

A Time for Shadows

T.J. Banks



Wanting to "make a difference," young Iris Amory joins the Red Cross as a nurse and finds herself serving in a hospital over in France during World War I. Iris gets her heart broken open -- once or twice (at least) -- by it all and is transformed by the horror around her, becoming a strong, compassionate woman and an inspiration to Dawn Kailey, the young journalist she tells her story to.

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CHAPTER THREE

“And this is where the gas cases are,” Sister Katherine Owens told Iris in a prim, precise voice. But her eyes were warm, kind, and shimmery, like a stained-glass saint’s. “It’s most important to keep an eye to the weather—and the windows—where they’re concerned. Their lungs are already badly damaged, of course, and the slightest drop in the temperature can exacerbate the condition. We keep oxygen by their beds for them, as you can see. And then, of course, there are the eyes.”

“What about the eyes?” Iris asked, thankful that she had been taken in hand by one of the English nurses. She was none too sure about her French despite the lessons that she and some of the other nurses were taking twice a week from a woman who lived near the hospital.

“They have to be bathed and treated. Remember, these poor fellows generally get it full in the face.” She went around to the side of first bed. “Hand me the basin and a fresh towel, please. How are we doing today, Tommy?”

The young man in the bed—was he really eighteen? Iris wondered—grinned and groped for the older woman’s hand. “Can’t see worth a damn outta these eyes of mine, begging your pardon, Sister Katherine,” he replied, squeezing her red, chilblained hand. There was a Highland lilt to his voice that brought Joe to mind. “I mean, I can sorta make out shapes but

not the details. I don't mean to complain none, but they're burning a bit more today. Who's the new Sister come to call?"

"Iris Amory," Sister Katherine told him. *Why, she didn't correct him*, Iris marveled. The nurses from England and other parts of the British Empire all seemed to be called "Sister," regardless of whether they were military or civilian nurses. The Red Cross nurses were simply "Nurse," far as she could tell. *Well, if Sister Katherine's not going to say anything, neither am I*, Iris decided.

She watched quietly as Sister Katherine dipped the towel into the basin and, wringing it out, began moving it lightly against the sore eyes. When she'd finished, she put the eye ointment in so deftly, he barely blinked. "And don't worry, Tommy: the sight's coming back far more quickly than the doctors and I anticipated. A few weeks ago, you couldn't even have made out those shapes. In a month's time, you'll have the full use of your eyes back and be wreaking havoc among all my younger nurses, I expect."

"That I will, Sister Katherine," he chuckled, giving her hand another affectionate squeeze. "That I will."

Iris trailed behind Sister Katherine, watching her chat and joke with each of the soldiers. As her grandmother would've said, this woman had "the gift" and not just in her hands: there was something peaceful and healing in her manner, and the men responded to it instinctively, their faces lighting up, even when, like Tommy, they couldn't see well enough to read hers.

Not that Sister Katherine let Iris stand there gawking while she did all the work. Nature had made her a teacher and a healer both: she soon had Iris putting in the eye ointment and checking on wounds and dressings as they made their way through the other wards.

Dealing with the wounds wasn't as awful as Iris had feared. Sometimes there was a powerful knock-you-down-to-your-knees odor, yes, but she could handle it—or even the sight of a missing arm or leg—without getting too queasy. After all, she'd been raised on a farm, and she'd seen some pretty nasty accidents with scythes, spooked horses, and the like.

Still, would she ever be able to put the same kind of feeling into nursing that Sister Katherine did? It worried her, Iris had to admit. *Am I always going to have this outside-looking-in feeling, even here? Surely, I should be feeling something.*

“How do you manage it—taking care of their wounds and still managing to put a good face on things?” Iris blurted out as they left one of the wards. Then she bit her lip. There! She’d forgotten all about protocol again. Probably she shouldn’t have been addressing Sister Katherine so familiarly. She’d heard that some nursing sisters and matrons were really quite touchy about rank. But the other woman seemed not to mind at all.

“It’s hard not to get attached to them,” she told Iris simply. “And it doesn’t add that many more minutes to the rounds to say a few kind words. I mean, it’s little enough to do when you think about the sacrifices they’ve made.” She smiled. “And while we’re at it, dear, I’m not much for formalities at the best of times, and these hardly qualify as that. So call me Katherine, and let’s have done with all the bowing and scraping.”

Iris smiled back. All at once, she felt less transplanted. The pale almost wintry sun shone a little more brightly through the cathedral-style windows, bringing badly needed warmth both to her spirit and the long, drafty corridor.

The hospital had once been a seminary, she’d been told, and it had taken the local authorities a while to get into suitable shape for the incoming wounded. The walls were all whitewashed, and every door was painted an absurdly cheerful scarlet. But Iris liked it. It made the place feel less like a hospital and more . . . well, *homey*, despite the lack of running water, heat, and other amenities.

“What an interesting old building this is,” Iris marveled. “It’s not at all what I imagined it would be like, but it’s got a lot of charm and history to it.”

Katherine nodded. “I agree—there’s something about the place that soothes the soul. It must be the history, as you say. For a hundred years or more, this was training camp, so to speak, for young priests. Something of their piety, their *godliness*, must

linger.” She glanced down at her watch and began moving down the corridor at a more business-like clip. Iris hastened after her, finding the shorter, stockier woman surprisingly hard to keep up with. “By the way, have you seen the chapel at the end of this hall?”

Iris shook her head.

“It’s a really wonderful room, and the wood carvings and stained-glass windows are still in amazingly good shape, considering that it hasn’t been used since the separation of church and state here in France. It’s sort of a special place of mine. I go there when all of this”—she gestured toward the wards they’d left behind them— “gets to be too much to bear.” She threw Iris a glance over her shoulder. “You may find yourself wanting to do likewise.”

“I’m not particularly religious – or Catholic.”

“Neither am I, though I used to sing in my church choir when I was about your age. But I say at times like these, we have to hold on to what we can.”

She halted by a door near the end of the hallway, and, for a second, Iris thought that this must be the chapel. Katherine’s tightened lips and a sudden, indefinable change in her manner told a different story, however.

“This is not like any of the other wards you’ve seen this morning,” Katherine cautioned. “This is like nothing you’ve ever seen, except maybe in your nightmares.”

Iris looked at her, bewildered, her own throat tightening.

“These are the eye-less, the nose-less, and sometimes even the faceless,” Katherine continued, her voice gone low and raspy. “These are the men whose own families probably wouldn’t be able to bear the sight of them. And the men, they know it, and there’s where the heart-break comes in.” She laid one of her strong, firm, squarish hands on Iris’s wrist. “You must always look them full in the face—what’s left of it, that is—and smile. Smile until it feels like the damn thing’s permanently etched onto your own face, but *smile*. Can you remember to do that, Iris? It’s terribly, terribly important.”

Iris nodded.

“Good. There’s a Dr. Kazanjian, who’s over with the 1st Harvard Medical Unit—a dentist, I believe—who’s doing some wonderful things with re-building jaws. They wouldn’t even let him return to the States when the rest of his unit went back. And back at 3rd London General, there’s an orderly, Francis Derwent Wood. He’s actually a sculptor, and he’s come up with these, well, *masks* for the men with the faces damaged beyond repair. We’re hoping that perhaps he’ll be able to come over at some point and take a look at some of our boys here. It would give them such hope.”

