



NONE OF US THE SAME

Jeffrey K. Walker



Book One of the *Sweet Wine of Youth* Trilogy

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For Kathy

The Bishop tells us: "When the boys come back
They will not be the same; for they'll have fought
In a just cause: they lead the last attack
On Anti-Christ; their comrade's blood has bought
New right to breed an honourable race.
They have challenged Death and dared him face to face."

"We're none of us the same!" the boys reply.
"For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;
Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;
And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find
A chap who's served that hasn't found some change."
And the Bishop said; "The ways of God are strange!"

"They" by Siegfried Sassoon (1918)

CHAPTER ONE



Deirdre

The old one in the last bed had riled them again. One of the trainees, impossibly young in a stiff white pinafore, stood pleading and wide-eyed. “I can’t bathe Mr. Duffy again, Sister! He...he... *touches* his...his...*nether parts* when he sees me comin’ with the towel and basin,” said the girl, struggling out her careful words in unconcealed mortification. Only the good Lord Himself knew what the Daughters of Charity would make of this poor girl’s conundrum. But Deirdre Brannigan was a lay nurse, not that it eased the suffering of the trainee standing before her burning with embarrassment.

“Fetch a friend or two who can hold his arms while you bathe him. ’Tis hard enough keeping everyone and everything clean without your delicate sensibilities aggravating the situation,” Deirdre said with mild scolding, calm in the fretting storm.

“I’ve... I’ve tried that,” the trainee said, two others vouching the truth of her timid protest with vigorous nods. “His... *manhood* still becomes... quite... *tall*... anyways. And he likewise leers at me in a most distressin’ manner.” An unsettling murmur rippled across the clustered trainees, tinged with an edge of mutiny. Deirdre knew she must nip this.

“Ladies,” she began with deliberate sternness, as if she were not just a few years clear of training herself, “let us be mindful this is a charity hospital with a mission to care for the least fortunate of our Lord’s children with kindness and understanding.” She sucked at her cheeks a little, checking a smile that rose from her unintentional imitation of Sister Mary Evangeline. Deirdre soldiered on, channeling the formidable matron. “If our Blessed Mother could bear the pain and sorrow of kneeling by the cross of her precious Son, I would hope and pray you can muster the strength to endure the sight of an addled old man’s... *nether part*. Regardless of its height.” She stared down each trainee, ending with the complainant, who burst into loud sobs.

“Bridget, you’re made of sterner stuff. Dry your eyes and blow your nose now.” She handed her an immaculate handkerchief, speaking quietly and taking the poor girl aside. “Come along. I’d a few tricks from the sisters when I was a trainee myself. I’ll entrust them to you, for use with present and future Mr. Duffys.” She turned and gave a backward nod and scowl, signaling the stricken girl should follow and stop her sniffing.

As the two women approached Mr. Duffy’s bedside, he was gleaming with lurid anticipation. Running a purple tongue over cracked lips, he reached under the bedclothes and rubbed himself with surprising vigor given his decrepitude. Deirdre, terse and businesslike, pulled his arms over the blanket. “These will remain in plain sight, Mr. Duffy, or I’ll have the porters bathe you with lye and the dandy brush from the horses.” He fell into an offended silence, shocked by her unexpected bluntness.

After pulling the nightshirt over his head, Deirdre commenced bathing the spent old man, his mind half gone from decades of drink, running a soapy sponge over the yellowed skin of his sunken chest and spindle arms. She handed over the sponge to Bridget for washing his other side. Half done, they pulled the sheet back over his chest, then folded it back from his lower body, leaving him exposed upon the bed. A crooked grin crept across the old man’s toothless gob, his withered penis rising from the greasy grey pubic hair. Bridget gave a short gasp and began a turn that Deirdre froze with an icy glance. Drawing a wooden tongue depressor from the pocket of her apron, Deirdre bent it back and thwacked the old man’s withered scrotum.

“Agggghh! Y’are a right demon bitch, y’are! Damn ya to hell, woman!” the old man yelped. He curled on his side, both arms shoved between his legs.

Deirdre turned to Bridget and said, clear and even, “You can finish bathing Mr. Duffy now. He’ll be giving no more trouble this day.” Not taking her eyes from the old man, she handed the tongue depressor with dignified ceremony to Bridget and said, “I recommend liberal use until such time as he learns to act proper at bath time.”

Bridget would share her secret with the others before the hour was out, so Deirdre hoped. She walked back down the double line of beds filled by broken men with a litany of illnesses. Some would soon be back to their poverty and filth. Others would pass to their reward here—perhaps tonight, maybe in a week or a month.

As she reached the day room, the door flew open and trainees flushed out in their identical uniforms, like schoolgirls off to summer holiday. Deirdre halted one by the arm and asked, “What’s all the caterwaulin’ here? You’ll disturb the patients with your silliness.”

“Tis war! Have you not heard, Sister? We’re to fight the Germans!” The girl’s eyes were wide and wild with anticipation of parades and dances and handsome young soldiers in fine uniforms. She knew the girl had every reason to be thrilled, young as she was. She released her, the girl scampering down the corridor to join with her friends in their jubilation.

In the now deserted room, Deirdre could hear the bells of Dublin—Catholic, Protestant, no matter—commencing to sound. First just the one, probably St. Patrick’s, this side of the Liffey, a few blocks away. Then another, more distant than the first. Likely the Pro Cathedral off Sackville Street, the Catholics joining from the other side. Soon enough, every church in the city added its peal. Above the din, she could make out cheering, a crowd already gathering on St. Stephen’s Green. Deirdre stared down from her window, scowling at the burgeoning celebration on the Green below. Speaking to no one, maybe everyone, she muttered into the antiseptic air, under the crescendo of bells.

“Those stupid, stupid old men. What have they gone and done to us now?”



Breakfast at the Brannigan's might be unpleasant to one not accustomed to the general raucousness of the household. The younger children, well into their school holiday, skittered about for diversion. Deirdre and her mother saw to the growling stomachs of Daniel and the second-born, Frank, who awaited another day at the brewery cooperage. Bacon and black pudding in the skillet, strong tea on the hob, and brown bread cooling from the oven provided the accompaniment to the chaos of this and every morning.

"You'll need to be quick about it," said Eda, sliding plates before the two men. "The trams aren't runnin', so you'll be walkin' to your work."

Daniel slid an arm about his wife's waist, landing his hand with a pat on her backside. Eda gave him a little slap and smile, then turned back to the stove. She set about making up smaller plates for herself, Deirdre and the children.

"You couldn't know that, Mam! You haven't left this kitchen since you woke," Deirdre said, shaking her head for the thousandth time.

"Mind your tongue, Deirdre, and don't be questionin' your mother's powers," said her father with the faintest smile, followed by an imperceptible wink. Dee replied in kind—no one else noticed—the exchange freighted with long usage between father and first-born.

"Holy Mother of God, no powers have I," said Eda, waving the back of her free hand at Daniel while she turned more rashers in the skillet. "*Ach* Deirdre, 'twas my mother, God rest her soul, had the true sight, not me."

Eda returned to the table with a huge pot of tea, refilling Daniel and Frank's mugs, both her strong hands needed to steady it. Daniel gave her another pat and received a second slap for his trouble. "'Tis yer father with the powers, if any are to be had under this roof," Eda declared. "By all the Holy Saints I swear, each and every time he was about hangin' his trousers on a peg near the bed, one of ye popped out nine months later."

"Those be only powers the good Lord gives to any strappin' Dublin man," Daniel said with pantomime humility, another curl at the corner of his mouth and a tiny wink to Dee.

“Was there much talk of the war at the hospital, Dee?” Frank asked. “You’d think they’d be needing doctors and nurses and the like for the soldiers at the fighting.”

Deirdre spun from the pantry cupboard where she’d been cutting thick slices of bread for the younger children. Brandishing the breadknife, she said to Frank, “’Tis all the silly trainees could natter on about.” Her knife flashed again. “And I’ll not be hearing about the medical needs of those fools who take a soldier’s coat to get themselves shot over Serbia. Of all the God-forsaken places on this green earth.”

“What of Belgium?” Frank said. “Sure, if one small nation can be done over altogether without reply, what’s to keep the Kaiser from marching through Dublin?”

“The Kaiser, you say? The King’s wee cousin Willy?” Dee said with a taunt. “Why in the name of the Blessed Virgin should we give a fig about the King’s family squabbles?” She turned with a dismissive wave at Frank.

Daniel listened without a word, but Eda’s worried eyes caught his. He replied with a slight shake of his head to keep clear of this argument for now.

Wolfing the last of his breakfast, Frank said, “We best be on our way, Da, what with the walk ahead. ’Twouldn’t do for the foreman to arrive late,” Frank said with pretentious gravity.

