

ELLIE'S WAR



The Final Ashes

EMILY SHARRATT

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The Ellie's War series:

Come Home Soon

Wherever You Are

Where Poppies Grow

The Final Ashes

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EMILY SHARRATT

 SCHOLASTIC

*For my mum and dad,
who reared me on stories – E.S.*

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FEBRUARY, 1918

Ellie brushed her hands over the young soldier's eyes, closing them for the final time. For a moment she imagined she could feel his eyelashes tickling her palm as they moved, but she knew that was impossible now. She pulled the bedsheet up and smoothed it over his skinny chest. Her own eyes were dry, but her hand trembled ever so slightly as she gave his fingers one last squeeze.

Finally she looked up and met the eyes of the white-haired doctor whom she had been assisting. He smiled kindly at her. "It doesn't get any easier, does it?"

She shook her head in reply.

"I don't think it would be right if it did. But you helped me make him comfortable at the end, my dear, and for that I am very grateful. I'm sure his family would be too. I believe you may return to your own ward now; things appear to be settling down here somewhat."

"Yes, Doctor."

As Ellie walked back through the main ward towards the stairs, she saw that he was right. A few hours previously, she and other nurses working in the less critical wards around the hospital had been called to help with the sudden influx of new and critically injured patients. As usual, the scenes of their arrival would have struck the untrained eye as nightmarish and chaotic, but after more than a year working there, Ellie knew better. The hospital was a complex structure of strictly maintained systems, with a large staff of experienced doctors and nurses, as well as volunteers such as Ellie. It was an efficient machine. Unfortunately, there seemed to be no end to the supply of injured and dying soldiers needing treatment; it had begun to appear as though the war truly would go on for ever.

Ellie knew she ought to hurry back to her own ward, where her usual patients and tasks would be waiting for her, but she couldn't bring herself to rush. Death, however often she faced it – and she saw it on a daily basis in the hospital – *didn't* get any easier to accept. Her mind kept drifting back to the young soldier; unlike her own patients, she didn't know anything about him. But he would have family and friends somewhere who would miss him maybe a sweetheart or even a fiancée. Surely England would soon run out of young men to be sent away to die?

"Ellie!"

She looked up with a start; her friend and colleague Grace Fletcher was hurrying down the stairs towards her. As always, Grace's uniform seemed to fit her so much more elegantly than anybody else's: even the flat blue colour served to highlight the vibrant shade of her eyes. It was impossible to resent her, though; almost impossible to keep from smiling when Grace was around.

"There you are! Come on, you're needed."

Ellie stopped dead in the middle of the stairs. "Why, what's wrong?"

Grace laughed as she drew level with Ellie, and then pressed her hand to her mouth. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't make fun, but you look so stricken! Nothing's wrong; we just need you for a job back upstairs." She narrowed her eyes as though trying to detect something hidden beneath the surface of Ellie's skin. "Are you all right? Have you just had a grim time of things downstairs?" She threaded her arm through Ellie's and began to escort her up the stairs.

"I'm fine, really. Nothing compared to what the girls down there have to cope with. It was just a patient that we weren't able to save."

"Oh, I'm sorry, love." Grace stopped again, her eyes still roving over the younger girl's face.

“Hmmm, maybe now isn’t the time...”

“What is it? Something *has* happened, hasn’t it? I knew it...”

“No, no,” Grace shushed her, no trace of a smile now. “Look, it was supposed to be a surprise, but think perhaps you’ve had enough of those for one day. We were just waiting for you to return so we could have a little tea to celebrate your birthday.”

“Oh!” In all the busyness of the past couple of hours, Ellie had completely forgotten about her birthday. Now she thought about it, Grace *had* been acting rather suspiciously earlier on in the day.

“We don’t have to, if you don’t feel up to it. I can go and tell the others...”

“No, I’d like to.” Ellie chewed at her lip. “Does that seem awful?”

“Of course not! We all have to keep our spirits up somehow. And it’s not every day you turn seventeen. Come on!”

As they walked into the ward, they were greeted by a cheer from the men, propped up in their beds around the room. Ellie instantly felt her eyes sting at the sight of the equipment trolley, relieved of its usual burden of bandages, bedpans and syringes, and instead standing resplendent with small bunches of snowdrops in jam jars, a pot of tea, a milk jug and dainty china cups that someone must have brought from home, and one sticky bun in pride of place. Waiting by the trolley was Ellie’s Aunt Frances, in an apron so clean she must have only just changed it, and – Ellie’s eyes widened – the ferocious matron of the hospital.

Matron herself began to lead the others in a rousing rendition of “For She’s a Jolly Good Fellow” and Grace joined in in ringing tones while never loosening her grip on Ellie’s arm. Ellie felt herself flush with pleasure.

Afterwards the nurses perched on the ends of the beds while Grace poured and distributed the tea. Ellie wanted to share her bun with everyone – with rationing, such a treat was rare for all of them – but eventually had to concede that it would be reduced to crumbs if she tried to split it sixteen ways. Instead, she contented herself with slipping morsels of it to Aunt Frances, whom she was sure had been having an unpleasant time of it downstairs. Her attention kept being drawn back to the implications of that fresh apron.

“Are you really only seventeen, Nurse Phillips?” Private Bryson was asking her now. “You seem such a professional I thought you must have been working here for years.”

Ellie smiled, at the same time casting a nervous glance at Matron, who did not like excessive praise to be offered too freely to any of her nurses. “Thank you, that’s kind of you to say so. But, yes, I’m seventeen today.”

“So young,” murmured Private Lessing. He himself was no more than nineteen and had lost a foot following an infected wound. He said it quietly, but clearly Ellie wasn’t the only one who had heard him.

“Yes, Private, Nurse Phillips is young, but I knew she was up to the job when I took her on. I trust I am allowed to make the decisions on the hiring of staff for my hospital.”

Ellie and Grace exchanged a glance and then hurriedly looked away before they burst out laughing. Poor Private Lessing flushed a deep shade of red. Not even the most formidable doctors in the hospital dared to challenge Matron.

“Shall we have a bit of a singalong?” Grace ventured.

Matron looked thoughtfully at Private Lessing. In the month that he had been in the hospital it had come to the attention of his fellow patients and some of the staff that, despite his shyness, he had a beautiful singing voice: sweet but powerful. Since then, few could miss an opportunity to hear him sing.