She shook her head and, putting her hand on the doorknob, looked up at Iris. “And that’s what you’re here to do, too—give them hope. Not false hope, mind you, but hope that people’ll be able to look at them and still see them for who they truly are.” She opened the red door and slipped through like a shadow, Iris following.

Even with the warning she’d just received, she was unprepared for each gargoyle face that turned expectantly toward them as the old bandages were snipped off. She could feel her lips start to curl back like a cat’s encountering a strange and frightening smell: it was only the memory of Katherine’s words that kept her from turning tail and bolting back through that door.

One man was missing half his face; another had no lips and two tiny holes where his nose had been; and yet a third had no eyelids and would have no way of hiding from the weird mask his face had become.

And there were the smells. The smell of flesh that had been ravaged by shell fragments. The smell of pus-filled abscesses that needed lancing. The smell of carbolic spray and other medicines that couldn’t disguise either of the others.

This is hell, Iris thought, fighting the nausea that swirled about in her stomach. And her mind flew back to that Red Cross poster she’d seen back in the Simsbury post office the day that Joe had told her about his decision to enlist. The soldier being

helped by the dough-faced nurse had been rugged and manly-looking despite the bandages on his forehead. *How can they tell such lies?* she wondered now. *It's nothing like that at all.*

“Good morning, Arthur,” Katherine said pleasantly as she sat down by one man’s bedside and began cutting away at his dressings. He was missing his lower jaw. Iris tried not to stare, but all she could see was that tongue of his wagging back and forth. “How’s the pain this morning?”

“Less, considerably less,” he replied, trying to raise himself up on the pillow a bit. His voice was slurred, but Iris found that after awhile, she could make out his words. “Who’s the new recruit?”

“Iris Amory. She’s fresh from the States, so I’m showing her the ropes this morning.” Katherine left off from her work long enough to chafe his hand in hers. “Come here, Iris. I want you to meet Arthur Henson—he’s a special friend of mine.”

“Aw, Sister Katherine, all the fellows here are special friends of yours.” Arthur’s eyes lit up. “Have to say, you ain’t mighty particular about the company you keep.”

“And I say it’s because I have such excellent taste,” she retorted. “Come over here with the salve and fresh bandages, Iris.”

Iris came, but neither her spirit nor her feet were particularly willing. *What can I possibly say to him?* she wondered. *And how in God’s name do I keep the horror out of my face and voice the way Katherine does?* Then somehow she was standing right at the cot, holding the disfigured man’s hand, although she didn’t remember taking it. It was, she noticed immediately, a surprisingly fine-boned hand with the kind of long tapering fingers you’d associate with a pianist or a surgeon. She looked up at the wreckage of his face and saw that what remained was fine-boned, too, and that the eyes were dark and deep-set. Why, he’d been a handsome man before this, she realized. And something welled up inside of her, more powerful than the horror and nausea she’d been feeling. It washed over her soul, drawing her to this other soul and changing her completely. She was no longer standing on the edges, looking in.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.” It was all she could do to keep from shaking her head, the words sounded so inane and tea-party-ish.

“Thank you for saying so, miss. You sound like you mean it.”

“I do,” she said, surprised to find it true.

After that, it was easier to tend to them. The trick, Iris figured, was to study each man for the feature or features that had survived. Then she could roughly reconstruct in her head what he must’ve looked like before. As long as she could hold on to that mental picture, she could talk to him almost as easily as she could’ve to Joe or any other young man whose face was still as God had made it.

That was, of course, until she came to the soldier with barely any face at all. She didn’t realize it, of course, not until after Katherine had set up the folding screen around his cot and scissored away the stained bandages. Only the eyes remained in the scorched earth of his face. If this was Hell, then here was a soul that had been tormented beyond what anyone could surely be expected to endure.

“Hello, Sister,” the man said to Iris. Like Arthur, he had some trouble enunciating. “My eyes are acting up today—the shrapnel scarred ’em some, I reckon—but I can still hear pretty good. And y’know, I can still smell some, even though my old honker is gone. Don’t that beat all? Anyhow, that sure is a pretty scent you’re wear- ing, if you don’t mind my saying so. Is it honeysuckle?”

“Why, yes, it is,” Iris said. “How did you know?”

“My ma grows it in her garden. Great hand with flowers, Ma is. Morning-glories, hollyhocks, phlox, love-in-a-mist—there ain’t nothing she can’t grow.” He gave a weak, raspy chuckle. “Y’know, she even rooted a corsage from the big anniversary shindig that she and the old man had ’fore I come over here. Said she couldn’t be sure of his giving her flowers again till she was all laid out in her coffin.”

They both laughed awkwardly, then fell silent. “My grandmother had a garden like that,” Iris told him before the

silence could swallow them whole. “All herbs and old-fashioned flowers.”

“You got a nice voice, Sister.” He raised a half-bandaged hand toward her face. “You wouldn’t think it too forward if I—?”

She surprised herself by saying, “No, not all. And then I’ll clean your wounds.” It was the first time that day she’d volunteered to do that for any of the men without Katherine’s quiet prompting.

The callused blunt fingertips with their ragged nails were gentle on her face, and Iris found herself fighting back not nausea but tears. “Thank you, Sister. My fingers work a whole lot better than my eyes, so it helps me learn folks easier.” His hands fell to his sides. “Sister Katherine don’t mind my doing it, although some of the other nurses gets squeamish. But you sat through it like a real trouper, Sister, and didn’t flinch once.”

“Iris,” she said and began carefully washing the wounds on his face. Some of them were still weepy, but he didn’t look hideous to her anymore. “What’s your name?”

“Archie Edgerton at your service, Miss Iris.”

“I don’t foresee myself commanding anybody here,” she laughed. She ran her fingers across his face, checking out her work. The wounds looked clean enough now: she could begin putting on the ointment and fresh bandages. “I’m still learning the trade, Archie.”

“Aw, you’re a natural, Sister Iris. It’s in your hands—I can feel it. Sister Katherine’s got it, too. Way I look at it, you either got it born in you, or you don’t. And you come through with flying colors.”

“Thank you.” The mutilated face was fast receding under the clean linen strips: he looked more mummy than man now, with only his eyes looking out at her. She fastened the last strip in place. “How’s that feel?”

“Good as new, Sister Iris,” Archie replied. He reached for her hand, and she took his, holding it as if he’d been an old, old friend. “Good as new. And thanks—for not running when you seen me.”

“I couldn’t,” she told him and realized it was true. “I just couldn’t.” She was aware of Katherine having come up behind her and practically purring her approval.

“That’s ’cause it’s not in you to run from a person or a thing, no matter how bad it is. You might’ve wanted to, but you didn’t, and that’s what counts.” He squeezed her hand, then let it go. “Flying colors, Sister Iris—flying colors.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Iris paused at the doorway of the linen room and peered in. Mrs. Abbott, the Englishwoman who oversaw the hospital's linen room, was setting out a Christmas Eve tea for all the nurses. The tea cloth—which was, in reality, a patchwork flannel quilt with lots of red in it—camouflaged the long ugly table and threw some of its red glow against the high whitewashed walls, giving the room an almost festive look.