“And an apprentice as well,” Eda said with a raised brow and admonishing look. “Although that particular fact hasn’t made it through your thick skull, *mo bhuchail*, with the carousin’ and the carryin’ on ’til the pubs close of an evenin’.”

With a half-hearted swat at Frank’s gingery head that belied any genuine anger, Dee said, “Off with the both of you now. There’s precious little time for your messing about this day.” In a flurry of jackets and caps and children hugging legs, the two men, father and son, spilled out the door and into the morning hurly-burly of the Liberties. They called farewells to young Sean, already out on the street with his band of friends after nicking a bit of bacon and buttered bread from his mother’s kitchen.

With the younger children quieted by mouthfuls of bread and jam, Dee and her mother sat together at the lovingly worn table, as

they had done for as long as Dee could recall, even before moving to this house after Da was made foreman.

"Mam, why do you fill their heads," she motioned to the children, "with this Donegal nonsense about seeing the future and the like?"

Eda, her patient eyes full of love for her daughter, washed down a mouthful of bread and said, "There's no harm in't, sure? Just a bit of tradition from the old place. Your Da and me have got you and Frank and now the young ones as fine an education as the Christian Brothers and the Mercy Sisters can give." She patted Dee's hand and held it in her rougher palm. "That doesn't mean there aren't things above and below can't be explained in books."

"But how could you know the trams weren't running this mornin', Mam? The stop's more than three streets away," Dee said.

Eda wiped her hands in her apron and thought for a moment. "Listen close round you now," she said and took another slow drink of tea. The two sat in silence for a long minute, the children chewing their breakfast.

"I hear the callin' and shoutin' and cloppin' you'd expect of a Wednesday morn in the Liberties," Dee said.

"Do you then, *stóirín*? Do you indeed?" asked her mother with a wry smile just visible above the rim of her mug. "Now, tell me what *don't* you hear?"

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Mam! I *don't* hear a thousand things," Dee said in exasperation.

"Ahhh, now there's the thing, isn't it? What I don't hear are tram bells."

Dee listened for another moment or more. A broad admiring smile crept across her face. "I wouldn't have took notice in ten thousand years."

Eda studied Dee for a moment with an unspoken look of concern, reaching over to smooth back some of her daughter's unruly hair. "I'm not so sure of that, Deirdre. There may be more of your grandmam in you than you credit."

"Of that I have great doubt, Mam," Dee said with a short laugh. "I'm lucky to get through a day of disasters at St. Vincent's, let alone foresee anything."

"You've come along right quick with your nursin'. Haven't the Sisters already gave you that ward full o' poor souls, and supervising the young nurses to boot?" said Eda with unconcealed pride.

“I wouldn’t put much stock in that, Mam,” Dee said. “Most days I suspect their confessor made me the penance for all their sins.” Eda shook her head with a soft laugh as Dee added, “Although ’tis not clear to me when the Daughters of Charity would have the chance for much grievous sinning.”

“Now don’t be takin’ your fun at the expense of the nuns, Deirdre,” Eda said. “I remember well that Sister Mary Evangeline herself came to see if you might have a vocation for the order.”

Dee choked out an involuntary laugh. “Oh, that’d been a disastrous thing. Like visitin’ the ten plagues of Egypt upon them all at once.” Dee smiled across the table at her mother. “Nursing’s a deep enough vocation. And I do have a bit of a way with it.” She studied her mother’s calm and content face, lined more by laughter than sadness. “But I’d not want to miss a life like you and Da have.”

The two youngest Brannigans tried to scamper off. Dee caught them and wiped the red currant from their cheeks and fingers. She kissed each in turn, nodding them out the door to their play.

Eda sat gazing with the deepest affection, leavened by a little wonder, at her eldest daughter. “You’ve grown to a woman of great strength, Deirdre. That fills the heart of your father and me each and every day.”

Dee broke away from her mother’s intense look with an uncharacteristic blush. “I’m naught but what you and Da have made me, Mam. And I’ll love and honour you both ’til the end of my days.”

“That’s all we’d ever ask or want,” Eda said. She rose to clear the table. “You best be on your way to St. Vincent’s. No telling what foolishness will be goin’ on in the streets with all manner of eejits over the moon with this war.”

CHAPTER TWO

Jack

*27th day of July, 1914
201 Gower Street
St. John's*

My Dearest Johnny,

I'm happy each and every summer to know I'll be putting a letter into the hand of our Jackie for him to take you personal. What a fine thing it was when first you asked me to send Jackie to you. He's come up a bit much in the City and a month at the light each summer has done him more good than you can know. Who'd have known when Jackie first came up to you, just he and Will, these seven year gone, that he'd finagle his whole band o' brigands into your laps, too? Geordie and Sandy are good and decent lads who've been loyal friends, in school and out, and like sons to me so underfoot they always be, especially when there's a meal to be had. And poor young Toby, with his father gone these 10 year now and just him and his ma! The boys took him in—such good hearts—when he grew so fast all the other younger lads made terrible sport of him. Will's a quiet and sometimes quare type,

but he's the one looked after poor Toby, timid as a hare, and brought him along to the Church Lads' Brigade and other such things.

I hope the crate of provisions made it safe to Rosie, being as how those lads feed like a herd of caribou. There's some sweetmeats for your little ones. I also sent along a dozen or so books. The bookseller found a good Catullus with both the english and the latin and a few of Walter Scott for young Teddy. Rick sends along tobacco, some tins of virginia cavendish and one of something called perique he says comes from Lousiane and has a good spice to it.

I'll have to end now, as Jackie and the lads will be leaving for the quay soon and I want to put this in his hand before he goes. I often think on our younger days at the light and the long walks at the shore with scarce a word needed between us. Maybe 'twas right for our parents to send me away before you became over dear to me, my lovely Johnny. But you have my own boy with you now, and that'll be enough for me.

*With all the love that's in my heart,
Your dearest sister, Viola*



Squinting into the morning sun, Jack and Will studied the cove, hands close around their eyes. "I'll be damned. What's she doing there?" Jack said, breaking their puzzled silence. Will pursed his lips as he peered out at the iceberg. "Does seem odd for high summer. I'd call that well out of season."

Down the rough grass that ran away from the lighthouse door to the edge of the sea cliff, they could see Jack's uncle silhouetted against the blue-grey water, familiar from the smoke that wreathed his head. Uncle Johnny would have something to say about this. As they approached, the keeper said, loud enough to carry back on the wind, "What think ye that might signify, b'ys?" Jack had long marveled at the prodigious volume of smoke Uncle Johnny could produce from a single bowl of flake cut.

"Do you recall any bergs so late in summer, Mr. Barlow?"

Uncle Johnny put a hand to his yellowed horn pipe and thumbed the smooth bowl, the carving long worn away. He exhaled another

great burst of blue smoke and said, "Not in my time, that's a certainty." Pointing seaward with his pipestem, he continued, "I recollect Jackie's granddad speaking o' such a berg arrivin' in August his first—may chance his second—year as keeper. That was before me or Jackie's ma was born. Makes it '61 or '62, if I cipher justly."

"What do you think brought this big one down so late, Uncle?"

"That nor'easter that started up late yestere'en. Must ha' blown her right down and grounded her inside the point. All the fog and mist these past days, we'd not ha' seen her approachin'. That's twenty fathom to the bottom, so she's a biggun right enough, me dear b'ys."

"Seemed just a freshening breeze at suppertime, Uncle. Must have picked up greatly then?"

"She blew hard all night. Stronger each time I was up the light to wind the weight. You bucks wouldn't have noticed, sleepin' like the dead."

Will let a half smile escape. "I never sleep better than at the light, Mr. Barlow. Even through Geordie's snoring."

"... and that could wake the dead in Labrador," Jack added.

"Ayeh, enjoy the untroubled dreams o' youth while you can. They'll flee betimes, young Will'am." Uncle Johnny gave Will a sharp pat on the shoulder, accompanied by a sigh that leaked around his pipe stem. The keeper, after so many summers, had near as much affection for Will as he did for his own nephew.

"We've rather invaded you over the years, haven't we?" Will said.

Uncle Johnny tapped his pipe against the heel of his palm, then blew out some lingering ash. "Bah, you lads—'specially you, Will—you've been dear to our Jackie since you was in short pants at school. 'Tis a joy to have the lot of youse. Does a mite of good for our young ones, too." He began refilling the pipe from a worn-shiny leather pouch drawn from his trouser pocket. "Can be a lonely life for children."

As is the way with bergs, the longer they studied her, the more personality she revealed. At first, she was a uniform blinding white. As the sun arced through the crystalline sky, she became every kind of white—and every shade of grey as well—belying her craggy surface. She was shot through with streaks of blue, one near her middle perpendicular to the sea. A fine-lined fissure near her waterline showed burnt red. Her top sloped left to right, bowing down to the sea.

“You manage to conjure a berg in August? Not sure that’s a skill I’d brag along the quays back home.”