“Well, we all ought to be getting back to work, but I dare say one song won’t hurt, to send us on our way in good spirits. Private Lessing, you are our choirmaster. What will it be?”

Private Lessing ducked his head and wrung his bedsheets nervously between his hands. “Nur Phillips ought to choose, as it is her birthday.”

Ellie nodded at him encouragingly. “What about ‘You’re in Style When You’re Wearing a Smile’?” she suggested, naming her current favourite from the wireless.

Everyone agreed and Private Lessing led them in, his rich, clear voice helping to smooth the many discordant ones in the gathering – including Matron’s.

As was often the case, Aunt Frances had to work later than her niece, so Ellie walked home from the hospital by herself that afternoon. There was a biting February wind and the sun was low in the sky, ringing the clouds with lines of fire as it descended. Ellie pulled her coat closely about her and tucked her gloved hands under her arms. She could barely take her eyes from the sky; the colours were mesmerizing.

Reaching the door to the digs in which she and Aunt Frances lived, Ellie puffed out one last steaming breath, and then closed it firmly behind her. She peeled off her gloves, pulling repeatedly on each finger to loosen them first. As she did so, so she noticed an envelope propped against the carriage clock on the hallway table, her friend Jack’s familiar, careful handwriting creeping across it, and she smiled.

As she was fumbling impatiently with the buttons of her coat, her landlady, Mrs Joyce, walked over to greet her. “Happy birthday, my dear. There’s a fish chowder on the stove for you as a special treat.”

“Oh, thank you, Mrs Joyce. That’s so kind of you.” Mrs Joyce’s fish chowder was one of Ellie’s favourite meals.

“Not at all, my dear, not at all. You enjoy that. I just have to run down the road to check in on old Mrs Parkin, but I’ll be back to have a cup of tea with you later on.”

Ellie smiled. She was very fond of Mrs Joyce, who in many ways was more maternal than her own mother had ever been, but still she was glad to be able to read Jack’s letter on her own over dinner.

She changed hurriedly out of her uniform, washed her hands, and was soon seated at the kitchen table, a steaming bowl of Mrs Joyce’s fine chowder before her. This recipe, like so many others that her landlady followed, Ellie knew, came from *The Win-the-War Cookery Book*, and was designed to make their rations go as far as possible.

Unable to wait any longer, Ellie tore at the envelope. At first her eyes roved over the page, unable to read it through properly, instead picking up disjointed phrases here and there:

Happy birthday, Ellie!

...wish I could see you on your seventeenth birthday. I still remember your seventh!

...will take Charlie down to our tree in the woods after work to have a pretend birthday tea party and play some songs on my fiddle. . .

We left some fresh snowdrops the other day in the place where you and I buried your dad’s things. . .

Charlie is missing you a lot ...think your mam must be too, though of course she doesn’t say. I know I am!

...can’t wait to see you next month. . .

Ellie took a spoonful of chowder – still hot enough to scald her tongue – then smoothed the paper down and began to read carefully from start to finish.

It was strange; her life here in Brighton was so engrossing and, for the most part, she was very content. When she didn’t think about home, about the people she missed so much, she could almost imagine that she wasn’t homesick – that she was an entirely different Ellie, one with no attachments to the small village of Endstone in Kent.

Jack's letters destroyed that illusion. But, still, she was always happy to receive them. It made her feel not quite so far away.

She would be going home to Endstone next month. She hadn't been back since Christmas, and the days every visit seemed to bring a fresh shock. There were no able-bodied men over the age of eighteen left in the village at all now. The central square bore the ugly scars of the bombing the previous summer, and the people were still recovering from such devastation in their midst, as well as from the loss of Sarah Pritchard, who had been killed.

Charlie is missing you a lot ...think your mam must be too, though of course she doesn't say.

It was Ellie's instinct to snort as she reread the line about her mother, but she fought it. Jack was right in recent years her mother's behaviour towards her had softened. It seemed she had even come to think that she might need her daughter.

Ellie tore a strip from the single slice of bread the rationing allowed her and popped it into her mouth as she imagined Jack and Charlie under her favourite oak tree in the woods – the one with so many happy memories of both her father and of childhood games with Jack.

She smiled. She and Jack had been friends through most of the birthdays they had ever had. Jack would be eighteen at his next. . .

The piece of bread felt as though it had turned to paper in her mouth. She took a messy slurp of water to force it down. Eighteen. The age he had once longed to be, back when he had wanted more than anything to be a soldier, to go away to war with her father and his older brother, and the other men of the village.

Of course, he knew better now. Even Ellie could not have anticipated how much his time on the front line – after he had run away and lied about his age – would change him.

But when Jack turned eighteen there would no longer be any choice in the matter. He was strong and healthy; even the leg that had been injured in the explosion at the munitions factory now gave him more than a twinge in the cold weather.

No, there was no question but that he would be called up. Just four months to go. After all these years, could there be any hope that the war would end in time to prevent it?

MARCH

As Ellie neared the top of the hill that led up to her home, she began to run. Her legs strained against the increased incline and the cold air tore the breath from her lungs, but still she was smiling. She raced up to the door – pausing to note that the front garden was looking very overgrown – and pushed it open.

“Eleanor!” Her mother was already standing in the hallway as though waiting for her.

Oh! Ellie thought. *Maybe she was waiting for me.* “Mother,” she replied, dropping her bag and stepping forward to give her a kiss on the cheek.

She felt Mother’s hand grasp her shoulder, the grip tremulous. As ever, her mother’s pallor and frailness were a shock to Ellie. But her smile seemed heartfelt, and made her appear younger.

“How are you, Mo—”

“Ellie!”

Ellie broke off and grinned up the stairs at her brother’s form, which looked so much longer and less rounded since she had last seen him. “Come down here, Charlie boy, and give your big sister a hug.”

Charlie pulled a face but trotted obediently down the stairs and into Ellie’s arms. She wrapped them tightly around him, squeezing her eyes closed and breathing in his smell. It was to her – simply *home*.

Charlie suffered this embrace for a long moment before patting her gently but firmly on the back in a way that clearly signified that he had had enough.