A regular sleighful of parcels crammed with oranges, chocolates, candy, and other goodies had just arrived from the States. Mrs. Abbott, a little red-haired woman with a china-doll face and a temper that didn't match, had told Katherine that she thought the nurses "could do with a bit o' cheering up, same as the men" and had set some things aside for "a right proper little party. Do 'em all a power o' good, I say, to just be girls and not have to be patching bodies back together for a bit."

Iris shifted her patients' chart to her left hand now and, resting the other on the doorjamb, sniffed appreciatively. Mrs. Abbott's lynx-like ears heard the sniff, and she looked up, shaking her head.

"Off with you, Miss Schoolmarm," she scolded, shooing Iris off as if she were an especially pesky chicken. "You'll get your tea at five like the others, so don't you be making big eyes at *me*."

That may work with the men in the wards, but it don't sway me any more than it would Queen Victoria, God rest her soul."

Iris—who, by this time, had learned that Mrs. Abbott was really a very nice dragon once she was certain you weren't a slacker—laughed and continued down the hall. *One more ward to go*, her heart sang. *One more, and then we'll have tea and chocolates*. And letters, too. For there were letters now. Warm, homey ones from Mrs. Banning, who was clearly lonesome rattling around in her little house and worried about Iris being all alone "over there with all those foreigners." And letters from Joe at the front that were so friendly and funny, it was almost like having him right there to talk to. He made no reference to their kiss in his letters, but his affection was evident, making her happy and nervous at the same time.

But she was settling in here, finally. Katherine had time and again steered her through—there was no going around—the difficulties of dealing with the plethora of war-time casualties. Most of the other nurses were chatty, friendly souls, more than willing to include her in the occasional picnic or train trip up to Paris, as her roommate, May Prentiss, just had. It hadn't been simple: even with a *carte* or an identification passbook, you had to put in an application for leave at least eight days beforehand. But it had been lovely: there hadn't been a flake of snow, just some frost hanging hard on the ground like ice, and walking the old cobblestone streets as they made their way from one little shop to another had made her feel as though she'd stepped into another time and place.

And there were the men. As Katherine had told her that first morning, it was impossible not to get attached to them. They were funny, brave, and grateful for the littlest thing. Of course, the Matron was always lecturing the nurses about not falling for any of their patients. "No loitering or canoodling on the grounds with them," she'd say crisply. "Not while they're patients here, at least. It's too easy to put yourself in a situation, cut off from normal life as we are here. That's not fair to you, and it's

certainly not fair to them. Wait till they're convalescent, then do what you please on your own time."

It was sound advice, but naturally, a number of nurses—including May, who had taken up with a Frenchman, René LaJoie—ignored it and happily "canoodled" with the abler-bodied patients. There was a song that both soldiers and nurses played over and over on the old Regina music box that some kind soul from the States had sent over:

*"There's a long, long trail a-winding
Into the land of my dreams,
Where the nightingales are singing,
And a white moon beams,
There's a long, long night of waiting
Until my dreams all come true;
Till the day when I'll be going down
That long, long trail with you."*

It was a haunting sort of song, Iris had to admit, and it had a trick of stirring in her a yearning for things she couldn't put a name to. Not that she even thought of any of the men here in that way; no, she was definitely with the Matron on that one.

But she liked working with the men—tending their wounds, monitoring their progress, and listening to their stories. Why, one fellow, Lionel Cameron of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps, had swum a river in one night, then lain among the corpses littered across a battlefield for nine more hours before crawling up behind enemy lines to gain some key strategic information. Afterward, he'd swum right back to his camp again. When you heard stories like that, you couldn't help being proud of being a part of it all.

She stepped quietly into the ward, trying to ignore the faint growls coming from her stomach. She'd skipped lunch, wanting to leave room for Mrs. Abbott's special tea. Not that there had really been time to stop for a bite. A lot of casualties had come in while she and May had been gone, including one amputee.

Iris accepted amputations as a fact of life in a war-zone hospital. You had to, given the high rate of sepsis and gas gangrene. She was infinitely less philosophical—and infinitely readier to retch—when it came down to being in attendance while Dr. Pratt or Dr. Brisbane sawed through flesh and bone, and blood spurted all over her apron. The stains never did seem to come out; even worse, many of the amputations would, she learned, have to be done over later on.

Placing her tray down on a badly scuffed and scarred table that one of the older nurses had commandeered from the chapel, she picked up the chart lying there and scanned it for the newcomers: Alexander Maxwell: double amputee as a result of gas gangrene. Roger McClure: facial lacerations. George Parmalee: shoulder and stomach wounds.

Iris tucked the chart under her arm and—she was getting better at juggling things—took up her tray again. She shook her head. *Might as well get the worst over with first*, she told herself, squaring her shoulders. *At least, there's only one amputee in this batch. Buck up, as Mrs. Wood would say.*

So she bucked up and went straight over to his cot. “Hello there, Alexander.” She had initially worried that addressing the men by their first names right off was too familiar, but Katherine had insisted that it made the men feel more at home. “I’m Iris Amory. I was up in Paris when you arrived the other day.”

“Paris, eh?” He tried to smile but could only manage a weak grimace. “I was there once, when I first come over. Quite the city.”

And it would 've been for you, Iris thought compassionately. *All those French girls would 've thrown themselves at you.* He was a good-looking young man with chiseled features. *He's like one of those illustrated heroes out of the magazine serials. What a waste . . . what a terrible, terrible waste. . .*

“Well, it says here that you need a dressing change. We can’t risk any infection getting in.” She sat down on an old metal chair and patted his hand. It was warm but not burning, so at least he wasn’t running a fever. And there was no “smell of death,” as Dr.

Pratt called it, creeping out from under the blankets as she lifted them. Maybe Alexander Maxwell would be one of the lucky ones and not have to go under the surgical saw a second time. "I'll try to be careful undoing these old dressings."

"Oh, it's all right, Sister." He turned his head wearily to one side. "I don't feel anything there. How could I?"

Iris paused in the midst of her unwrapping, a strip of stained linen in one hand and scissors suspended awkwardly in the other. "But I thought all the"—she fumbled about in her mind for a kinder word than "amputees"—"soldiers who'd lost arms and legs did. Dr. Pratt said so. 'Phantom limbs,' he says they're called."

"Oh, yeah, I've heard that one, too. But the only pain for me is up here, Sister." He turned toward her, pointing to his head. A shiver ran through his slim body. "Got a cigarette?"

"Let me finish with the dressings first, then I'll check with Sister Katherine if it's all right for you to have one." It probably would be: the gas cases were generally the only ones who couldn't because of their already damaged lungs. "You know," she began hesitantly as she returned to her unwrapping, "Dr. Brisbane was telling us that there's a Dr. Daniel Reardon with the 1st Harvard Medical Unit who has his patients write about their experiences on the battlefield. It does them no end of good, he says – cuts down on their nightmares and helps them through their convalescence." She paused. "Maybe it would help you—talking about it, I mean."