They turned together to see Geordie’s substantial bulk ambling down the slope, ruffling his hair and stretching like a bear just woke from winter. Behind him straggled two more figures, striking in their differing proportions, pulling jumpers over their heads against the sea breeze that carried the last of the nor’easter’s chill. One was of a very average height and build, but suffered by comparison to his very tall and rail-thin companion. The three late risers joined up at the cliff’s edge, adding to the quantum of surprise at the appearance of the strange iceberg.

“We have to row out to her,” said the average-sized Sandy with immediate resolve. “No one will believe it back home.”

Uncle Johnny let out another great billow, and said, “That sea’s still chopped from last night’s blow, ’specially for our skiff. ’Twill be hard pullin’ all the way out to the point and back.”

“I’ve rowed dories in worse, Mr. Barlow. Don’t mind about that,” Geordie said with a swagger that had expanded, commensurate with the width of his shoulders, over these last few years.

“You’ve grown a mighty lad, that you have. My Rosie trembles at the thought o’ feedin’ you each summer you’ve come up with our Jackie,” Uncle Johnny said, poking an elbow in Geordie’s expansive rib cage. “But mind you now, have a good look but stay well back o’ her. In summer heat and warm seas, she’s like to founder any moment. And when she splits, she’ll pull you right down and there’d be no savin’ ye.”

“Will there be room for everyone... in the skiff? It seems small for all of us,” asked Toby in his quiet halting way, as incongruous with his notable height as it was appropriate to his younger years.

Will reached up to put a hand on his shoulder. “We’ve not grown that large yet. Besides, we can push you through an oarlock if you make a nuisance.” Will gave him an affectionate smile which Toby returned with a crooked reddening grin.

“Pa! Pa! There’s a coastal boat—I think the *Lizzy Lindsay*. She’s showin’ a signal.” Following after the shout came the Barlows’ eldest with an old brass and leather spyglass under his arm.

Intent as they were on the strange berg, no one had noticed a schooner, her sails well-filled by the steady breeze, nosing out from behind the point on her way down to Bonavista. Uncle Johnny trained

his glass at the colored swatches spanking off a foremast halyard. He read out the characters in the array of flags.

“M-B-M, then O-M-K.” He slapped the barrel of the glass against his palm once, twice as he puzzled over the message. “Not a usual signal. Teddy, run up to my office and look in the Lloyds book, would you, b’y?”

“Already done so, Pa. Copied it out here.” Teddy took a crumpled paper from his pocket, advertisements on one side and the signal copied out in Teddy’s careful printing in a little white space on the other.

“Clever lad. You’ll make a fine keeper one day.” Uncle Johnny hugged the blushing lad to his hip while he read out the message.

“Declaration of war. Germany.”

The group of men gathered at the edge of the cliff on this fine summer morning stood gazing out to the east over the sea. Toward Europe, where the lights would soon be going out. Holding his son a little tighter to his side, the keeper drew on his pipe.



Prudy had made her way down to see what the excitement was about. She slipped her tiny hand into Jack’s and he lifted her, light as could be, perching her in the crook of his elbow. She threw her arms around his neck and nuzzled into his chest, rubbing her wind-chapped cheek against his rough jumper. Her head emerged, flaxy strands of hair clinging to the knit, just long enough for a quick whisper before burrowing back into the scratchy wool.

“After we come back from the berg,” Jack whispered back to her. At the news of this delay, she gave a tiny shrug into his sweater. Seeing her disappointment, Jack said, “What kind of tale shall it be then?” Prudy raised her head and peeped at the others with one cornflower eye, then buried her face back into Jack’s arm.

“Shall it be of a princess? And... an evil sea serpent... who keeps her prisoner on his... lonely iceberg?” Jack improvised. This brought a vigorous nod of agreement from the tiny girl, accompanied by a most innocent smile, as well as bemused looks from the gathered friends. Jack bounced her once and said, “Now back to the house with you, my lovely maid, and we’ll get underway when I’m back from the point.”

She squeezed Jack's neck as hard as a three-year-old might and landed a firm kiss on his unshaven cheek. He lowered her to the ground and she gamboled away up the grass like a rag doll, all loose arms and legs.

"If you could beguile the females a bit north of six and south of sixty the way you do that sweet child, you might have more luck with the ladies of St. John's," Sandy said, shouldering Jack sidewise.

Jack, eyebrows up, said over his shoulder, "No use in that, Sandy. You've torn through most of 'em already."

"And with little regard for—ahem—quality, one might add," said Geordie in the languid tones of their old Latin master. Toby stood near Geordie in a crimson blush over this talk of women. As to what it might imply he was still somewhat unsure, being a full two years younger than the others.

"Easy on now, lad. Jealousy is unbecoming a man of your... *stature*," Sandy said, squaring his shoulders and spreading his elbows in imitation of Geordie's broad chest and big arms.

"I must agree with Sandy," Will said. "There's something to be said for *quantitas* over *qualitas*"—Sandy nodding smugly at Geordie—"at least with baitfish and squid."

With Jack and Geordie swallowing chuckles, Will paused and with a dramatic stroking of his chin added, "Come to think, perhaps that doesn't apply quite as well to the ladies. Unless of course you're the gallant *Alexander* Hiscock." Will tossed an ingenuous look to Sandy—who loathed being addressed by his proper first name—inviting a reply. Sandy worked his mouth, eyes darting from face to face, struggling for a retort. Outmatched whenever Will entered the fray, he feigned renewed interest in the iceberg as a form of honorable retreat.

The others erupted, Toby now adding in his nervous laughter. They had long ago granted mutual license to take the piss. Without realizing, this had contributed much to their self-assuredness, with the exception of the younger Toby. However, Will had assured them when taking Toby along to the Church Lads' Brigade that first time over four years ago that he'd grow in confidence to match his prodigious height.

"Gentlemen, enough diversion at poor Sandy's expense, deserved as it may be. We must to sea for an ogle of this unseasonable ice."

With that, Geordie hefted the oars anew and strode off at the double-march to the rough stairs cut into the contours of the sea cliff, leading down to the small jetty.

The deep blue-green water of the cove, cool to the skin even in August, lapped against the skiff until they cleared the jetty. From there, the hefty swells from the previous night's nor'easter rolled the boat almost to the gunwales. Yet even pulling against an incoming tide, Geordie made good headway to the iceberg and they could soon make out long plumes of melting water cascading down her side. Even at some distance, the smell coming off her was a cold and otherworldly breath, ancient and subterranean. Her fissures were now distinguishable, jagged bolts of cobalt disappearing under the water's surface. The sun had been hidden behind a bank of cotton-wool clouds sliding across the sky. As the skiff floated broadside to the berg, the clouds slipped onward and the sun radiated down bright and unfiltered. In the pure light, the iceberg began to shine with an iridescent turquoise all along her waterline, sitting atop a lustrous bed of bright green.

"She's a wonder," said Toby. "Look at her glow!"

Jack said, matter-of-fact as his own awe would allow, "That's the sun down through the water, reflecting off the white ice. The green seawater gives the color."

"Either that or the Lady of the Lake is about to give me a bloody great sword," said Sandy, intent on the berg like the rest.

They bobbed and rolled in the swells, held by the power of the phosphorescent berg, until another bank of clouds moved in and the icy corona faded. With a cleansing sigh to pull himself from his trance, Geordie stowed the oars along the gunwales. "Gentlemen, we've a war now." He looked with purpose from face to face. "The King will rally the Empire, including this fair Dominion of Newfoundland. How shall we answer, b'ys?"

Jack rubbed a hand across his mouth, turning this over in his thoughts. "We're small, just 200,000 souls. Can we even raise our own regiment?"

"We'll surely find out when we return to St. John's," said Will. "If the rest of the important men are like my father, they'll consider it a point of honour to send our own regiment. The *pater* has always been

a stalwart King-and-Empire man, after all." Will paused at what he just said, pondered a moment with annoyed brows, then added, "And won't a war be good for business."

"No difference to me, I'm away regardless. Halifax or Montreal. I'll join a Canadian regiment, needs be," said Sandy. Looking unsmiling back to shore, he murmured, "I'll not miss the chance to get off this rock."

"For once, Alexander may be right. They'll need strapping young men like us," Geordie said, fingering the handle of an oar.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, each to his own, as they drifted shoreward with the incoming tide. The wind had swung around to south-southeast and the warmer breeze cleared off whatever chill remained. Imperceptibly, the south wind and the flowing tide combined to lift the iceberg from the sea floor.

Coming back into the conversation, something occurred to Jack. "Will, you've done a year at Dalhousie and are due back soon. Wouldn't they make an officer of you?"

Will turned seaward, drawing the sharp saltiness deep into his lungs while mulling Jack's question. A random splash slapped his arms and chest, snapping him back. "I suppose you're right," he said. Taking another long breath to clear his thoughts, a puckish smile emerged. "But wouldn't I have to *want* to be an officer?"