Ellie stood up laughing, though she had to rub her coat sleeve against her eyes, and noticed that Mother’s eyelids were rather pink too.

“Shall we have a cup of tea?” she asked brightly, tousling Charlie’s curls with her hand.

“Yes, let’s,” agreed Mother. “I’ve made some broth too, if you’re hungry.”

They wandered into the kitchen and Ellie busied herself about the stove while Mother and Charlie sat down at the table. There had been a time when such domestic tasks had been stiflingly boring to Ellie. Now they felt like a rare dose of home life.

“Are you well, Mother?” Ellie asked hopefully as she ladled the broth into three bowls.

“No worse than usual,” Mother replied. “I continue to be very tired all the time, and my headaches are as bad as ever. Of course, with poor Sarah Pritchard gone, I get little help with Charlie these days so I cannot afford to indulge my tiredness.”

Ellie glanced guiltily at her as she stirred the tea leaves in the pot. Sarah Pritchard had been her mother’s main support since Ellie’s move to Brighton. She suspected that, in addition to the loss on a practical level, her mother was missing the young Belgian woman’s companionship and cheerful disposition.

“Are you still attending the WI meetings?” she went on, bringing the bowls to the table. It had been such a pleasant surprise to her when Mother had started to involve herself in the village knitting group – which had then evolved into a Women’s Institute branch – at the start of the war, making friends with some of the women of the village for the first time.

“Well, no,” said Mother, with a touch of her old impatience. “It is difficult to bring Charlie now that he is bigger, and always running everywhere and climbing everything. And with no one else to

take care of him. . .”

Ellie winced. “Do you still see any of the other women?”

Mother paused. “I see them at church, when I’m well enough to go. Sometimes Mrs Anderson will bring groceries up to me, when she is not too busy with little Arthur or with her vegetable-growing for the WI.”

Ellie sat motionless, her spoon hovering above her bowl. It was just too hard. She knew how important her work in the hospital was, but how could she justify leaving her family when they were unable to cope without her? A dull ache began in the back of her head.

Mother seemed to collect herself, and with visible effort, asked, “How is your work? Have you been given any new tasks on the ward?”

Ellie felt her face soften in response to this small kindness. There had been a time when Mother had seemed to think that Ellie’s only role in life was to help her in the house and prepare herself for a good marriage. It was a mark of how Mother had changed that she was now showing interest in Ellie’s work.

“It is good, thank you. Tiring but so rewarding.” She handed Charlie a napkin to catch the broth that had escaped his spoon and trickled down his face, while rummaging through her mind for the best stories to tell her mother. She had to be quite selective; Mother would not like to hear anything she might think of as vulgar or mischievous; nothing too sad either. Ellie longed to speak of how she thought Private Lessing was in love with Grace – he blushed to the roots of his red hair whenever their eyes met and she thought the pretty nurse might be fond of him too, but sensed that Mother would not approve.

In the end, she settled for the story of a young private who had been discharged a week previously. Having suffered a serious injury to the head, he had lost the use of his right eye, and would not be returning to the front, but rather heading back home to his family in London. These days, it felt as though that was the best any soldier on the battlefields in Europe could hope for.

*

After lunch, Ellie persuaded Mother to go for a lie-down while she cleared up the bowls from the meal. She ushered Charlie into the front garden to get some fresh air where she could keep an eye on him through the kitchen window. As she filled the washing basin with water, her mind continued to roll around the problem of how she could take care of Mother and Charlie, while not ending up stuck in Endstone for ever, and giving up on her own hopes and plans.

She rinsed the last bowl and then glanced out of the window in time to see Thomas Pritchard walking up the garden path. It made her heart contract painfully to see how his clothes hung off him, his eyes looking as though they had sunk deep into his head. Even his limp appeared more pronounced. It had been wonderful to watch how Thomas had been changed by his relationship with Sarah, seeming to grow stronger and brighter with his happiness. But the process in reverse was devastating to witness.

Ellie ran to the front door, trying to adopt a convincing smile, and pulled it open just as Thomas stopped to pass Charlie his ball.

“Ellie!” Thomas said in surprise.

“Thomas,” she replied. As he walked up to greet her, she reached out and took hold of one of his hands between both of her own.

“I had forgotten your mother said you would be home. It’s good to see you.”

“And you,” Ellie responded, flinching a little at the untruth: seeing him like this was so very distressing. “Please, come in.”

Thomas followed her through the hallway and into the kitchen. "I've brought your mother the tablets for her headache."

"Thank you. You are good to bring them round when you're so busy," Ellie replied, setting the kettle on to the stove and reaching out to take the bottle of tablets so that she might read the label.

Thomas smiled. "Do you approve of my prescription, Nurse? I've moved her on to a higher dosage since I'm afraid the headaches appear to be getting worse."

Ellie felt her face burning. "Oh, I'm sorry – I wouldn't dream of questioning your judgement, Thomas. I suppose I'm just interested these days, now that I know a little more about it all myself."

"I'm pleased to see it," he replied with another small smile, covering her hand with his own. "You're an intelligent young lady and I have no doubt you're turning into a very fine nurse indeed, Ellie."

She shifted uncomfortably then returned to the stove to pour water from the kettle into the teapot. "Thank you – you're kind to say so. But never mind me" – she turned back to face him – "how are you, Thomas?"

The young doctor's eyes dropped to the table. "Oh, I'm fine, really. . ."

"Thomas. . ." Putting the teapot onto the table and sitting down in front of him, it was Ellie's turn to take his hand. It was a long moment before he looked up to meet her eyes, and when he did, she saw his were bloodshot.

"I miss her, that's all," he said at last, his voice hoarse. "It's odd, really, when you think about it. Three years ago, I'd never even met her. If it hadn't been for the war, I never would have done. So . . . so, you see, even though the war took her away from me, I can't—" He broke off and clamped his eyes tightly shut, his chin trembling slightly.

Ellie didn't trust herself to speak either. She sat squeezing his hand, waiting as he sucked in deep, shaky breaths. Apart from Charlie's chatter floating in through the kitchen window, the house was silent.

Eventually Thomas opened his eyes again and gave her a half smile. "I'm sorry."