"Yes—no—I don't know." His bruised and bloodied fingers picked at an edge of his blanket that had begun to unravel. Iris noted it with one part of her mind. She must remember to bring it to Mrs. Abbott's attention. Or maybe just fix it herself. With linens and blankets in such short supply, they had to mend and re-mend what they had: still, sometimes, as with the men themselves, there was only so much they could do.

One thought flowed into another, and she glanced down through lowered eyelashes at the exposed stumps that were all that remained of the young man's legs. They seemed to be

healing nicely, but she'd still have to put some dressings soaked in that vile Carrel and Dakin's Hypochlorous Acid ¼% Solution on them. You never knew when a wound could go septic, killing the patient in a matter of hours.

There was enough of Alexander's thighs remaining for Iris to see that those legs had been taut and muscular; his torso was long, so she imagined that his legs had been, too. *He must've been a good athlete and dancer*, she thought. *Slim and light on his feet*. She bit her lip, thinking how cruel such a phrase was now.

"You know, Sister, I believe I will," Alexander said suddenly, raising himself on one elbow.

"Will what?" blurted Iris, startled out of her reverie.

"Tell you about it. You've got a listening kind of face, if you know what I mean—thoughtful but not like you'd get all mawkish and gushy with cheap, easy sympathy like some women do. A fellow can't take too much of that." He drew his breath in sharply. "So, you ready for it, Sister? It ain't a pretty story."

Iris finished anointing his stumps with salve and straightened herself up. "Of course, I'm ready." She began to put the new dressings on. "I'm sure I've heard worse." She laid her chilblained hand on his restless one.

He clutched the offered hand. "I sure hope so, Sister—I sure hope so. It haunts me at night, when I can't sleep. I gotta tell someone . . ."

She had to listen hard, his voice was so low and pained as he talked about lying there in the trench with his buddy, Jordan Shaw—"the best friend a guy could have in those damned trenches. Always ready with a joke when we thought we couldn't take it any- more and a real crack shot when it come to picking those trench rats, I tell you.

"It had been pretty quiet that day. Then, all of a sudden, gunfire breaks out over our heads. I hear this damn funny noise, sorta like a dog whining high and sharp, and Jordan, he's gone. Weren't no dog but a shell, see, right to the head. The shells, they sound that way, y'know. And he's bleeding all over 'cause"—his

voice was tear-choked and ragged—“cause the top of his head’s gone, and he ain’t even Jordan anymore, and I feel this pain slashing through my legs, and it all goes kinda dark, just like it does in the novels.”

Iris squeezed his hand, trying to picture herself in his place. “You mustn’t blame yourself,” she soothed him. “There was no way you could’ve saved him.”

The young man pushed her hand away and began talking in a low monotone. He was so clearly back there with his dead friend in the trench, she wondered if he’d even heard her. “I was in that damn hell-hole forever. ’Least, that’s how it seemed to me. The pain in my legs was so bad, I didn’t know much. Didn’t even feel hungry.

“But I was powerful thirsty after a while: a fellow can go without food a whole lot longer than he can without water, y’know. It’d been raining to beat the band, so I crawled best I could over to this part of the trench that was filling up with water. I tried cupping my hands to get some, but they weren’t much good to me, being stiff and sore, what with the cold and me having had to rely mostly on them for the climbing, see. So I end up lapping like a dog. It was only after I’d gotten some down my gullet”—Alexander clutched at Iris’s hand again like a frightened child, and his voice rose, turning into a banshee wail—“I saw Jordan’s body lying there, half ways in that hole, *rotting*.”

He was crying now, each sob sounding as if it were being ripped out of him. “I wouldn’t have drunk the damn water if I’d known Jordan was in it, Sister! I would’ve died of thirst before I done it! Makes me feel like a goddamn ghoul!”

Iris sat there, stunned, her mind screaming at the picture his words had conjured up. She knew what she should be saying to him, of course: *You didn’t know. You did what you had to. Jordan would have wanted you to live, would have been glad that there was something of him left to give . . .*

But she couldn’t look at him. Nausea washed over her, and, jerking her hand away, she ran out of the room to the closest port she could think of, the linen room. She pushed past Mrs. Abbott

and threw up on some freshly laundered towels till she had nothing left to throw up. And even then, the dry heaves and sweats shook her body every time the image of Alexander lying in a sodden, bloodied trench, lapping up the stagnant water mixed with the rotting remains, came back to her.

Gradually, she became aware of Mrs. Abbott's cool hands on her clammy forehead. The little woman was oddly gentle and quiet as she cleaned Iris's face: the water was ice-cold, of course—it almost always was here, especially now that it was winter—but it felt heavenly on her sweaty face.

"I'm going to walk you over to the chapel now, that's what, and let you have a good sit," Mrs. Abbott said once she had finished tidying her up. "And I'll send Sister Katherine in to you as soon as she—"

"But I've disgraced myself!" Iris blurted tearfully. "I ran out on this man—not a man, really, more like a boy, they're taking them so young now—he'd had both his legs mangled by a shell—"

"Hush, love. You're not the first, and you won't be the last," Mrs. Abbott retorted. "Now, let's get you into the chapel. It's cool and quiet in there; you'll have a chance to collect yourself."

She whisked Iris off before the younger woman could get another word out and stayed with her long enough to make sure she was "over the worst of it." Iris barely noticed her leaving. The scene kept playing itself over in her head. Alexander Maxwell had reached out to her for some kind of solace, and she'd dropped his hand and fled his bedside as if he had indeed been a ghoul. And here she'd been so pleased with herself because she'd handled Archie and the other disfigured men so well.

"Flying colors," she said aloud, bitterly mimicking Archie's words of praise. They were good friends now, she and Archie, and she would have to tell him how she *had* run. His disappointment in her would be awful, she didn't doubt it. "Flying colors, in- deed! How could I have done that?"

"Done what?" The male voice was casual, almost flippant, with a definite Southern drawl. "Don't mind saying, I hope it's interesting."

Iris turned toward the chapel doorway. Lounging against it was a slim young man in a muddied uniform with—she squinted—the Canadian Militia insignia just visible. *Then, what about that accent—?* she wondered, as he ambled over to the pew where she was sitting. Talk about a puzzlement.

He sat down next to her, throwing one arm over the back of the pew. “Name’s Jerry Enright, ma’am,” he told her, holding out his other hand.

She took it and almost jumped back. There was a kind of raw energy about the man that flowed through his touch like an electrical current. “Iris Amory,” she said a little unsteadily.

“Pleased to meet you, Miss Iris.” Jerry turned her hand over in his and studied it. “It’s a right nice little hand. Doesn’t look like the murdering kind. What did it do?”

She eased her hand out of his grasp and looked downward, hoping he’d mistake it for maidenly modesty when she was actually scanning her nurse’s apron for telltale vomit stains. *Oh, Jesu*—she’d already picked up one of Katherine’s favorite exclamations—*there’s one right on my knee!* She clamped her hand down on the offending spot. “It can’t be of that much interest to you,” she faltered.