"Enlist as a private soldier? Like the rest of us have no choice but to do?" asked Sandy with equal amusement and incredulity.

"I suppose that's exactly what I mean," said Will. "I don't have any military experience, outside the bits of riflery and first aid we had in the Church Lads' Brigade. Besides, it'll be over in a few months and I'd miss the whole show in some officer training course."

Geordie gave a great clap and rubbed his big hands in unabashed glee. "Ho-ho, won't the *paterfamilias* howl, my sweet William! I should very much like to be a fly on the wall when you tell him."

"You'd be quite a fly, Geordie. A horse-stinger at least," said Jack. "But you're getting well ahead of us. We've none of us, save Sandy, even agreed we'd enlist."

"Well, I'll have to look after you miscreants. Like as not get yourselves killed without me," Geordie said with nonchalant finality. "So that makes two. And now you, Naught-Lieutenant William Parsons?"

“A matter of honour, of that I’m sure,” Will replied. “So yes, I suppose you can count me in.”

“And me as well,” Toby declared, adding more meekly, “if they’ll overlook my age.”

“Why Master Tobias Halfpenny, I expected no less from such an upstanding—and I daresay *upright*—young Newfoundlander,” Geordie said, triggering another deep blush. “You’re a credit to your father’s memory,” he added with more sincerity. This elicited a halting smile, a bit sad at the corners, from Toby.

Will caught Jack’s uneasy wandering eyes. “That leaves you the last man standing, Jack. Or rather sitting, this being a smallish boat. What say you?”

Jack was uneasy with the cascading rush of the conversation. He was desperate to speak with Uncle Johnny. “I’m not altogether sure you aren’t the finest gathering of damned fools I’ve ever seen, but if you four are determined to take the King’s shilling, then I suppose...”

He was cut off by a deep rumble and crack. They spun as one toward the point, surprised by the much larger gap between the berg and the shoreline now. They sat suspended as the great massif split along its downward-running blue fissure, the smaller side sliding away into the sea. Freed of this enormous weight, the remaining section rolled around an axis well below the waterline. They watched the slow rotation as the larger berg capsized itself, replacing its sloping top with jagged double peaks, shedding water and sandy slurry from the sea floor. A second later, the sound of crashing surf surrounded them, followed by a fetid burst of wind that smelled of the grave. The surge from the foundering slammed the skiff and pushed it up and sideways. The friends grabbed at arms and legs and clothing, keeping all aboard. Geordie lunged to retrieve a dislodged oar from the water. As the boat settled, they all faced Jack.

“Seems I don’t have much choice, b’ys. All for one and God help us,” Jack said with forced bravado.

“That’s my good lad, Jackie! And should we meet our final morn, we shall forever live in glorious memory,” said Geordie, throwing his head back with a wide smile and unaffected laugh. “What was it the Romans said, Will, about dying for the *patria*? You were the only one awake in old Barnsley’s class.”

“Dulce et decorum est pro patria more,” Will said, reciting with the diction of the Latin prize winner he had been not so very long ago.

Geordie began his strong and steady stroke, hauling them shoreward. “That’s it”—*stroke*—“Sweet and becoming”—*stroke*—“to die for one’s country.”



All the young Barlows gathered around the bench under the gable in their big shared bedroom—save for Prudy, who perched on his lap—as Jack meandered his way through another tale. Uncle Johnny had come to hear from his office down the hall where he had been polishing chimneys for the light’s six lamps. Occasional squeaks from his rag on the red chimney’s glass punctuated the story as the keeper leaned against the doorframe of his children’s room.

“Just as Paddy the little fisher thought he’d never see his family again, the wise old salmon he’d freed from his net just the day before leapt out of the water and pointed his way home through the terrible fog with his shimmerin’ flipper...”

The sweet bite of Johnny’s pipe filled the room, the afternoon sunlight falling in rays along the floor, refracted through the smoke. Johnny studied his nephew as Jack enthralled the children scattered around the floor. His young cousins adored his stories and started in asking as soon as the weather broke in May when Jack would return with a fresh trove for them. Truth be told, Rosie and Johnny enjoyed listening near as much as the young ones.

“Did he become King of the Fishers and marry a princess?” Prudy asked, her voice small as a cricket’s.

“I hear tell he did, my sweet little maid. But that might just be a story for another day,” said Jack, dodging promises since they were departing tomorrow.

“Jackie, can you lend me a hand in the office?” asked Uncle Johnny, with a look that carried more meaning than his words. “I’ve any number of chimneys to polish.”

“Of course, Uncle,” Jack said, giving Prudy a squeeze before sending her out the door and down the stairs after the rest. Uncle Johnny’s office was at the top of the stairs on the second floor. The house was

built right around the base of the whitewashed stone tower, plastered walls within and thick pit-sawn weatherboards without. The office was above the assistant keeper's room where the friends always slept in a jumble on the bed and the floor. There had been no assistant as far back as Jack could recall.

A white-painted cabinet with pigeon holes for the light's signal flags, the edges of slots for the more useful ones worn to bare wood, sat under the window. The large *Lloyd's Signal Book* lay atop the cabinet. A gouged and dented mahogany desk with the weather log sat just beside. The other walls were lined to the ceiling with overflowing bookshelves.

Johnny handed his nephew a rag and they took turns dabbing into a small wooden pail filled with jeweler's rouge in the middle of the table. The fine red powder polished soot from the chimneys without scratching the glass. They sat working in silence for some time, the only sound their soft rubbing and squeaks as the glass came clean. Finally, after a luxuriant puff on his pipe, Uncle Johnny spoke. "Jackie, I know you to be a young man of good sense and not inclined to rashness." Jack saw no need for a reply, so polished on in silence with a slight nod. "I've also seen o'er these past six or seven years how fierce loyal you are to your mates."

"And they to me, Uncle," Jack interjected.

"Ehya, to be sure, b'y. 'Tis sure, that," said Uncle Johnny. He rubbed and smoked for a few moments, pausing to choose his words with care. "I wonder if you've pondered all the import of what you've decided, regardin' this war."

"I've given it some mighty thought," said Jack, "and it seems there's no escaping that it's a matter of duty." He stared for a moment into the crimson-stained rag in his hand, then reached for another chimney.

"True, Jackie, all true. But none of you've seen what war looks like, I mean lookin' it in the face. There's a pernicious kind of evil comes with war," Uncle Johnny said, the words darkening his face. He stopped and studied his pipe for a moment.

"Ma said you saw some fighting in China, during your time in the Navy?" Jack watched his uncle's face move through a jumble of expressions, some he had never seen before.

“In my time before the mast, I saw the viciousness Christian men can bring upon others, enough to know I wanted no more part and came home to this light. And that was only a short fight against simple heathens with old weapons.” Uncle Johnny’s eyes followed his thoughts out the window. “There’s precious little glory comes from war, far as I’d know, Jackie,” Uncle Johnny said with a slow shake of his head. “Precious little.”

“Surely this is different, Uncle?”

“There’s always some will find words to make their choice a righteous one. And ’tis certain some German lad and his uncle are havin’ this self-same conversation, sure as we’re sitting here.” They both paused to dip into the pail for more rouge. This uneasiness between them was something new and disturbing. Giving out a long sigh, Johnny said, “But I expect it’s ever been so, that young men will go off to seek the bubble reputation.” He placed his rag in the pail, relit his pipe, and gazed out over the sea again, lost in his own reverie.

Jack rose without a word and made his way down the stairs, passing Aunt Rosie peeling potatoes in the kitchen. Just then, the red door flew open and in ran two of the young Barlows, with Geordie, growling like a giant, in pursuit. Rosie gave a start, jumping in her seat. She placed a hand over her thumping heart and shouted, smiling, “Outside with the lot of youse, and shut that door!”

“I hear and obey, my Lady Rosamund,” Geordie said with utmost gallantry as he scooped a small Barlow under each arm and shifted them out the door. Jack trailed along behind, into the warm summer afternoon.

As Geordie strode out with the two youngsters slung like sacks of meal across each hip, Sandy called from his sunny seat next to the door, “You might want to loosen your grip, Geordie. Young Samuel there is looking a bit blue in the face.” Rolling his giggling bundles onto the grass, Geordie turned back to join Sandy and Jack on the bench, just as Will and Toby emerged from the door, too. They leaned against the warmed clapboards of the house as Jack rose and rounded to address them.

“We’re off tomorrow, lads, so there’s only one thing left for us here,” Jack said. The others squinted back with clueless expressions. Jack motioned to the bog meadow stretching behind the lighthouse all the way to the tree line half a mile landward. It was the source of

every manner of berries for Aunt Rosie's jams and pies, a different variety each fortnight right through the summer.