"Don't!" Ellie cried. "Don't be silly. You have nothing to apologize for. You know you're like family to me, Thomas. I just wish. . ." She trailed off and they stared levelly at each other. There was no need to say what they both wished. "How are the Mertens family?" she asked, pulling her hand back from his so that she could pour the tea into the cups.

"Oh." Thomas drew out his handkerchief and blew his nose. "Haven't you heard? They've gone to Whitstable to join Dr Mertens' sister and her family, who have been living there since fleeing Belgium. I think, after what happened, staying in Endstone was too hard. They just wanted to be around family, I suppose."

"That's perfectly understandable," Ellie said carefully. "But you must miss them, Thomas?"

"I do," he agreed, rubbing his eyes wearily with the heel of one hand and lifting his teacup with the other, "very much so. It makes me feel even more as though the whole thing were just something I dreamed. I will go and visit them there, though, when things settle down. If they ever do, that is. . ."

"Of course!" Ellie exclaimed, the thought only just occurring to her. "You must be struggling without Dr Mertens in the surgery!" *And without Sarah*, she added in her head, thinking of how much Thomas's wife had helped with the running of the practice, even before they had been married.

"I am. With more and more men returning injured from the front and requiring ongoing care, it's busier than ever. I'm getting very worried about these reports of influenza from Europe. And, if I'm honest, I'm just not on top of things in the way I need to be. I can't seem to get myself organized." Thomas stared into his teacup as though expecting to find the answers at the bottom of it.

"No one could blame you for that, Thomas."

"In fact," he went on, almost as if he hadn't heard her, "I've been thinking about you, Ellie."

“Me?” she said, unable to keep the note of surprise out of her voice.

“Yes. Have you given any thought to how long you’ll stay in Brighton?”

“Well, yes,” she replied, her mind returning to the puzzle she had been pondering earlier. “I had thought about it. But I’m not sure what the answer is. I know Mother and Charlie need me here, but I don’t feel I can really help at the hospital. . .”

“Of course. Your matron is very pleased with you.”

“Is she?” Once again, Ellie was taken aback.

“Yes, she wrote to me.” Thomas glanced at her face and gave a small laugh. “Ellie, you look stunned.”

“I *am* stunned!”

“She wrote to me after Sarah died – you or Frances must have told her, I suppose?” Ellie nodded mutely. “Well, she sent me a very kind letter. And in it she mentioned how hard you were working and that she felt you were becoming a very skilled nurse, with good instincts. She was very complimentary about my training – which I didn’t feel I deserved at all!”

Again, Ellie couldn’t speak.

“Anyway, I have no doubt that you are much valued there. But if you ever did wish to return to Endstone, there would be a job waiting for you if you wanted it – a real job as a nurse, I mean, not just helping out with odds and ends as you used to do.” He peered at her face. “There is no pressure, you understand? I just wanted to make sure you realize that it’s one option that exists for you.”

“Thank you, Thomas,” Ellie said quickly, conscious that, in her confusion, she probably appeared rude. “That is very good to know. And very kind of you. May I take some time to think about it?”

“Absolutely – you *must*, Ellie. You should take all the time you need. It was your father’s surgery, it’s not going anywhere and you will *always* be welcome.”

“Thank you,” Ellie said again. “Thank you.” She paused. “And, Thomas, would you mind not mentioning this conversation to Mother – just until I’ve thought about it some more?”

“Of course not; I understand,” Thomas said sympathetically. He knew Ellie’s mother well by now and could no doubt imagine her concerns. “Anyway,” he said, rapping his knuckles on the table decisively, “I should be getting back to the surgery. Do call in to see me before you go back to Brighton, won’t you?”

“I will. Thanks again, Thomas,” Ellie said as they both stood. “Take care of yourself.”

He smiled in reply before tugging his coat back on.

As she waved him off at the front door, Ellie saw Jack pulling up on his bicycle, hair springing out from under his cap, cheeks pink from the wind, and her stomach seemed to flip over.

Thomas and Jack spoke for a moment at the gate while Ellie jiggled impatiently on the doorstep, waiting until Thomas had turned away and walked out of view before racing to meet Jack halfway down the garden path and flinging her arms around him. She felt Jack’s arm slide about her waist in response, his breath in her hair. Ellie tried for a moment to imagine how Thomas must feel, knowing that he would never be able to stand with his arms around Sarah, but her body seemed to rebel against the thought. She gave a violent shudder and squeezed Jack all the more tightly until he gave a gasping laugh.

“Steady on, El. I might need those ribs again!”

Since Ellie's mother was more accepting of his presence these days, Jack had stayed for dinner, enjoying the stew that Ellie had made, then doing the dishes while she settled Charlie down in bed. Now they were strolling hand in hand down the hill towards the village square. Jack had insisted Ellie was going to buy her a belated birthday drink.

As they crossed the square, Ellie's eye was drawn to the cobbles in front of the village store, still scarred from the bomb that had landed there eight months previously. The damage to the store itself had been fixed, and the shop was up and running again under the expert management of Jack's mother and his sister, Anna, though of course at this time in the evening it was closed.

Ellie shyly withdrew her hand from Jack's as they walked into the smoky fug of the Dog and Duck pub. He grinned and winked. There was no question that the pub was quieter than it would have been in previous years; now the clientele mostly consisted of old men, injured veterans, factory workers too young to have been conscripted and the occasional woman – mostly land girls in from a hard day's work farming in the countryside around Endstone. They called out greetings to Ellie as she and Jack made their way to the bar, as well as questions about Brighton and her work in the hospital, and how long she would be home this time.

At the bar, Vera Baker, the landlady, was pulling pints while shouting instructions to her young daughter, Maud, whom Ellie glimpsed peeking up from the cellar, her blue eyes glinting from deep in the gloom.

"Ah, Ellie Phillips, it's good to see you back, lass," Mrs Baker declared.

"Thank you, Mrs Baker, it's nice to be home."

"You haven't forgotten us all now you're living your exciting life in the big city?"

"Of course not!" Ellie said, feeling Jack's eyes on her.

"She'd better not," he put in, letting out his booming laugh.

"Ah well, I'm sure she won't be forgetting her handsome beau!" Mrs Baker laughed, giving a wink that instantly painted crimson splashes on Jack's cheeks. "What can I get you both?"

While she pulled their glasses of cider, the conversation turned to rationing, which had officially been introduced a few weeks previously, though shortages had existed for some time already.