“Oh, but it can,” Jerry assured her. He stretched out his long legs and flexed his fingers. “I’m always up for a good story, Iris. And it looks like I’m grounded here for awhile, so I figure I’d rather be sitting right here, listening to whatever you’ve got to say.”

“First, why don’t you tell me what a Southern gentleman’s doing in the Canadian Infantry?”

He laughed shortly. “Means I forgot what my daddy always was telling me.”

Iris smiled up at him. The nausea was receding now, thanks to the coldness of the drafty chapel. “Which was?”

“That whatever you run from becomes stronger than you are, or you sure as hell wouldn’t be running from it.” He reached for a cigarette out of the breast pocket of his frayed uniform and lit it with an odd lighter. Probably a shell casing. The men were

always coming in with curious things they'd fashioned out of battlefield debris.

"Y 'see," Jerry told her, taking a drag on the cigarette, "I got drafted down in Georgia, where my daddy's farm is. Didn't much care for the picture of myself gassed or hanging off some barbed wire or getting blown to next Sunday by a Hun shell, so I hightailed it to Canada. Well, ma'am, it wasn't long before the Canadians found me and decided I was just what they was looking for. So here I am."

He leaned his curly dark head against the back of the pew and, taking another pull on his cigarette, practiced blowing smoke rings. Clearly, he didn't trouble himself greatly about the propriety of smoking in a chapel. "Damn. Still a couple short of Sam Ryan." He grinned at her. He had this engaging crooked grin that made you want to be in on the joke. "Seeing who can blow the most smoke rings is a popular pastime down in the trenches—right up there with popping off the rats and picking off the nits, in yours truly's humble opinion."

"I don't think you're all that humble," she retorted. "But what are you going to do now? While you're here, I mean?"

He threw her a look that melted her right down to the bones. "Oh, I guess I'll chase you till I get caught," he said casually, then laughed. "You're blushing awfully hard."

"And you certainly know how to catch a body off guard," she replied. She put a hand up to her throat, as if that could still the trembling inside her. "Not very gentlemanly."

"No, ma'am, I'm not," he agreed meekly, though there was still laughter lurking in his voice. "That was right improper of me." He polished off the cigarette and ground it into the chapel floor. "So, if you don't mind my asking, what horrible, unwomanly thing have you done?"

Iris stared at her knee. *Might as well tell someone*, she thought, remembering her words to Alexander before—before she'd heard that horrible, horrible story. *And maybe then I can finally stop thinking about it*. "I ran out on a patient and threw up in the linen closet."

“Must’ve been right hard on the sheets and towels,” he agreed. He reached for another cigarette, then seemed to think the better of it and pulled a creased envelope and a pen out of another pocket instead. He began doodling on the back of it, and Iris watched, fascinated as a tiny caricature of herself took shape there. “Surprised the folks in charge of linen supplies didn’t have you court-martialed, it’s so damn hard getting soap and water for cleaning anything hereabouts.” He paused. “So, why’d you run out on that there soldier?”

Haltingly, she told him the whole story. “I don’t know why it affected me so. I mean, I can handle cleaning up men who have half a face—or less—but I can’t handle this.” She struck one fist weakly against her open palm. “Why—why can’t I handle this?”

“It’s a new kind of horror, that’s why.” His tone was different somehow; she looked up into the deep-set brown eyes and saw a weary kind of pain in them. “And a soul can only take so much.” Another caricature—Jerry himself this time—appeared next to the one of her. “Those fellers with their faces blown away, hell, you’ve gotten used to them. You see them every day—you change their dressings—you wash what face they got left. You talk to them: they talk to you about the farm back home, the girl they was courting before they joined up, and how they’re worrying what she’ll think of them when they get shipped home again. They’re real to you now.

“This other feller—this Alexander here—why, he looks pretty much the same as you and me, only his legs aren’t all there. But he’s carrying most of his disfigurement—that story of his—up in his head, and it’s a pretty damn sickening one at that.” He began fiddling with his makeshift lighter. “Ever hear folks talk about the ‘bowels of compassion’?”

She nodded. Her grandfather, in his final illness, had accused her grandmother of “having no bowels of compassion.” Iris had always thought he had a point there.

“It’s a phrase my daddy bandies about a lot,” Jerry continued in that easy conversational way of his. “Always struck me as a peculiar one. I mean, why bowels? Why not heart?” He shrugged.

“Well, I come over here and saw the gas gangrene cases, the men caught on barbed wire and dying by inches ’cause there’s no way no how their buddies can get to them, and I threw up plenty, I tell you. Felt my insides twist and turn more times than I can count.”

Putting his hand on her shoulder, he turned her about to face him. His eyes were still pained, but there was an almost mystical glow in them now. “But, y’know, that’s how I figure compassion’s gotta start: breaking you down from the inside out and taking root in the blood and mud and horror that’s fit to swallow us all up alive.”

Their gazes met and locked. All the sounds from the adjacent wards had died away, and the dusk was filling the room. It was as though they’d stepped out of time.

“You’ve made me feel better,” Iris finally told him. Placing one hand gingerly on the back of the pew in front of them, she rose. Her legs still felt rubbery, but the clamminess and nausea were completely gone. “Thank you.”

Jerry touched her hand. “Glad to oblige, ma’am.” He gestured toward her skirt. “Looks like you just begun to earn your stripes there.”

She followed his glance and realized that he was looking at the splotch she’d been trying so desperately to hide from him. “Guess I have,” she replied, feeling her face redden again. “Well, I hope I’ll be seeing you again before you go back.”

“Oh, you will be.” He smiled, but his smile was a preoccupied one. “I’m not going anywhere for awhile—’least, that’s what they’re telling me.” He handed her the drawing. “Here you go. You can keep it as a souvenir of our meeting.”

“Thank you,” Iris murmured. Sliding the drawing up her sleeve so it wouldn’t get wrinkled in her pocket, she headed out the chapel door. Halfway down the hall, she almost collided into Katherine. “Iris!” the older nurse exclaimed, catching hold of her wrist. “Mrs. Abbott just told me what happened. Are you all right?”

“I am now,” Iris said, passing a hand over her forehead. “The young man in there helped me. He’s a Canadian soldier—well, he’s really from the States, like I am, but he’s with the Canadian Militia . . .”

She surprised herself with the way she blurted out her story, sparing her friend no detail about Alexander Maxwell and the chance meeting with Jerry, chattering like one of the patients when they came to after surgery and the chloroform was still on them. “He really did make me feel better. Funny how somebody I never laid eyes on before could do that, isn’t it?”

“Not really,” said Katherine a bit absent-mindedly. “Some folks have the gift.” She frowned. “What did you say his name was again?”

“Jerry. Jerry Enright.”

Katherine began flipping through the pages on her chart. “‘Comfort, James.’ . . . ‘Diprose, Frank.’ . . . Ah, here it is—‘Enright, Jerry.’ Knew I’d seen that name somewhere.” She scanned the notes next to his name and bit her lip. “He’s in for shell-shock,” she said quietly. “He may be a fine young man—I’m not saying that he’s not—but, remember, you’re dealing with someone who’s, well, not quite right.”

“He seemed sane enough just now while we were talking,” Iris argued.