Geordie groaned and slid to a slouch, "No, Jackie, not that blasted juniper again."

"Aye, to the juniper. We've not ended a summer here without a footrace to the old tree in the bog," Jack said, heading off around the lighthouse. "Hurry on now!"

The others followed with little enthusiasm, jogging to catch up. "You don't think we're a bit old for this now?" said Will in his reasonable voice, always maddening to Jack on occasions like this.

"Not a whit, Will," Jack said, keeping up his stride.

"You always win," Sandy said, resigned to the race and his loss.

"Exactly why we'll never be too old," said Jack.

They stood along the edge of the bog, studying the lone gnarled tree standing at the center. The old tamarack leaned at an impossible angle away from the prevailing sou'westers. The four hundred yards to the tree were thick with hummocks of grass and small pools of clear peat-filtered water that reflected back snatches of sky and clouds.

"Ready, b'ys?" Jack said, eyeing down the line with competitive zeal. The others gathered themselves, rising to his challenge as any adolescents just crossed into manhood would, of course, do.

"Right," Jack said, lowering himself to a half-crouch. "We're away, lads!"



19th of August 1914

My dearest Vi,

I finish this letter early Sunday morning, awake between windings, when there's quiet time to think on matters. So between the jigs and the reels, I should be able to finish this for Jackie to put into your hand. The lads depart this morning, if the supply boat arrives as we expect. 'Tis a sorrow to see the boys' visit cut short, so much excitement they bring to the house. Our little Prudence is bursting into sobs at the thought of losing her cousin Jackie early. But a day is a year and a week is forever to a child like her. We

fear she's been burnt to a scrunchion by all Jackie's attention and there'll be no living with her over the weeks ahead.

As you've heard by now, the boys are determined to enlist together and join in this war. Or should we be calling them men, by rights? It's a wonder how fast time has passed, grown as they are. Yet in some ways they're too green to burn, in particular poor young Toby. That sweet boy may be a long one but he's so thin you could shoot a gull through him. And so meek I swear he's aft times afraid of his own shadow. Sure, Sandy sees the five of them knocking round in strange lands and Geordie is so filled to the gills with King and Empire he's like to burst if he doesn't get a uniform on him. And good luck to His Majesty feeding that lad. He's not finished with one meal than he's on the baker's list again, ready for the next. Like the others, Jackie's set his mind on joining the fight, although I allow his heart mightn't be following close to his words. But he'd not dream of deserting his mates in such a circumstance. Of course, with Will going, there'd be no holding him back. Young Will can be deep as running water, no more so than now. I haven't puzzled out his thoughts, him being so accustomed to keeping his own counsel, save with our Jackie. He seems to have a mixed catch of reasons, but I'd wager his father's shadow falls over all of them. You'd know the better, since you took work at his family's premises these twenty-five years gone, back before you met your Rick.

I've no desire to worry you, Vi, but I sense the lads may be sailing too close to the wind in their haste to join up. What's to come when these big armies take the field against each other? Young men would seem weak things in the face of that. Pray God I'm wrong and it'll all be over in a few months. Well, let's you and me just hope all our darling boys will come home safe and sound when this foolishness is done. Maybe they'll come to the lighthouse again and we can hear their great tales of glory.

I thank you for the parcel of books. You know well how much they mean to me and what good they'll do the children. I fear I'd be lost had I not the fine library Pa began and, with your help, I've continued. Give my thanks to your Rick as well, and my affection to all your fine children.

*With all my love to you, dearest Vi,
Johnny*

CHAPTER THREE



Deirdre

The layered smells of oak wood—dry oak, sawn oak, wet oak, burnt oak—cloyed at her throat and stomach. She remembered how he brought this smell home in his hair and clothes, of how she had once made finger rings from the curly wood shavings that fell to the floor when he reached into his pockets.

Da must have a head near thick as an oak, right enough, she thought.

The young apprentice knew to a certainty the woman in the dark blue nurse's cloak standing in the entryway was not to be denied. He hurried off to fetch his foreman. Dee carefully banked her anger, ready to blow it to full flame as soon as her father made his way to the entrance of the cooperage. She saw him emerge from the shadows with the rattled apprentice walking sideways beside him, gesturing at her. When Daniel recognized her silhouette against the bright opening of the entry doors, he smiled and called out, "My darlin' daughter Deirdre! What brings you down here?" Daniel removed his cap and wiped his sweaty brow with a pale blue kerchief.

"Don't you 'darlin' daughter' me, Daniel Brannigan, you stupid ox of a man!" Dee threw his words back with more venom than the apprentice

could imagine directing at a foreman. He couldn't think of anyone more important, not that he'd ever met, except maybe the pastor.

"Are you dotty? Or have you taken to the drink in your declinin' years?" Her anger blazed higher with each word she spat at him.

"Deirdre Ann Brannigan, you'll not address me so in my place of work," her father scolded, casting a quick side glance at the apprentice. Seeing that she was gathering herself for a renewed burst, he signaled with a terse jerk of his head to the young man to clear away to his duties. Daniel's expression softened with the apprentice's exit, never able to keep his anger going with his first born. "Now, calm yourself and tell me what's got you blowin' a gale," Daniel said, leading her toward a bench near the open doors.

"How could you do it?" she asked, swallowing a sob and squinting through burgeoning tears. "Frank joining up is nightmare enough. I'd expect that from a headstrong fool like him."

A rush of understanding burned red over Daniel's face, the lines of his forehead and around his mouth etching deeper. "So word's out then," he said, studying a calloused palm.

She sprang to her feet, rage flaring again, and shoved hard against her father's broad chest. "But why in the name of Patrick and Brigid and Columcille would you let yourself be dragged back in as well?" Even her prodigious will could no longer stanch the sobs. She collapsed to the bench, shoulders heaving. He handed her his kerchief, awkward in his embarrassment. Daniel blew out a long and pained sigh, turning half away from his daughter. A flicker ran through his thoughts. Just a quick image of a much smaller Dee, standing before a window in their tiny old flat, face contorted as she fought back tears over one of a thousand childish hurts, determined not to cry. *So much and so little changes*, he thought.

"I'd hoped to tell you myself tonight, when we were all round the table," Daniel said as he turned back to Dee. As ever when he witnessed her cry, darts of pain shot through him.

"Mam sent Molly to the hospital to fetch me home. And didn't Sister Mary Evangeline have a fit of apoplexy at me leaving the ward midday and all. Imagine Mam being so beside herself that she sent poor Molly," Deirdre said, calming her gasps, wiping once again at her nose. "The child must have been terrified every step o' the way." Dee then looked

her father square in the eyes, her piercing stare dripping with accusation. "Bridie Fallon from up the street told Mam the awful truth. Her Brian had been down to the recruiting himself and the sergeant was wooing all the excitable fools there by droppin' your name as a new sergeant-major, just signed up," she said. "And with your own son, too."

Daniel went ashen, imagining the hurt he had caused his Eda. He would carry the burden of this particular stumble for many a year to come, that was as certain as the sunrise.

Dee pinched up her face as she felt hot tears again. "Mam was sitting at the table, rocking herself like 'twere a death in the family." She wiped the back of a hand against her cheek, concealing her deep emotion at the thought of her mother. "You'll have much to answer for this dark day, Daniel Brannigan. And for many a day hereafter," said Dee, doling out the penance to her miserable father.

They sat motionless as if frozen in amber, the bright daylight spilling through the entry, cleaving the deep shadows inside the corridor. The red brick walls breathed out a musty, turned-earth damp that chilled them both, though the day was fine. Dee's face played in and out of the shadows as she turned her head, bent, wiped, blew. Finally, after an eternity of silence had passed between them, Daniel slid toward her, his supplicant hands spread wide. They were both stripped bare, each hung to their own cross.

"Deirdre, there's such a great need of men... and they're raisin' so many new battalions here and everywhere," Daniel said, slow and quiet. "There's nowheres near enough sergeants to train and look after the young ones joining up in their thousands, including your brother and his mates."

Daniel sat next to her with surprising lightness for so solid a man carrying such a heavy burden. He took her hand in his much larger one, strong and hard from so many years of staves and hoops and mallets. They sat like that, Dee sobbing and sniffing, softer than before, at the thought of her mother.

He spoke again, a bit steadier. "I left my old regiment a lance corporal after South Africa, when you were just a wee girl. I never thought that would amount to much," he said with a forced smile. "It seems good enough to make me a company sergeant-major in this time of dire necessity."

"A far sight older sergeant-major as well," she added. "And I was just big enough to remember how hard 'twas on Mammy, with me and

Frankie to care for without you." Daniel studied his hands while she reminded him of the struggles he had left for Eda with the young ones.

"And you were wounded, weren't you?" Dee felt herself winding up again, so she calmed her voice with a great effort. "I remember you coming home leaning on a cane."