Old Mr Thompson, the boys' teacher from the local school, was sitting up at the bar with a pint of stout and a newspaper. He greeted Ellie, and then asked, "I imagine you've received your ration card in Brighton too, Eleanor?"

"Yes," Ellie replied, "though my landlady has mine since she does all the shopping for the house."

"Landlady!" cooed Mrs Baker. "You're a proper working girl now, aren't you? A real professional!" Ellie smiled.

"Indeed she is," Mr Thompson proclaimed. "We should probably be addressing you as Nurse Phillips these days, shouldn't we?"

"No, no," Ellie said. "'Ellie' will do just as well as it ever did! Besides, my matron wouldn't like to think I was giving myself airs and graces because I'm out from under her nose for a few days!"

The others chuckled.

"Well," Mrs Baker went on, "I know we must all do our bit, and heaven knows food supplies aren't what they were, but it's torture how little bread we're allowed now. This barley business is just not the same. And as for that so-called turnip bread. . ." She made a disgusted face that caused Ellie to pull her drink away from her mouth quickly before she spluttered into it. Jack sniggered and shook his head, passing her a handkerchief, which she used to dab at her mouth.

“Indeed,” Mr Thompson said, “and it makes you think – if the government are having to introduce such measures, they can’t be imagining that there is an end to the whole sorry affair in sight. Perhaps they’re even anticipating tougher times ahead.”

“Tougher?” Mrs Baker’s jolly face fell, and Ellie noticed for the first time how much thinner and more tired she was looking than the last time she had seen her. “Surely not?”

It was so strange to think that a couple of years ago it was Mrs Baker’s husband working behind the bar, while she made sandwiches in the kitchen, changed the barrels, or was at home with the children; even stranger to think how they all just got on with their lives despite their terrible losses.

Mrs Baker was called away to serve another customer at the same time as Mr Thompson was drawn into conversation with the young veteran beside him. Jack took hold of Ellie’s elbow and muttered into her ear, “Come on, El. Let’s go and sit somewhere a bit quieter.” She smiled back at him, only just restraining herself from reaching out to tuck one of his curls behind his ears.

Their glasses of cider in hand, they wound their way to a corner by the window – though not before Ellie had stopped to chat with several more villagers full of questions about her life in Brighton and stories of their own to tell.

It was always so comforting to be around people that she had known for her whole life; to see the familiar faces and move around places that she would be confident navigating with her eyes closed. As she and Jack settled into their seats, Ellie allowed herself to think for a moment about what it would be like if she accepted Thomas’s offer and moved back to Endstone permanently.

“Jack,” she blurted, before she could decide whether it was a good idea, “Thomas said the most extraordinary thing to me today.”

Jack was smiling as his eyes roamed fondly over her face. “Oh really? What *extraordinary thing* was that, then?”

She wrinkled her nose at his impersonation of her voice, then took a breath and chewed her lip before answering more slowly, “Well, he’s obviously struggling on his own in the surgery. He ...he asked me if I’d like to work with him there.”

“El!” Jack exclaimed, leaning forward and seizing her hand so suddenly that he almost tipped over his cider, rescuing it just in time. “Oops,” he said with a grin, dabbing at the few spilled drops with his palm. “But, El, that’s wonderful! You clever thing! I can’t believe you waited so long to say anything – you must have been in agonies over dinner! This is just the chance we’ve been waiting for!”

Ellie felt her brow furrow slightly. “Well, yes, I mean ...I know it’s a great offer.”

Jack beamed at her. “Yes? You sound as though you’re about to say ‘but’.”

“Yes, *but* I haven’t given him an answer yet.”

“What?” He looked utterly baffled now, one eyebrow raised questioningly, though still the smile was fixed in place. “Why ever not?”

“Well, because I haven’t deci—”

“Hello, Jack!” came a voice from above them.

Ellie looked up, startled, and saw a pretty, dark-haired girl of around her own age standing over them. She’d been so engrossed in their conversation that she hadn’t even seen her approach. The girl looked familiar, as most people from the village did, but Ellie couldn’t place her.

“Maggie!” Jack said, smiling. “What are you doing here?”

“Same thing you are, I expect,” Maggie responded, standing with her weight on her left leg so that her right hip jutted out. Her dimples were like pins in a pin cushion, Ellie thought.

“Maggie, this is my ...my very good friend, Ellie Phillips,” Jack said, with an uncharacteristically shy smile. “El, this is Maggie Brown. We work together at the factory.”

“Nice to meet you,” Ellie said, still looking fixedly at the other girl.

“Likewise,” Maggie said in a monotone, barely glancing in Ellie’s direction. “Anyway, where do

you dash off to after our shift, Jack? You were gone before I'd got out of my overalls!"

Ellie looked curiously at Jack, whose cheeks were glowing with their tell-tale red stripes again.

"Oh, sorry," he replied with a nervous chuckle. "I didn't mean to leave without saying goodbye, but I wanted to make sure I caught the earlier train. Ellie got back from Brighton today, you see. She's never home for long, so I have to make the most of it when she is – don't I, El?"

Maggie gave Ellie a longer look now. One eyebrow inched upwards, as though amused by what she had just seen, but all she said was, "I see."

Ellie felt her own eyes narrow. Who was this girl? And why was she now launching into a story so complete with raucous laughter – about the factory foreman, after Jack had just told her he wanted to make the most of their time together? Her timing couldn't have been worse; Ellie was wondering why she shouldn't have mentioned the job in the Endstone surgery to Jack yet. Clearly it hadn't occurred to him that she might not take it. She hadn't decided how she felt about it herself yet. Of course, in many ways it would solve all the problems she had been struggling with – and she was hugely flattered to be considered good enough for the job – but Brighton had been such an adventure. She'd experienced such freedom living and working away from home. She was learning so much every day at the hospital, as well as making a real difference to the lives of the soldiers. Matron and the other staff had gone out of their way to accommodate her when she was still young – she thought again with a flush of pleasure of Matron's praise in her letter to Thomas – and she'd encountered people she would never have met in little Endstone. She thought of her latest letter from Sanjay Das on the frontline in France; the young Indian soldier she had treated last year wrote to her regularly since he had been discharged and sent back to the battlefields. When would she ever have met someone like him if she had stayed in Endstone?