“Judging from what’s written here, he’s probably one of the milder cases,” Katherine replied. “It’s hard to tell, though: shell-shock can take so many different forms, everything from incontinence and spasms to hallucinations and full-fledged seizures. We had one fellow here a few months before you came who somehow managed to get his hands on a kitchen knife. I was near the end of my rounds one afternoon and if the chap in the bed next to his hadn’t called out a warning, I’d have gone right over there and gotten filleted for my pains.” She sighed, tapping her blunt-nailed fingers against her clipboard. “He’s back in England now, in an asylum, poor devil.”

“But you say Jerry Enright’s one of the milder cases.” Jerry had helped her over her shame and horror back in the chapel; the least she could do now was to stick up for him.

“*Probably* one of the milder cases,’ I believe I said. We don’t know what he’s seen or what demons are dancing around in that head of his, Iris, dear. All you know is that his commanding officer thought it safer to remove him from the battle lines for a time.”

Iris could feel a throbbing starting up behind her left eye. “I don’t believe it, Katherine—I *can’t* believe it. I don’t know why, but I can’t.”

“Maybe you’re right,” her friend allowed. She sighed and ran her fingers through her graying hair, knocking her nurse’s cap off kilter. “God knows the doctors themselves barely understand it—they can’t even make up their minds whether to call a man ‘shell-shocked’ or ‘neurasthenic.’”

She stowed her chart under her arm and patted Iris’s arm. “Do what you feel is right, dear. Your instincts are good, and you’re not giddy or thoughtless like some other younger nurses. Be his friend. But remember what I said. Do you think you could possibly manage going to the tea?”

Iris shook her head. “Thanks, Katherine—and thank Mrs. Abbott for me, too—but I really need to lie down. I still feel woozy.”

She watched her friend head back down the long corridor and disappear into the shadows. Iris half-turned back toward the chapel, wondering if Jerry was still in there. Then she shook her head and flitted like a ghost to her room.

CHAPTER SIX

“So it looks like ol’ Black Jack’s comin’ at last.” Jerry whistled. He leaned against the whitewashed wall, resting a hand right above Iris’s head.

She glanced up from the soiled bed linens that she’d been about to cart back to Mrs. Abbott. “Really? When?”

“Thursday. Or so I happened to overhear Pratt tell Brisbane.” Amazingly enough, they were alone in the hall. Jerry playfully tweaked a curl bent on escaping from her already tousled upsweep, and a delicious quivering went through her. “I’m right curious to meet him.”

It had been more than a week since they’d been together. It wasn’t easy finding the time or the privacy for lovemaking, though May had been good about slipping out of the room after the lights had been turned down. Sometimes Iris felt guilty about that; René had just gone back to the Front, and her trysts with Jerry must make May miss her lover more than ever.

He rested his hand on her shoulder now, his fingers straying down her arm. “Wish I could stay longer, Flower-Girl, but Doc Brisbane’s waiting on me.”

“Do you think he’ll say you’re fit to go back?” she asked, her voice an aching whisper. She honestly didn’t know what the right answer was. Of course she wanted him rid of his demons, whatever they were—he hadn’t been able to talk to her about

them yet, not even in bed—but even *thinking* of his leaving for the front, right in the midst of this precious new intimacy of theirs, hurt her.

“How the hell should I know?” He shrugged, his hand falling away from her arm. “I’ll tell you when there’s something to tell.”

He was back again—that cold stranger who sometimes looked at her out of her lover’s eyes and spoke with his voice. He would appear without warning, just as Iris was feeling closer than she’d ever imagined it possible to be with another person, and she’d draw back like a scalded cat, wondering what in creation she’d done to bring that darkness in him on.

But it always faded quickly, leaving room for those moments when their souls and bodies seemed to blur and blend, making it impossible to tell where she ended and he began. Which was the true Jerry? she wondered now. The dark cold-eyed stranger or the man who held her so tenderly during their rare lovemaking?

Avoiding his gaze, Iris tucked the curl he’d been playing with earlier back into her nurse’s cap. “Well, I hope all goes well,” she said with starched politeness, moving away from him.

Then, suddenly, Jerry was holding on to her shoulders and kissing her in that way that made her go all warm and limp inside. “You make me crazy, Miss Iris Amory, that you do,” he breathed into her ear. “Is May gonna be out tonight?”

“I—I don’t know.” His breath, warm on her cheek as he leaned closer, was a drug. “I can find out and let you know.”

“You do that.” He kissed her and let her go. “Pears to me we got some unfinished business to tend to.”

She watched him amble down the corridor, her head spinning. Her eyes fell on the doll-sized painted figure of a saint standing at the base of one of the windows. Iris walked over to study her, not knowing who she was, only that her eyes were gentle and blue and that she carried a single rose in her hands like a gift. Her painted gaze was serene and comforting, and Iris almost immediately began to feel her tension slip away.

“So you’ve found her.” May was by her side, warm and whimsical as usual.

“Who is she?”

“St. Dorothea, the gardening saint. Not that I’m the authority on saints, mind you”—May was, Iris knew, Protestant – “but René has pointed her and some of the other survivors out to me.”

“Survivors?” Iris stretched her hand out to touch the chipped rose, to get a feel for the battered yet still sweet face. “I don’t understand. Whatever did he tell you about her?”

“Only that when the monks left here, many of the little statues and other religious relics were stolen. René’s from a village not far from here, so he knows the history.” May shrugged. “I imagine the same happened at monasteries all over the country. And he really didn’t tell me a lot about ol’ Dorothea here—only that she was the patroness of gardens and gardeners and that they killed her for her beliefs.”

“So it’s about faith,” Iris mused, more to herself than to her friend.

May turned her about so that they were facing each other. “Suppose *you* tell me what happened to put you in such a broody mood? I passed Jerry on my way over here. It wouldn’t happen to have anything to do with him, would it?”

Her voice low, Iris repeated their unsettling exchange. May listened, her eyes a living version of the little wooden saint’s. “Oh, Iris,” she said softly. She put her arm around Iris’s shoulders. “I guess it is about faith after all,” she continued as they began walking down the hall. “Faith that it’s all going to work out somehow.”

He was quiet, almost self-effacing. Certainly not at all what Iris had imagined the Commander of the American Expeditionary Force would be like. Yet for all his old-fashioned reserve, there was a forcefulness about General Pershing’s set mouth and eyes, a refreshing directness in his manner when he talked with the doctors or walked through the wards. Actually, he talked with everyone, she noticed: not a single wounded man escaped his notice. He made no glib speeches about a glorious

cause or a war worth fighting, just thanked them for having given so much.

Iris was there by Archie's bedside, just about to change his dressings, when Pershing came in. The General's eyes, always a little sad, grew even sadder as they rested on each mutilated face, but he did not let it hamper his speech: he talked to each man simply and naturally. When he came to Archie's bed, his eyes traveled from the heavily bandaged man to the surgical scissors in Iris's hand, and he said, "If it's all right with this man, Sister, you may continue as you were. I don't want to interfere with your duties."

Iris touched her friend's shoulder, and he nodded, saying, "I reckon the General has seen worse."