"Aye, that I was, but others had it worse," Daniel said, his thoughts running back to hard days long ago. He ran his tongue across his upper lip, the thirst and dust of the veldt still a phantom burning. He sat up taller, a newfound resolve stiffening his back. "But what's done is done. I've given my word to the commander of the new battalion," Daniel said, then let slide an impish look to Dee. "But I pressed him for one condition."

Dee pulled the kerchief back from her father's hand, wiping her eyes and nose again. "It better be a powerful important condition," she said with an indignant sniff.

"Tis indeed," Daniel said. "He promised me your brother and his reckless friends will be assigned to my company." Dee sat up and faced him now. "So I might just be able to keep them clear of o'er much foolhardiness," Daniel said, convincing himself with as little success as he had his daughter.



*Headquarters Royal Dublin Fusiliers
Naas, County Kildare*

Ref: Urgent Need for Noncommissioned Officers 28th August, 1914

Dear L/Cpl Brannigan,

As you must be aware, your country faces the gravest peril at this time. In response to His Majesty calling all able-bodied loyal men to the colours, our Regiment is forming up several new battalions to join the fighting in France and Belgium. It is with humble pride that I have accepted command of one of these newly-formed battalions. Although hundreds of stalwart volunteers have come forward to enlist, we face a critical need for mature men of military experience to serve as noncommissioned officers,

for our immediate training needs, as well as to accompany these selfsame troops to the field. This need is particularly acute, as the 1st Battalion will not return from Madras until early winter.

I well recall the steadfastness you exhibited under fire, even after receiving wounds, as a soldier of my company in the vicious fighting at Pieters Hill, during the relief of Ladysmith. We share memories both bitter and sweet, of the honour with which we acquitted ourselves that day and of the comrades who now sleep beneath the African dust. I am confident we can rely upon your same steadfastness in this current hour of need. I have been informed that your son, Francis, has enlisted in the battalion. Surely there is the greatest honour to be found in serving together, father and son, for King and Empire?

It is within my authority as Officer Commanding to offer you immediate appointment to the rank of Company Sergeant-Major when you consent to joining the new battalion, as I am confident you will. Please confirm soonest, either in person or by return evening post, your decision again to render service to your country and your King.

*I remain, sir,
Proudly your past and future comrade in arms,
Arthur G. Lawless, Lieut.-Col.*



Eda wiped the sideboard for the third or the thirtieth time, avoiding discussion of the upcoming departures. "Mam, you'll rub the shellac right off if you don't settle yourself," Dee finally said, exasperated with the unceasing motion.

"Don't be visitin' your own sour disposition upon your mother, Deirdre," said Daniel, baiting her into conversing with him.

"Oh, to be sure, *Sergeant-Major* Brannigan! Don't let my sourness interfere with your inhaling that great pile o' rashers on your plate. You'd think the two of you were off for a day of the football at Croke Park, not to kill or be killed by Germans."

Eda returned to her wiping, all the harder from Dee's words. Not interrupting her polishing, she said to her husband, "Mind the clock. Your train might well leave early today."

“There’s time yet, *stóirín*,” Daniel said. What little of the Irish he knew, he had from Eda. He seldom spoke a word of it within the children’s hearing.

“We’re doing our duty as all men of this land must and should do, sister,” Frank said with all the condescending certainty of a recent convert. “And if we’re to have the Home Rule, we need to show we’re worthy of it.”

“Oh, that small nations might be free, is’t?” Dee said, mocking her brother’s superciliousness. “Tis just a squabble between the King and his naughty cousin.” Frank reeled under his sister’s terrible glare and turned his attention back to his food. “And you’ll pay a terrible price for this King’s folly, mark my words, Francis Brannigan.”

Daniel rose as his oldest children squabbled, walking over to his wife. Turning her by the shoulders from her fervent polishing, he wrapped her in his arms. After a few slow and deep breaths freighted with unspoken feeling, he pulled back, looking down at her with pained tenderness. “I thought we’d not face these sorrows again, my sweet wife,” he said to Eda, the back of his big hand gentle against her cheek. “The world’s a cruel and unfair place, more often than not.”

“Aye, husband, ’tis often cruel indeed.” Eda sniffed against his woolen uniform, then lifted her head and smoothed the khaki worsted. Daniel kissed her on each cheek. Eda closed her eyes, not able to bear the sight of him so close. Daniel separated from his wife with great care, then moved with tentative steps toward his daughter.

“The young ones are outside at play. I told them to stay close so they can give their farewells as you leave,” Eda said to her husband and son, sniffing against the back of her hand. Frank rose from the table and snatched his peaked hat from a peg by the door. He hugged his mother, who kissed his cheek and smoothed his unruly ruddy hair.

“Mind your father and your officers, Francis. And come home to me safe and sound, *mo bhuachaillín daor*,” Eda said with a shaky smile as she stroked the rougher sleeves of her son’s soldier’s tunic, looking him up and down a last time, pressing his image into her mind’s eye like a summertime flower within an old book.

Daniel drew near his seething daughter. “I hope you’ll see a way past the hurt, Deirdre.” She scowled at him in reply. “You’re our first born and so very dear to me.” She looked away to the window, trying

to block the sound of his voice from her mind. "I have such hopes that once we've seen this through, I'll see you settled and happy with a good man, bouncing your own first born on me rickety old knee." Daniel placed his arm around her shoulders and gave her a little smile with the secret wink they had shared for years.

Nothing was surer to reignite her anger. She shoved the arm away, his hand smacking against the window frame. "Don't be giving me all this soft-soap, talking of grandchildren and the like. You'll not get round me with your sentimentality." Through her rage, Dee could see nothing of her mother's horrified face. Nor of her brother standing at the door, gaping at her tirade. Certainly not her father, shrinking inside his new khaki as his heart broke beneath the shiny brass buttons.

"Tis your choice to shatter this family, your choice entirely," she hissed at him between her teeth. "I'll never forgive you for this, no matter what you conjure to say on your way out the door." She pointed a finger close to her father's nose and shouted, "Shame on you and your foolishness! Shame!"

Daniel's legs weakened under the weight of her bitter accusations. Without words that could have any meaning now, he turned to the door, shoulders sloped, and slid from sight into the bright morning light. The excited shouting of the children bidding their father and brother goodbye failed to penetrate the gloomy pall filling the room. After the latch clicked as loud as she'd ever heard and her husband of twenty years and more disappeared from the home they had made together, Eda walked toward Deirdre with small, pained steps. She searched her daughter's face for a familiar look, some recognition of the child she had carried. Dee spun away from her mother's confused stare as Eda choked on fresh tears.

"*Ach, mo chailín!* My own dear girl!" Eda gasped through her sobs. "Since the day you first drew breath, that man has loved you more than was good for him. And surely more than you now deserve!" Eda grabbed Dee by both shoulders and gave her a tiny shake. She had strength for no more. "I'll pray to the Blessed Virgin you don't live to regret those bitter words of partin' you just visited upon your own father's head, Deirdre Ann Brannigan."

Dee pulled away and pounded up the stairs, ending the wretched scene with the slam of a door.

CHAPTER FOUR



Will

“The station master tells me there’s a public meeting starting within the hour, so let’s make haste, my hardy lads,” Geordie said with a broad grin, excitement radiating from every inch of him.

“Where’s the meeting to be then?” asked Will, lifting his knapsack from the train platform.

“The Church Lads’ Armoury. I suggest we make our way toward the Cathedral, so we can stow our kit at Jack’s house on Gower or Will’s up Garrison Hill. We don’t want to be carrying all this into a crowded meeting.”

“Best stop at Jack’s,” Will said without explanation.

When they arrived at the Oakleys’ house, Jack set his satchel on the stoop and burst in through the door. He was greeted by shouts and a clamor of small feet, his youngest siblings running to him with ecstatic faces. With widespread arms, they engulfed his legs and waist. Behind the vanguard of smaller Oakleys’, Viola strode down the hallway in her white apron, without which the others would hardly recognize her, pushing away flyaway hairs with the back of her hand as she grinned up at her eldest.

“You’re more’n a week early, darlin’ Jackie! We’ve just finished supper but I can find something for you b’ys in the larder,” Viola said,

kissing Jack and then smiling with a word of genuine pleasure to each of the others in turn.

“No time for that, Ma. We’re just about dropping our bags, then we’re off to the big meeting at the Armoury.”

Viola’s smile never wavered, but her eyes flashed concern as she said, “Of course, of course that’s where you should be headed. Like the rest of the young bucks.” She shooed the children out of the hall. “Just drop everything in the parlor and you can sort it after you come back,” she said, leading the way to the front room.