But the thought of Sanjay gave her a start. How would Jack see her choice to stay in Brighton as anything other than a favouring of her life there over her family, over him? Ellie didn't even think she could convince herself otherwise.

These uncomfortable thoughts nibbled away in her mind, and all the while Maggie's interminable story rattled on, illustrated by elaborate hand gestures, and punctuated by shouts of gusty laughter. Ellie uncrossed and re-crossed her legs pointedly, drained her glass and put it down on the table with unnecessary force. Finally she glared from Jack to Maggie and back again.

When Maggie reached the end of the story at last, Jack laughed – but only politely, Ellie thought smugly – and said, "Anyway, Maggie, I'll see you at the factory tomorrow. I should be taking Ellie home before it gets too late."

Ellie frowned. She was glad that Jack was getting rid of Maggie, but she didn't feel ready to go home. She had thought they might stay for another drink, spend some more time together, maybe talk a little more about the Endstone job...Not to mention the fact that she hardly required someone to "show her home" when she was perfectly used to going around Brighton all the time on her own.

As they stepped out into the dark square and Jack tucked her hand into his own, she felt grateful for even the ten minutes it would take them to walk back to her house, but at the same time greedy for more.

"Jack!" she said suddenly, tugging on his hand. "Let's not go straight back. Let's go to the cliff first."

"El," he said with a smile, "it's getting late. I've got work tomorrow."

"Oh, come on. When did you get to be so boring? Just for five minutes, then I'll let you go home for your hot cocoa. I'm only here for a few days. Please!"

He groaned but said, "All right, all right! You'll be the death of me, woman! And we're not going to our hiding place. Just to the top of the cliff there."

"What? Why?" Their hiding place was a little nook, carved by the elements into the rock beneath

an overhang of the cliff. They had visited it together since they were children.

“Ellie! It’s pitch black! I for one have no desire to end up broken into pieces on the rocks down there.”

“Oh, yes.” She laughed. In her excitement she hadn’t even thought about that. “All right, then, the clifftop. I’ll race you there!”

“El!” Jack’s voice drifted up the path from behind her. “What are you doing? You can’t see where you’re going!”

She felt the adrenaline surging like an electric impulse through her veins. “Jack Scott, are you suggesting for one minute we couldn’t both find our way up and down this path blindfolded?” she shouted, the last word coming out in a little yelp as she caught her foot on a fallen branch she hadn’t seen in the darkness. She righted herself quickly, but slowed her pace somewhat.

“What was that, Nurse Phillips?” Jack asked in an amused voice, as he drew nearer.

“Nothing, Grandpa,” Ellie said, fumbling for his hand. “I just thought I’d wait for you to catch up since you seem nervous about following the path in the dark.”

Weaving their fingers together once more, they stepped out of the tree-lined path and into the field that overlooked the cliffs. Little scraps of reflected moonlight flickered on the water and the wind made a hushing sound. Ellie breathed out all the chattering thoughts; breathed in calm and quiet and peace.

The next evening at the train station, Jack twisted his hat between his hands as they waited for the train to arrive.

He blew out a breath. “I just don’t understand,” he said, for what felt like the twentieth time.

The night before they hadn’t talked any more about Thomas’s job offer, instead enjoying each other’s company, along with the peace on the clifftop. But when he’d arrived at her house after work that afternoon, he’d clearly been thinking about it all day, and just as obviously hadn’t heard her tell him that the decision wasn’t yet made.

Ellie, in the meantime, felt even more torn. “Jack, I’m not saying I’m not going to take it. You know I’m not saying that! I just need to think a bit more.”

“What is there to think about?”

“How can you ask that? You know how good the job in Brighton has been for me!”

“It’s the same job here; it’s just closer to me! And your family...I thought that would be a good thing.”

“It is, of course. But it’s not the same job at all – surely you can see that. It will be much slower and much less challenging. . .”

They both looked up as they heard the rattle of the train’s approach. There was a pause, and then Jack said, so softly that Ellie had to strain to hear him over the train’s noise, “I just thought you wanted to be here, with me.”

Ellie closed her eyes. This was horrible, and it was only getting worse. “You know I want that.” She was having almost to shout now. “But I don’t want to make any rushed decisions. Please try to understand that.”

She opened her eyes and saw that Jack’s were fixed on the ground, his pulse visible in his tense jaw.

“Jack, please, I have to go now. Don’t be angry with me.”

“I’m not. You know I never could be. . .” But still he didn’t look up.

“What rot, you’ve been angry with me plenty of times!” Ellie said, trying to make him laugh. She put a hand on his cheek, leaned up and kissed him quickly on the mouth, so that his eyes widened in surprise. “I’ll decide soon, Jack, I promise. I’ll miss you. I always miss you. Goodbye.”

She picked up her bag, opened the carriage door and stepped inside. Then she stood by the window

hands pressed against it, watching until finally, Jack looked up and gave her a wave and a small smile

APRIL

Ellie shook the crisp white sheet out so that it made a snapping noise like a sail in the air and then let it settle down on to the bed. Methodically she began to move around the bed, tucking the sheet in tight to the mattress, but all the while her mind was busy elsewhere.

It had been this way since she had returned from Endstone three weeks previously. Arguments about whether she should stay at the hospital in Brighton or go home to Endstone rolled round and round in her brain; the case for each seemed equally compelling. And so she found herself stuck, unable to move one way or the other, and always ended up abandoning the whole dilemma until another time.

Inevitably, though, the thoughts would come back to bother her in the middle of the night, or when she was eating, or working. She felt as though she got no peace from them.

In the meantime, she had continued writing to Jack as usual – she knew from past experience how dangerous it was to let silence grow between them – but unable to reassure him about her decision, she felt her letters sounded superficial and rambling. His own seemed strangely bland, though she couldn't be sure she wasn't imagining it.

She looked down at the bed she was making and saw that the final corner was creased, the sheet sticking out oddly. Making a noise of exasperation, she untucked it and tried again. Work of this sort didn't help either. This empty ward had to be made ready for a new influx of soldiers, and Ellie had been working alone for hours – cleaning, making up beds, restocking the supply cupboards and trolleys – with no one to distract her and nothing more stimulating to occupy her mind and provide a break from her thoughts.