So she went through their usual morning ritual—a little stiffly at first, conscious as she was of the great man standing by her side, then quickly losing herself in her work. But even so, part of her was still aware of how Pershing's eyes never left the ruin of Archie's face. When she finished applying salve and fresh bandages, Pershing shook Archie's hand. "Bless you, son," he said gruffly. "I don't know if I could have endured as much as you have."

"Comin' from you, sir, that means a lot," Archie rasped back. "I'll remember that."

"As I shall you." Pershing nodded and followed Iris out of the room. He cleared his throat. "That was some fine work you did in there, Sister."

She blushed. "Thank you, General. Archie's my friend, you see, and there's so little any of us can do for him, it hurts."

"Yes, he has paid a higher price than most." He passed his hand over his forehead and suddenly looked terribly, terribly old. "Does he have family back in the States?"

"Yes, General—his parents and a sweetheart. She hopes to be able to come here soon so she can be with him, but, she doesn't know the full extent of his injuries, you see. Derwent Wood is due for a visit here soon, and we're—we're hoping he might be able to do something for Archie before she arrives." She

swallowed hard and forced herself to meet the older man's eyes. "I—I don't know if he could bear it, sir, if *she* couldn't bear it."

"Let's hope she's made of the same stuff that you are, Sister." Pershing sighed. "How old are you?"

"Nineteen, sir."

He suddenly smiled down at her, and it was like watching a sunburst break out over a somber winter landscape. "You're older than any of my girls would be now. If they'd had a chance"—his firm voice quavered, a ripple on a seemingly still pond—"I like to think they'd have shown half as much spirit as you have." He took off his general's cap and bowed. "Bless you for the work you're doing—"

"Amory, sir—Iris Amory," she blurted. "I'm not really a full-fledged Sister." She stared down at her tray of instruments and soiled bandages. "And I—I really don't do that much compared to some here."

"You do what you can," he told her. "That's more than enough." He placed his cap back on his head and nodded, then walked away, his face stern and sad again. Iris had an eerie prickling feeling that he was not walking alone; that at least one invisible companion walked with the great man wherever he went.

"That was quite the conversation," said a familiar voice behind her. Iris whirled around, almost dropping her tray. Katherine smiled tiredly. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop, dear, but I was so close, I couldn't help overhearing. The general seemed quite taken with you."

"He was very kind and complimented me on my work," Iris said slowly, "but there was a terrible sadness about him, especially when he was talking about his 'girls.' And when he walked away just now, it was almost as if he was . . . well, *looking* for something or someone."

"Several someones," Katherine murmured. Iris shot her a puzzled look. "You didn't know about his wife and daughters?" Katherine asked. Iris shook her head.

“A few years ago, the general was in charge of the 8th Infantry in Mexico. His unit was transferred to Fort Bliss, Texas, and he was making arrangements for his family to join him there when a fire broke out in the house in Mexico. His wife and all three of his daughters died in the blaze. His five-year-old son was the only one who escaped, thanks to his black orderly.” Katherine’s voice was raw with pity. “That’s when the general’s hair went completely white, they say.”

Iris glanced down the shadowy hallway. The general was gone by now, of course—Katherine wouldn’t have spoken so freely of his personal tragedy otherwise—but something of the sorrow that he carried with such silent dignity lingered. She winced, feeling physically ill at the mental picture of those little girls twisting and shrieking as the fire ate away at them. “What a horrible way to die,” she whispered.

Katherine put her hand on Iris’s shoulder. “And what a horrible way for him to live,” she said softly.

That night, Iris lay quietly in her bed, resting her tousled head against Jerry’s shoulder. He would have to leave soon, of course: it would never do for the Matron to find him here. But she savored his closeness. In bed, he was all warmth and light and gentleness, whispering endearments; the boundaries between them seemingly broken down, and they flowed into one another. Iris had never known a giving and a taking like this, and they filled her with wonder. “It’s like magic,” she had marveled once to Jerry.

“Feels like the most natural thing in the world to me,” he’d breathed back.

Iris put a gently exploring hand up to his face, and he turned to her. “I almost thought you’d fallen asleep,” she laughed softly.

“Not with you so close,” Jerry murmured. He eased the chemise off over her head and drew her close, their bodies quickly merging together in silent symphony. Afterward, he lay there, stroking her unbound hair. “It’s like a blanket on your

shoulders,” he whispered, twisting a thick chestnut lock around his long fingers. She laughed and ran her hand against his cheek, smooth as tanned leather, and eased her head back down against his shoulder.

“Iris,” Jerry said suddenly, “they’re shipping me back to the Front. End of the week.”

She sat up, her hair falling around her. She couldn’t speak at first: there was this terrible pain shooting through her, as if some wild thing was clawing around her entrails, eating her alive from the inside out. She had known that this was coming, of course. It had walked alongside them in the corridors and in the old garden with its curving paths that seemingly went nowhere; it had punctuated every conversation and hovered in the shadowy corners of the room every time they’d made love. But weeks had gone by without Jerry receiving orders. And as the weeks had turned into months, she’d let her hope grow . . . not a lot, just a little, as tentative as a green shoot in that overgrown garden that the monks had designed centuries ago. “But you’re not well!” she blurted.

Jerry laughed harshly. “I’m well enough on the *outside*,” he corrected, “and today, the good doctor finally upped and decided that my shell-shock wasn’t as severe as some of the cases that have come through here. In other words, he done run out of excuses and has no choice but to send me back if he’s not gonna catch hell from someone higher up.”

He made a quick, pained gesture with his hands, his anger and fear spilling out of him. “See, word is, they’re expecting Brother Boche to attack the French and British sectors northwest of the line, and they need every damn man they can get their hands on.” He groaned. “And here I am, just startin’ to feel like I got some kind of chance, don’t you know.”

Don’t I, she thought and put her hand to her throat, hoping to keep the nausea she was suddenly feeling at bay. Was this how May had felt when she knew René must go back to the fighting? “I—I don’t know what to say,” she faltered.

“I don’t rightly know as there’s anything to say,” he rejoined, his voice so quiet, so detached, he might as well already have left her. But then he turned toward her, and she saw that it wasn’t that cold, dark, angry stranger who lay beside her. That his eyes were full of life and light as they rested on her. “Oh, Jesus,” he whispered, “am I gonna miss you, Flower-Girl. But I’ll be back for you. One way or another, I’ll find you, I swear. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes.” When he was like this, Iris never doubted him because it was his best self who was speaking, the same man who had eased her horror and shame in the chapel on Christmas Eve. His look and tone now soothed the sore places in her soul, the wounds that his dark twin had sometimes left. And in the midst of her despair over his going, there was a little flicker of warmth stirring inside her, and she grasped it gratefully, not caring if she burned herself doing so. “But—but I’ll worry about you. I can’t help that.”

Jerry caressed her shoulder. “I know that, honey. None of us can help it. But from what I hear, the Germans ain’t doing as well as they’d like us to believe. That armistice of theirs with the Bolsheviks was a bad business, there’s no getting around that. And look at how many positions the Canadians and Brits have won back—Ribecourt, Flesquières, Havrincourt, Marcoing, Passchendaele”—his voice shook—“and a whole slew of others. German Southwest Africa, too. Then there’s all those countries breaking with Germany and Austria-Hungary. You think they ain’t sweatin’ over that?”