“Ma, here’s Uncle Johnny’s letter,” Jack said as he fished it from inside his coat. Viola squeezed it to her breast, then caught herself and hid it away in a pocket of her apron. Jack kissed his mother’s greying hair and said, “We’re off now, Ma. No tellin’ when we’ll be back, so don’t fuss over anything to eat for us.” With a chorus of goodbyes, the five were gone again, down the street and trotting up the hill toward the Armoury.

The meeting passed in a blur, tired as they were from their travels. The assembly hall was overflowing and stifling hot from the packed bodies and steaming emotions. The raucous cheers and shouted affirmations made it impossible to hear the speakers most of the time. As the crowd rose and sat, waved and clapped, Will caught a few glimpses of his father among the distinguished gentlemen of the stage party. Finally, an announcement was made that enlistments would be open after the meeting. With “God Save the King” and “Rule Britannia,” the meeting collapsed under its own jingoistic weight, the great crowd spilling back onto Harvey Street and flowing downhill to awaiting pubs.

Men gathered at the entrance to the Armoury, perhaps two hundred, awaiting the reopening of the doors. A few were weaving their way to the front of the fluid queue, determined to have their names first on the regimental roll. Jack and Will stood together in the milling crowd, near their friends but a little apart, able to track the others’ whereabouts by the guidon of Toby’s tousled brown hair floating above the boaters and caps of the crowd. They noticed around them familiar faces of old friends from school and mates from the CLB. Others they knew from their neighborhoods or from sports days with the Methodist Guards, the Catholic Cadets, and the Presbyterian Highlanders.

They exchanged hellos and handshakes. Short conversations echoed the platitudes just heard from the stage, garnished with a bellicose bravado more strongly proclaimed than deeply felt. The heady mix of excitement and anxiety, in near equal measure, was thick and palpable. The long wait to reach the recruiting table added a dash of petulance to the mix. Thus was the great balloon of excitement deflated, giving the volunteers their first exposure to the tedious routines of military life. By the time Jack and Will, the last of the friends, had answered the recruiter's questions and signed their names to the roll, it was late summer twilight. The five regathered in front of the Armoury, exhausted by their long day of train travel and ricocheting emotions.

"Alea iacta est, brave legionnaires! The die is cast! Let us cross the Rubicon and find some blessed supper," Geordie said, patting his stomach with both hands. "I may be forced to eat the next passing nag otherwise."

"In the interest of sparing the horses, I wager Ma has something on the stove or in the larder," Jack said. Geordie, long a devotee of Viola Oakley's kitchen, brightened and led them away.



Will turned up Garrison Hill, as the bells tolled ten o'clock. From the Oakleys', it was a short walk to his family's house, dominating the street in its looming Queen Anne splendor. He could see it on the corner, white clapboards fading to a bluish grey in the growing darkness. The lights in the front parlor still burned bright, strange for this late hour. As he reached the short flight of stairs running up to the entry, the door opened and a sudden racket—all basses and baritones—rolled down to the pavement.

"We'll gather again at Davis's offices tomorrow at ten," Walter Parsons said in a voice accustomed to being heeded. "We've much to do, gentlemen, and in precious short time."

As the half-dozen men, some more familiar to Will than others, stepped off the stairs, they greeted him by name with hearty handshakes. Most had been on the platform at the meeting. "Quite a momentous day... makes all of us proud... young men from good families... put

us on the map of the Empire..." Will murmured pleasantries in reply, none of the older men's words distinct or memorable.

"Ah, an early return. Well you should have, William," Walter boomed out, disregarding the sleeping neighborhood. "Your mother was anxious the Germans would shell the lighthouses, though God knows what gave her such an idea. Women get so blasted emotional at the mention of war. We must get accustomed to it, I suppose."

Will shifted the rucksack on his shoulder and lifted his small valise from the sidewalk. "We heard of the declaration by signal from a passing coastal ship, but had to wait until the Lighthouse Service boat came," Will said by way of both explanation and apology.

"Those lighthouse keepers live like Eskimos. Half their lives in the middle of nowhere with no company but their own dull thoughts," Walter said with undisguised distaste. "Do a great service when some canny Scotchman devises a machine to replace them all."

"The Barlows were as gracious as ever, Father, and Jack's Uncle Johnny did all he could to speed us on our way. The supply ship arrived on schedule but was running north. The nearest train depot was Lewisporte."

"God, what a jumbled mess—north to get south," Walter said, his scorn for the outports manifest. The Parsonses were not so many generations removed from hauling cod themselves, not that Will had the temerity to point this out to his father. "Well, get yourself inside. We've important matters to discuss, you and I." Walter turned back into the house, certain of his son following. Will hefted his bags and trudged up the steps, watching his father disappear down the hall into his library.

As he set his load next to the hatstand, Will's mother appeared from the parlor, giving quiet directions to the maid, an exhausted and desultory young Ulster girl who was carrying a large tray of half-smoked cigars, empty brandy glasses, and a few sandwich corners—the remains of the still unexplained gathering of men.

"William darling, such a welcome surprise. When did you depart the lighthouse?" his mother asked, her preternatural calm unwavering as always.

"Three days ago, Mother," Will said, kissing her offered cheek. "We slept rough a few nights on the deck of the Lighthouse Service

steamer, but managed to clean ourselves up a bit on the train," Will said, trying to smooth the indelible wrinkles from his sleeves. "We were sorry to cut short our visit, but given the circumstances..." he trailed off, stating what he believed to be the obvious.

"I was worried to death for your safety, William, and am utterly relieved you are home," his mother said with her usual detached tone, undermining the professed intensity of her anxieties.

"William, I need you here! You may get mollycoddling from your mother later!" his father bawled through the open doors of the library.

Will kissed his mother's cheek again and motioned down the hall with his eyes. "Better see what the *pater* is about."

"Good night, William. We can speak again after breakfast," said his mother, turning to float up the stairs, not a hair out of place, after what had turned into a rather long day.

Will made his way down the hall, a reflexive knot growing in his stomach as it had since boyhood. He slid the library doors closed behind him and settled into the chair to which his father had motioned him. Walter Parsons sat in all his imperium behind a large and heavily carved mahogany desk, contemplating the evening's final brandy in his right hand. He did not offer his son a drink. Will glanced around the familiar room, all leather spines and wood panels and brass fittings, a vague nautical air reflecting the source of the family's prosperity.

"My boy, that group of distinguished gentlemen is the Executive Committee of the Patriotic Association," Walter said, "appointed by the Governor to ensure the efficient raising and support of the Newfoundland Regiment for the duration of hostilities." Taking a long sip, he added off-handedly, "Not that the fighting will last long."

Will was unsurprised. St. John's was stuffed to the gills with fraternal organizations, paramilitary groups like the CLB, businessmen's associations, *ad hoc* committees of all colors and stripes, boosting the town and its trade. His father was involved in each, it often seemed, except the Catholic and Methodist ones.

"Yes, I know about the Regiment. We went directly to the Armoury from the station, as soon as we heard of the public meeting," said Will.

Walter was surprised. "Strange I didn't see you there. I was among the stage party," he said. "Why didn't you greet me after?"

“We arrived late and the crowd was so dense, you’d departed before I could make my way to the front,” Will said, choosing a small lie to avoid a lecture on filial duty and whatever else Walter’s irritation might light upon.

“No matter, no matter. You’re here now and we have an important matter to discuss,” Walter said, pushing the conversation along. “You will of course not be returning to Dalhousie next term.”

A statement not a question, Will nodded his agreement and said, “I should think few will.”

“Yes, one would hope. Indeed,” said Walter, raising his eyebrows in disapproval of any unnamed students who might shirk their duty at this time of peril to the Empire. “You of course will join the Regiment,” Walter continued without looking at Will. “Your year at university will overcome any objection to your age in receiving a commission. That and my position on the Executive Committee and place in the community.” Walter rose and walked to the window and took a slow draught of brandy, well satisfied with the events of the day. “The Regiment will need steady young gentlemen as officers. Certainly if they’re to lead some of the rabble we’re likely to get from the outports, even from Labrador. Although the fighting should be finished before many of them slouch their way to St. John’s.”

Will steeled himself at this opening and said, “That’s just it, Father, about the fighting being over quickly.”

Walter turned and looked at Will. “What about it?”

“With Jack and Geordie and the others, we discussed the war and joining up, either here or with the Canadians, after we heard of the declaration,” Will said, gathering momentum if little confidence. “We came to the same conclusion about the war being over quickly and don’t want to miss out.”

“You had substantial leisure to jaw over the matter,” Walter said, suspicious of where Will was leading the conversation.

“Yes, we did,” Will said. With an awkward attempt at casualness, he added, “And we decided to enlist together.” Will’s artifice of nonchalance was met with a thunderous silence while Walter stared at his son trying to make sense of what he was saying. Will continued, “After all, if I were to accept a commission, I’d likely not finish officer’s training before the whole thing was settled.”