At that moment, though, the sharp ringing of heels against the floor startled her from her examination of the troublesome corner. She looked up to see the short but solid form of Matron marching briskly towards her, her expression stormy.

“Phillips! A word, please.”

“Yes, Matron,” Ellie said, her voice coming out whispery in her disquiet.

“Look, Phillips, what's this Doctor Greggs tells me about you being away with the fairies during the surgery on that poor young man's leg yesterday?”

Ellie's mind sprang to life and began to race, her heart thumping painfully. “P—private Harrington?”

“Yes, yes,” Matron said impatiently. “The doctor tells me you passed him the scissors to remove a piece of shrapnel when he'd asked for the tweezers. And then you stood there like a post-box when he pointed out the mistake.”

“Oh. . .” All at once Ellie's face was burning as though she had a fever. She had forgotten all about the episode – had barely given it a moment's thought at the time, and certainly not since.

“Oh? Is that all you have to say?” Matron's own face was beginning to colour, her eyebrows inching higher and higher up her forehead. “Apparently it was only the quick response of Nurse Fletcher that prevented disaster.”

“Yes,” Ellie said. “Yes. I'm ...I'm sorry.”

“Sorry? Phillips, you know well enough at this stage in your nursing work that sorry isn't worth anything when someone's dying of an infection, or of blood loss. Lord knows you're a dreamer at the best of times, but surgery is *not* the moment for it! I expected better of you!”

“I know. . .”

“Now, as it happens, Doctor Greggs thinks very highly of you, and of course the silly man on mentioned it to me out of concern that there might be something wrong with you that you need help with...Is there?”

“Is there. . .?”

“For goodness’ sake! Wake up, girl! Is there something the matter with you? Because if there is—

“No ...no, Matron.” Ellie wrung her hands miserably, wishing she were anywhere other than there. It was all she could do not to turn her back on Matron and run from the room.

“Because he’s not the only one to have noticed that you are not up to standard at the moment. Your brain hardly seems to be here at all.”

Ellie couldn’t hold her gaze any longer. She looked to the floor, though she knew how much infuriated Matron. Sure enough: “For heaven’s sake,” Matron went on, her voice getting louder and louder until Ellie cringed, sure that the whole hospital could hear. “You’ve been in this ward for an hour and still half the beds aren’t made! I never thought I’d have to remind *you* that this is not a hobby for you to pass your time – it’s a place where very, very sick men come to be healed! You know this! What do you have to say for yourself, young lady?”

What *could* she say? “I’m ...I’m sorry.” Ellie forced herself to lift her chin and look Matron in the eye once more. It was the least she could do. “I’m sorry.”

Matron stared back at her for a long moment, then shook her head, turned on her heel, and walked out of the room.

Ellie watched her go, her hands still bunched in the sheet she had been trying so hard to straighten and which was now crumpled beyond all redemption. Finally, when she was sure that neither the matron, nor anyone else, was about to walk back into the ward, she abandoned her sheet and fled the room. Her feet seemed to fly over the tiles until she reached the staff bathroom. Bursting into a cubicle, she locked the door, put her back to it and slid down until she was sitting on the floor, the tiles cold through her thin dress.

The sobs that tore through her body took her by surprise, both for their violence and for the lack of control she had over them. She couldn’t remember crying like this even when her adored father had died, nor when Jack had been away at war, nor when the bomb had fallen on Endstone, injuring and killing people she knew and loved. She lowered her forehead to her knees, allowed herself to wish for a moment that Jack was there with his arms around her, and then abandoned any attempt at restraint. She cried until her throat and eyes were raw, and until there wasn’t the breath in her lungs to cry any longer.

Afterwards, she drew herself back upright, washed her face at the sink, returned to the ward and finished her work as quickly and efficiently as she was able. She convinced herself that no one who saw her during the rest of her shift would have known that anything was amiss.

But she had forgotten that her aunt had had a rare day off, and when she walked into their shared room back at the digs that evening, Frances took one look at her face and leapt from the bed, dropping the novel she had been reading. “Ellie! Whatever’s the matter? Has something happened?”

All Ellie’s hard-won composure vanished and within moments she was sprawled on her aunt’s bed, choking out a barely coherent account of the day’s events and sobbing into her waist.

“Ellie!” Frances shushed her. “My darling girl! I’ve never seen you like this in all your life!”

“I know!” Ellie said through a ragged throat. “I ...the doctor ...I could have killed that man. . .”

Frances stroked her hair and gave a short laugh. “Ellie, you could not have killed him simply by passing the doctor the scissors instead of the tweezers!”

Ellie opened her mouth to argue but instead a hiccup broke free, stopping her short.

Frances took advantage of this to forge ahead. “Of course, our work is important, and we must try to do our best all the time. And normally that is what you do – what we all do. I think, in truth, one of the

things that is upsetting you is the idea that one of the doctors has had anything other than wholehearted praise to offer of you. No, don't disagree with me, Ellie. There's nothing wrong with wanting to do the best job you possibly can, even perhaps being a little competitive about it."

"I've been getting sloppy!" Ellie protested. "And I didn't even realize it! Never mind being competitive! Perhaps I'm not as suited to being a nurse as I believed."

"Nobody who knows you could deny that you've not been yourself of late," Aunt Frances conceded, running a soothing hand over her back. "But that is not the same as not being a good nurse. We all have other things on our mind sometimes. What is bothering you, dear? It might help to talk about it."

Ellie paused, knotting the fabric of her aunt's dress and feeling like a child. She drew a deep breath in, and then let it go. "I think it's about this job that Thomas offered me back in Endstone. . ."

"Yes?" Aunt Frances said patiently.

"It's just that it keeps playing round and round in my head."

"Well, yes, dear," Frances said, in a tone of absolute forbearance. "I had always imagined you would take it eventually."

Ellie sat up, her mouth falling open as she looked at her aunt. "But ...but I haven't made up my mind! Not at all! It's driving me mad trying to make the decision!"

"Ellie," Frances began softly, "it seems to me that your instincts are leading you very clearly in one direction."

"But. . ." Ellie felt entirely bamboozled. "But which direction is that?"

"Why, back to Endstone, of course."

"But. . ."