His hand fell away from her shoulder, and he sighed. “It’s happening, all right. The signs are all there. What I keep asking myself, though, is how many of us are gonna be left standing once the shooting and the gassing’s all done?” He shook his head. “The French High Command ain’t exactly been handling things brilliantly. René there once told me that some of the soldiers used to bleat like sheep whenever officers passed ’em on the road. Can’t say as I blame ’em.”

The wind wuthered outside, seeking entry through the monastery's walls. It screamed like a banshee in a glory of grieving, sorrowful and insatiable. Iris shivered and drew closer to her lover. He smiled at her, but the light in his dark eyes was flickering, fading fast.

"I never did tell you how come they sent me here, did I?" he asked. She could see that he was making a tremendous effort to fight the darkness inside him. "That wind out there, it kinda brings it all back to me in a rush like. There was one just like it the night after Gil died."

"Gil?"

"Gilbert Thompson." Jerry sat up. "He was the lieutenant of my battalion and a real gentleman and scholar. And he died at Passchendaele."

Passchendaele. Iris had heard the stories, of course. Sir Douglas Haig, the Commander-in-Chief of the British forces, had intended the whole campaign to be a ringing victory against the Germans. Instead, it had turned into more than three months of shelling, heavy rains, and mud so thick and deep, it clogged rifles and swallowed men and horses whole. Eventually, the Allies had won back the little village, but the price had been high: 325,000 men.

"I'd seen fighting, naturally, but nothing like that." Jerry continued in a low, hurried voice. "And that damn dank mud smell was everywhere, so strong sometimes, it was hard to tell what was worse—that or the stench of dead men and horses rotting away in it. Never had a real clear picture of Hell, Iris, till I saw all that.

"Gil, he made it through almost to the end. Then, in November, right before Haig called off the offensive, he was killed. That was one of the things that made it so damn hard. Just a little longer, and he'd have made it."

Iris laid her hand on his arm. "You thought a lot of him, didn't you?" she asked quietly, sensing that there was more to this particular story.

“Hell, yes. He was good to us, never pulled rank or sent us anywhere he wouldn’t go himself. Looked after us like a brother, he did.” He stared down at his hands; Iris, following his glance, saw that they were clenched so tightly, it looked as though his knuckle bones would burst through the skin. “My rifle had gotten clogged with the mud, and Gil had stopped to help me with it. He saw the shell coming before I did and pushed me out of the way of it. Just kinda a reflex action, I guess. When I came to, I had this shell splinter in my arm.”

He touched the inside of his upper left arm. Iris had run her hands over that long ragged scar hundreds of times since they’d become lovers but, mindful of his condition, had never asked him how it had happened.

“So, soon as I could, I crawled back over where we’d been, back through the muck and the dead. Some of ’em was just blown-up bits of men—arms, legs, and the like. Others, like Frankie Plante, one of my buddies, were still in one piece, still holding onto their rifles, their eyes wide-open and watching me. Then I found Gil.”

The silence hung thick and cobwebby between them. Iris swallowed hard.

“He’d been cut in two,” Jerry said, dragging each word out, “but he was still alive. And he—he *smiled* at me.” His voice broke. “He *smiled* at me, Iris. Jesus, can you believe it? The poor bastard’s cut in two, and he’s *smiling* at me.” He covered his face with his hands; when he took them away, there were tears in his eyes. “He couldn’t move, of course, just kept on smiling and looking at me with these big begging eyes like an animal caught in a trap. And I—I knew what he was asking me. So I managed to wrest poor Frankie’s rifle from him. It wasn’t clogged, like mine was, and I—I shot Gil in the heart. I was holding him when they found me, his blood flowing all over me.”

He was sobbing now. Iris pressed his shoulder. She had never seen a man come so undone. It was almost as though his entrails were spilling out of him onto her bed, and she didn’t know how

to staunch the bleeding. "It was the only thing you could do," she told him. "There was no saving him. You did the merciful thing."

Jerry smiled—a faint, ghastly smile. So, she thought, Lieutenant Gilbert Thompson must've smiled up at him, his eyes begging for release.

"I've been holding you at bay," he said suddenly. "I wanted you, all right, but I didn't want to want you. 'Cause then I'd have to feel again, and I didn't want to feel anything ever again after that day. I kept pushing you away, and you just stood there, taking it, like a good soldier." He rubbed his eyes. "Why are you still here, anyway? I ain't been that all-fire good to you, not outside of bed, at any rate."

She didn't know herself. Maybe it was because this intimacy of theirs was all so new to her, she just didn't know better. Or maybe it was, as Archie had told her, because it really wasn't in her to run from a person or thing. Then it came to her, pulled from somewhere deep inside her, just as her decision to join up with the Red Cross had been. "This is where I'm supposed to be," she said simply. She smoothed his sweaty ruffled hair, and Jerry touched his fingers to her lips.

"Don't ever leave me, Flower-Girl," he said.

She bit back the obvious answer—that he was the one doing the leaving. "I won't," she promised.

"We—we haven't got much longer," Jerry faltered. "And we barely been apart since we met that night in chapel." He ran his hands gently along her face, almost as if he were trying to learn the lines of it by heart. Much as Archie had that first day in the ward. A wellspring opened up in her, and she yearned over him, not as a lover, though that was there, too, naturally. It was simply that she could now truly see him, soul wounds and all. She saw, too, the light in him breaking out and fighting to push back the darkness.

It was his fight, of course: she couldn't help him with it, she knew that. Nor was there any guarantee that he would ever be whole again, let alone that they would ever have a future together once the war had burnt itself out. What was it Joe had said to

her? “*We can’t be making promises.*” Well, neither could she and this man who lay beside her. But she could give him something of her own light and warmth now to help him as he trudged back to the trenches, the shelling, the liquid fire, and the mustard gas. And maybe, if fate was kind and spared him, it would bring him back to her. For this man was her home and she his: she saw it all so clearly now.

“We’ll make the most of it,” Iris said, working hard to steady her voice. “And I think—I really do believe—that it’ll be easier for you now that you’ve talked it out some. It’s like”—she lay her hand on the ugly scar—“you’ve let the infection out, and you can heal now. You just have to remember, you did the last thing that anyone could possibly do for Gil then. You ended his pain.”

The tightness in his face eased up, although the sadness in his eyes didn’t. “Thanks, Iris,” he said, giving her name back to her in the most loving, tender voice imaginable. “It’s good to know that I can talk to you about things like this.”

They nestled back down together for the time they had left, not saying a word, just watching the trees outside the narrow window thrash about in their battle with that eerie changeable wind.

A Time for Shadows

T.J. Banks



Wanting to "make a difference," young Iris Amory joins the Red Cross as a nurse and finds herself serving in a hospital over in France during World War I. Iris gets her heart broken open -- once or twice (at least) -- by it all and is transformed by the horror around her, becoming a strong, compassionate woman and an inspiration to Dawn Kailey, the young journalist she tells her story to.

A TIME FOR SHADOWS

by T. J. Banks

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