Then the penny dropped. Walter's face went crimson as he stormed about the library, spilling his brandy on carpet, couch, desktop. "Do you sit here and tell me you intend to enlist in the Newfoundland Regiment as a *private soldier*?" Walter's chest heaved with angry exhalations. "Our only chance... my only son... a *private soldier*?"

Walter drilled an angry stare deep into his son. Will shifted with horrible discomfort in his chair, creaking the leather beneath him. There was no turning back. "Actually father, we already did enlist, the five of us, tonight after the meeting." His feigned easiness was betrayed by beads of sweat forming at his temples.

"Then you will withdraw your enlistment tomorrow, as early as possible!" Walter thundered across the room at his son, the denseness of the laden bookshelves absorbing his voice, giving it an uncomfortable intimacy. "Do you understand me, William? You will not humiliate me and stain this family's reputation with such abominable foolishness." Walter gave full head to his anger now. "Do you not comprehend how hard your grandfather and great-grandfather... and of course myself... struggled to make this a respected, prosperous family? One that is welcomed into the best homes, here and in England? What would your mother's family think, the daughter of a Church of England bishop, for God's sake?" Walter looked daggers at his son as he bellowed, "Are you completely mad, boy?"

This was the moment Will had known for the last three days was inevitable. As nausea pulsed through him, he feared he would vomit. Studying the arabesques in the silk carpet under his feet, his father's angry respirations shrieked in his ears. Jolts of fear ran down both legs, as he lifted his eyes to his father's purple face.

"I gave my word as a gentleman to my oldest and dearest friends," Will said in a shaky but regular cadence. "I will not break my word, as no gentleman would countenance for a moment," he said, not averting his gaze, fearing even to blink. There was an unnatural stillness in the tense room.

His father looked away first.

Walter barged to the window, glaring into the clear summer night. It seemed to Will the silence would last until dawn. Finally, Walter spoke without turning, calm, but in a voice as cold and dead as the

air off the curious iceberg they had seen at the lighthouse a few days before. "You're quite correct, William, that a gentleman honours his word, even if that word is... intemperately given," intoned Walter. "However, you will have nothing from me. Not a word of support. No intercession on your behalf. Not a penny."

"You wish to play soldier with your friends, then live like a soldier. Including on a soldier's pay," Walter said, spitting the last words. He heaved a great sigh of dramatic resignation and drained what little was left in his glass before continuing. "I know it would be a fool's errand to keep your sisters or your mother, who has always been too sentimental where you're concerned, from communicating with you," Walter said without emotion, as if reading from a warehouse inventory. "But you will hear nothing from me after you leave this house and join the ranks. Do you understand now that there are consequences to your little gentleman's agreement?"

"Yes, Father," Will replied, wrung out by this horrible scene and the long eventful day.

"Now leave this room. I shall not see you again before you depart for training, which should be within the fortnight."

"And I suggest you find temporary lodging with one of your comrades," said Walter with gratuitous pettiness. "I'll not have you under my roof in these humiliating circumstances."



7 Garrison Hill
Early Wednesday morning

My dearest William,

I leave this note on your bed, knowing your father would be distressed if he knew I had written so soon after the unpleasantness he endured last night. And I shan't see you today before you depart, since your father has forbidden even the servants from intercourse with you. I am confident this will not last, but best to honour his wishes for now. I could not let you go without a word from your loving mother however.

William, you have all my heart and I fear I have little else to give. I shall pray for you every evening and morning, which is a gift my purse can sustain and is more precious than gold. May God protect you, as I know He will, in this righteous struggle.

I am told it is likely the Regiment will be posted to England for training. It would be best that you not visit my family there. I am sure your father will soften toward you, but until that time, I think it best not to involve your uncles and aunts in what is a matter best kept to us. Should circumstances change, I shall write to arrange a visit, your military obligations permitting. Are private soldiers allowed leave, I wonder?

Your friends have long been of utmost importance to you. Perhaps had I been able to give you a brother, you might have needed them a little less. Maybe it was never a good idea to allow you to accompany Jack to the lighthouse. Had you been here, you could not have made such a rash promise.

William, you will always be my precious boy. I shall fear for your safety every moment until you return to us. Your sisters, especially Augusta, are beside themselves with grief over this horrid rupture with your father and your imminent departure for foreign fields. We shall keep you close in our hearts until your return.

*Your most loving and devoted,
Mother*

CHAPTER FIVE



Deirdre

Dublin had fallen into an anxious routine in the eight months since the war began. There were plenty of Irishmen fighting and dying in France and Belgium over towns no one knew existed a year ago. The Munster Fusiliers and the Irish Guards had suffered huge losses early on and a battalion of the Dublin Fusiliers was dug into the sucking mud of Ypres. Now everyone was on tenterhooks for news of the landings in the Dardanelles, of which the Brannigans, father and son, were taking part with their battalion of the Dubs.

Deirdre continued her routine at St. Vincent's, although the group of trainees she had supervised in August was nearly gone, picked over by the military nursing services and the Volunteer Aid Detachments the Red Cross was recruiting. The absence of her father and brother left a gaping hole at home, mealtimes in particular. Her relationship with her mother had changed from the day the men left and Dee knew it was her fault. They were cordial enough, she and her mother, but Eda concentrated on the younger children. The easy laughter between mother and daughter had ceased. Most days, Dee ached from the quiet. She had regretted the ugly parting with her father from almost the moment he left, but could still not bring herself to write him. Foolish pride, she knew. She missed him desperately.

A novice nun, so fresh at the hospital Dee could not recall her name, moved down the ward, feet invisible beneath her long white habit. "Sister Mary Evangeline wishes to speak with you, Sister Brannigan. In her office."

"Please tell her I'll be down as soon as I finish with Mr. Corcoran." Dee turned back to changing a dressing on a septic leg sore. After finishing with the patient, Dee made her way to the broad staircase that consumed half the second floor landing and took the two flights to the Matron's Office with brisk steps. She touched the door a few times with her knuckles, pushing it open after a quiet "Come" from the nun within.

Sister Mary Evangeline sat at the desk in her sparse office from which she had administered St. Vincent's Hospital for over a decade. She had accepted Deirdre as a trainee at the age of sixteen, upon the unanimous recommendation of her teachers at the Mercy Sisters' school. Although Deirdre was a handful in her early days, full of stubbornness and overconfidence, the matron had never regretted this decision.

"Deirdre, please come with me," said Sister Mary Evangeline, rising from her desk. "Your mother is here to see you."

Her mother had never visited her at the hospital before. "That's a curious thing, Sister. I hope the young ones are all right."

"The youngsters are fine," she said, offering nothing more. "I asked Sister Louise to take your mother to my private rooms." They walked together through the courtyard, over to the convent wing. Sister Mary Evangeline's rooms were near the entrance. The nun eased open the door onto her sitting room. Eda sat in an armchair before the window that framed a dappled backdrop of lush foliage pocked with pink blossoms. She was sobbing against the waist of the young nun standing beside her.

Heart in her throat, Dee ran to her mother and dropped to her knees on the floor. She grabbed her mother's forearms. "Mam, what grieves you so?" she said, knowing what was to come. The only question was which one.

"*Ach*, Holy Mother of God, Deirdre! What're we to do? What now?" her mother shrieked, rocking back and forth. Sister Louise's lips moved in silent prayer beside her. Dee felt Sister Mary Evangeline's hands, light on her shoulders.

“Mam, is it Frank? What’s happened to Frank?” Dee pleaded in her inexcusable desire to offer up her brother rather than the unthinkable alternative.

“Tis your dear father! Your only father!” wailed Eda, dissolving into a flood of sobbing grief. “*Sé do bheatha, a Mhuire, tá an Tiarna leat...*” Eda gasped out her prayer to the Virgin as she clung with whitening knuckles to the rosary in her right hand.

Dee saw the crumpled paper clutched tight in her mother’s left hand, the unmistakable pale yellow of a Post Office telegram. At the sight of it, any guttering hope of a mistake was snuffed. Dee collapsed onto the floor at Sister Mary Evangeline’s feet, her mouth gaping in a silent wail. Her eyes darted about, wild and unfocused, arms flailing to find purchase on something, anything. She grabbed the nun’s ankles through her habit, hugging them tight to her shoulder, as scalding tears flowed into the spotless white fabric.

“*Anois agus ar uair ár mbáis...*” Dee heard her mother’s prayers waft away, soft and distant.



POST OFFICE TELEGRAPHS

*Office: Dublin Main
Rec'd: 14th May, 1915*

*Office of Origin and
Service Instructions:*

*WAR OFFICE LONDON
Handed to: addressee*

TO: Brannigan, Ethna Mrs., in New Row, Dublin

Deeply regret to inform you that Sergeant-Major Daniel Brannigan, Royal Dublin Fusiliers, was killed in action on 26th April. Lord Kitchener expresses his sympathy.

Secretary, War Office