"My poor girl. Do you have any idea how much you've been talking about the place lately? And perhaps more to the point, about Jack?"

"But – but my work here—"

"Is important – and you have achieved so much. But there will be other volunteer nurses to fill your place here at the hospital, make no mistake. In fact, I believe Matron is expecting a new cohort in the next fortnight. And you will have other chances to continue your learning. I think the Endstone surgery will be a huge opportunity. You will be the only nurse there, and poor Thomas is going to need all the help he can get. In many ways, your responsibilities there will be far greater than they are here."

Ellie wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Do you really think so?"

"I'm sure of it," Frances replied.

"You don't think it's me conceding defeat and taking the easy route?"

"Not in the least, you silly thing! And, Ellie, there will be other chances to work in hospitals, and away from Endstone, if that's what you want in the future. You are so young. You have done so much already, but this is only the beginning of your working life. Look, the war is changing everything, but it won't go on for ever. In the meantime, if you think you would be happier being near your family and Jack, then that is where you must be. We have all learnt how important it is to be happy, haven't we?"

Ellie drew a shuddering breath, and realized that all her counter-arguments had evaporated into thin air. The decision that had seemed completely beyond her for so long was suddenly perfectly clear. "Oh, Aunt Frances. . ." She fell back into her aunt's arms. "You're completely right! I have been so miserable, and all this time you knew what I needed to do!"

"You silly thing!" Aunt Frances laughed, squeezing her tight. "You knew it too. You were just making things more difficult for yourself."

Ellie joined in with a shaky laugh, sitting up again, and feeling the stresses of the last few weeks almost as a physical sensation as they trickled down her neck and out of her body.

"And just think, Ellie – it was your father's surgery. It feels only right to me that you should be

there now, carrying on his work, with his patients, in the town that was his home.” Ellie swallowed hard past an uncomfortable knot in her throat and nodded. “I think every day how proud he would be of you, you know,” her aunt concluded.

“How do you do that?” Ellie asked her.

“Do what?” Aunt Frances asked, standing up to draw the curtains against the dark sky.

“How do you know exactly the right thing to say and do – all the time?”

“You really *are* a silly thing,” Frances said, with another chuckle. “And, by the way, I can read you like a newspaper headline. Now,” she went on, as Ellie gave her a mock scowl, “go and wash your face, and let’s have some supper.”

“All right.”

“And then I imagine you might have some letters you’ll be wanting to write.”

Ellie drew out her handkerchief and blew her nose before answering: “I will?”

“Well, yes,” Frances replied with an air of studied casualness. “You’ll be wanting to write to Thomas ...and your mother ...and perhaps to a certain young Master Scott. . .”

Ellie grinned as Frances swept from the room, calling, “I’ll put the kettle on! You can make a start on those letters now, if you’d like. . .”

Ellie leapt to her feet and hurried to the writing bureau in the corner of the room. But as she drew out a fresh sheet of paper, she decided that, while she would write to Thomas and let him know that she would be taking up his kind offer, she wanted to surprise her mother and Charlie – yes, and Jack – and give them the news face-to-face.

Imagining Jack’s expression when she told him, she abandoned her writing and collapsed backwards on the bed. She knew it had hurt him that she hadn’t made the decision straight away, but she was sure of how happy he would be now. He would laugh at her, she thought wryly, for the fact that once again she had taken so long to make the decision that had been so clear to everybody else. She pulled a pillow into her chest and hugged it tightly. On this occasion, she didn’t care how much he laughed at her. She just couldn’t wait to see him.

MAY

It was strange walking up the garden path once again, her big suitcase knocking against her knee. Some ways it felt like no time at all since she had last been here; in others it couldn't have felt more different from her last visit. Everything had changed.

Once again the garden was looking very overgrown, though now at least it was crocuses, bluebells, lilacs and peonies that were fighting their way through the wild grass and weeds. She would have to get it back in shape now she was home, Ellie thought. She could resurrect her mother's long-neglected vegetable patches, too: grow some potatoes and cabbages, maybe some beans.

It had been sad saying goodbye to everyone at the hospital – especially Grace, some of her longer-term patients, and Matron. Ellie laughed to think of the latter. She would never have imagined when she first met the formidable matron that she would come to feel such respect and even affection for her.

As soon as she had made the decision to return to Endstone, Ellie's concentration levels, and therefore her work, had returned to normal. Matron had been very supportive of the decision and had told Ellie that Thomas would be "lucky to have her" in the surgery. The thought had been making Ellie beam ever since. So too had the fact that, as she was leaving, Grace had tugged her into a quiet corner to brandish the pretty solitaire ring on her finger. "Private Lessing. . ." was all she managed to get out, but that had been enough to fill Ellie with happiness that felt like bubbles in her throat.

Perhaps more than anything, Ellie would miss her aunt. She had always been close to her Aunt Frances, had admired and wanted to be like her since she was a very young girl. But over the last eighteen or so months living and working together, they had become true friends. As soon as the wretched war was over, Ellie would make sure she got to Brighton regularly to visit her, of that she was determined.

Dropping her bag at the front door, Ellie peeped through the window into the kitchen. The sight that greeted her made her heart squeeze tight. Mother and Charlie were sitting at the table, boiled eggs and salad before them. Mother's posture was strangely hunched, a grey shawl drawn tightly around her narrow shoulders. Charlie kept up a constant stream of conversation – Ellie could hear his piping voice in snatches through the window – but the best Mother managed was the occasional wan smile in his direction.

Ellie paused for a moment, watching them, but then knocked decisively on the window. Her mother's startled expression – eyes and mouth so wide – made her wonder briefly if she ought to have warned her she was coming after all, but then Charlie caught sight of her and dimples appeared in his round cheeks.

"Ellie!"

She smiled and waved, before walking to the front door. By the time she opened it, Charlie was struggling down the hallway with a chair, clearly ready to do the job himself.

"Ellie!" he exclaimed again, wrapping his arms around her waist.

Mother appeared in the doorway looking so frail and bewildered that Ellie briefly felt the urge to cry. "Eleanor? We weren't expecting you, were we? Perhaps a letter went astray. . ."

"No, Mother," Ellie said with a small smile, staggering over to her with Charlie hanging like a dead anchor around her middle. "No, I thought I'd make it a surprise this time. You see, I won't be visiting

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