil of grey obscured the edge of the horizon. “I want you to be there, to be with me. I know it’s a lot to ask. All we ever did was share a kiss or two, exchange a few letters. There were no vows, no promises... nothing like that. It was—is—a lot to ask of you. But since that night we met, I’ve never been able to forget, to stop...” William bit his lip, entreaty in his eyes. “I’m not an eloquent man, Arthur. I’m not very good at talking about what’s inside me. I can give orders, I can hold my end of a conversation but when it comes to you... I’m struck dumb.”

“Why?”

“I’m afraid that if I say what I really feel, you’ll say ‘no’ again. We’ve spent more time apart than together. I know we have so much to learn about each other. I know I’m asking a lot of you. I know that you’d rather be up in one of your planes than tied to the ground.”

I touched his cheek, glad to feel the warmth of his skin beneath my fingertips. “I’ve had enough of flying. I like being rooted to the soil. I’m a farmer’s son, remember?”

William turned his head and brushed his lips across my palm. “Will you come and live with me, Arthur? Will you tend that good earth with me? I have nothing to hide from you. No one from my past, there has never been anyone. Only you.”

A low, rolling growl of thunder filled the waiting silence. It didn’t matter that we were halfway up a hillside, surrounded by waving grass and gathering clouds. I leant forward and kissed him, taking my time, savouring the feel of his lips yielding to mine.

William’s cane fell unheeded to the ground when he held my face between his hands and took a small step back, breaking the kiss. “Is that a yes?”

“I must be mad. But, yes, it is. I’ll live with you. Although how you explain my presence should be interesting.”

“You saved my life, remember? As far as my family are concerned, I’m repaying that debt by offering you a home with me. They needn’t know what goes on behind closed doors. I think there are some secrets we can keep, don’t you?”

“Now may God bless you all. May He defend the right. It is the evil things that we shall be fighting against—brute force, bad faith, injustice, oppression, persecution—and against them I am certain that the right will prevail.”

I turn off the wireless and glance at Arthur. He’s still sleeping, legs stretched across the hearth rug, *The Times* sprawled over his lap, beneath his folded hands. Afternoon sunlight touches him, finds the threads of silver in his dark hair. I want to kiss him awake, see him smile. But I don’t because I know that, before too long, Mrs Fogle will rattle along the hall with the tea tray. I’m sure she knows. But she’s a good woman, discreet and kind and loyal. Our secret will always be safe with her.

The newspaper rustles when I sit down beside Arthur.

He stirs, smiles then looks at me with those brown eyes, the ones I lost myself in all those years ago. “Hullo. Is something wrong?”

“No, just the usual. Mrs Fogle will soon be here with elevenses.”

He glanced at the clock. “Bit late for that, isn’t it? And why didn’t you wake me? Did I miss the speech?”

“Yes, it’s a bit late, and yes, you missed the speech.”

He straightens up and rakes his hand through his hair. “So, are we at war?”

“Yes.” The answer doesn’t carry the same burden that it might’ve done twenty-five years before. This time we are too old to enlist and too broken. Me with the limp that never went away, and Arthur with arthritis. I feel a guilty relief at that thought.

“All we went through.” He sighs and squeezes my hand. “It all came to nothing.”

“I don’t know about that.” This time I do kiss him—swiftly. “*We* came out of it. We may not be able to take up arms this time, but we can do our bit.”

“I told you, I am *not* joining the Home Guard.” He scowls and I want to kiss him again.

“We’re already doing our bit. We’re growing all those vegetables, raising sheep, providing food.” I move closer when he puts his arm around my shoulders and smiles.

“That we are.” He rests his head on mine and we enjoy our own peace, knowing that we will tend that good earth together.

THE END

Author Bio

S.A. Meade lives in Wiltshire and loves it. She's partial to gin and tonic, loves to cook and watches cookery programmes when she's not working, writing or reading.

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