

Paris 1917

AFTERWARDS, SHE WOULD FIND HERSELF UNABLE TO describe the old man with whom they shared the elevator, other than a lascivious smile, as if he knew. She would forget the hotel lobby, the desk clerk, the room, even the view out the window which she knew must be the Luxembourg Gardens. I want . . . he said, but she stopped him with a kiss and pulled him into the room. She worked her hand through the front of his coat, shirt and undershirt to the warm smooth skin of his stomach. She felt the kick all the way up her arm.

Still locked in the kiss, he undid the buttons of her blouse, pulled up the camisole and ran his arms around her waist. This time the feeling started deep in her chest, spreading heat from there. They squirmed out of their clothes and stood there in boots, pants puddled around their ankles. He started walking forward towards the bed, she backwards, baby steps, still joined in the kiss. She tripped and he caught her in his strong arms before she fell. Together they collapsed onto the floor, laughing as they pulled off their boots. Naked now, they embraced again.

He lay on his side and drew a line with his fingers from her toes up one leg over her hips belly breast and face and down the other side. He moaned when she touched him. They made love there on the floor.

Later she got up and surveyed the room, their clothes leading from the door, his boots, the last thing to come off, at the bottom of the bed. She would remember none of those details but would never forget the long lateral muscles of his back, where angel wings would start. And the shame. She would never forget the shame.

He looked up at her and smiled and she saw momentarily in his face the face of her brother. What? he said.

Nothing, she said. You're beautiful.

Iris

THE ENVELOPE WAS AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SMALL PILE of mail, as if it planned the surprise. I'd already been to the shop for the newspaper and the girl, the new one, had counted my change incorrectly and I'd said so and she'd said aren't you the sharp one, which she'd never have said to a twenty-year-old. I felt like saying and aren't you the stupid one but didn't. On the way home, I'd stopped under the tree outside Suzanne's place, even though I knew they weren't likely to be home; the younger children's piano lessons are on Wednesdays and they'd have left already. I was about to keep going when I noticed, on the ground under the tree, a tiny possum, lying on its side as if sleeping. I don't know how I'd missed it on the way up. I had to take my time bending down. I looked back at Suzanne's house; definitely no one home.

The possum was breathing but its breaths were fast and shallow, as if it might not be long for this world. I dropped my satchel and walking stick, sat down on the ground beside the possum and picked it up gently. I could find no obvious injuries,

but ants were making their way over the underside of the poor little creature's face and neck, no doubt anticipating their attack once the elements had done their work. I brushed off as many as I could and took my cardigan from my satchel and wrapped the possum up. It didn't resist me, had no fight at all.

I'd seen a possum like this with its mother and twin on the wires in the early evenings lately, making the journey from Suzanne's house to the mango tree in my front yard. Ringtails not brushtails, creatures you might have as a pet if their smell wasn't so powerful. 'You should be with your mother,' I said, 'not sleeping on the footpath.' I held the possum against my chest. It nuzzled straight down into the cardigan, perhaps feeling a measure of safety with this new giant that had come into its life, or perhaps just too exhausted to care. The sun was already high in the sky, and although there was a freshening north-easterly breeze I felt it was going to be a warm day. We sat for a while, the possum and I, both of us too weak to do much else.

I was just contemplating how I might manage to stand up when I saw the young man from the grocery store on his way to work. 'Hallo!' he called out as he charged down the hill towards me. 'Are you all right, Mrs Hogan?'

'Well, clearly not, Patrick,' I said. 'I've gone and sat down and now I need to stand up. I have a possum.'

'So you do,' he said, moving closer to give me his arm. 'That's the one was there last night.'

'You saw it last night?'

'Yeah,' he said, 'on my way home from work.'

'Why didn't you pick it up?'

'It's just a possum, Mrs Hogan.' I gave him my free hand and he fairly pulled me up—I really don't think I had much to

do with it—and then held the possum for me while I put my satchel over my shoulder. ‘Stinks,’ he said.

I took the possum back and sent him on his way. ‘I’m glad I’m not a possum or you might have left me here. Anyway, thank you, Patrick,’ I said and then noticed his name badge said Mark. So nice of him not to correct me. I smiled and patted his shoulder.

‘Seeya, Mrs H. Have a good one.’

Most mornings I see Geoffrey, the postman, who always has something interesting to say about the world—yesterday it was people in Sydney whose gaiety was a problem for the police in a way I couldn’t understand; I’m not even sure what they were happy about because I missed the beginning of the story and then felt I was too far behind to ask—but today he must have come early. He sometimes does if his satchel is very full. The children next door on the uphill side were standing to attention at the gate in their uniforms, their mother at the top of the stairs yelling at them; nothing unusual in that household, frankly. I smiled as I passed the children and said, out of their mother’s hearing, ‘Is that a dragon I can hear?’ They didn’t respond but the older one, a boy of about ten, smiled back and craned his neck to look at what I carried. ‘I’ll show you later,’ I said, feeling I needed to get inside and put down my load. I collected the mail and from the bottom of the stairs called to the children’s mother, ‘Lovely day.’ She pretended not to hear. They’re new to the neighbourhood.

I put the mail down to open the door and took the possum, still in my cardigan, and set it down in the umbrella box. It was breathing more easily, I thought, although it was totally incurious about its new surroundings. Exhaustion, I decided, and exposure. Somehow it had been separated from its mother. I picked up the mail and left it on the hall table while I went

to warm some milk and sugar and put on the coffee. I found an eye dropper in the bathroom and washed it out. I took the saucepan of sweet milk to the front hall and filled the dropper. At first the possum showed no interest but I persisted, pushing the dropper towards its tiny mouth until it took a first little lick and then guzzled. ‘Hungry too,’ I said. I filled a hot water bottle and put it in the box, unwrapping the possum from my cardigan and wrapping it in an old piece of flannel. My cardigan smelled musty.

I made my coffee and went to get the mail from the hallway table. It was the usual nonsense—a bill from the electric company, a rather lovely booklet from the SPCA, a David Jones catalogue—and the envelope.

I knew where it was from, the blood-red logo in the corner, the R with its long tail, but even though I knew, it took a moment to recall the word, as if I had it tucked away in the very darkest corner of my mind and it took time to find the light switch. Miss Ivens came first, her name, and then her face, smiling, saying, as she so often did, ‘After all, Iris, we’re women. We do things.’ And then Royaumont, I thought finally, dear Royaumont, as I sat down on the floor in the hall, fell down really and found myself seated. I haven’t heard for years, not a single word, not from any of them.

The envelope had taken a circuitous route and several months to find me, posted in June from France, addressed to Miss Iris Crane, my maiden name, going first to the house at Risdon by the look of things—I don’t know how they knew where to find me—and from there to Fortitude Valley where Al and I had lived; Mr Stinson must have forwarded it from the Valley here to Paddington. I didn’t open it straightaway. I’d felt a little

flutter and decided it was best not to upset the apple cart. I got up from the floor slowly, using the hallway table for support.

I have a heart that worked well for more years than I care to disclose before it decided, rather suddenly, that it could work well no more. I told the heart doctor Grace took me to that at seventy beats a minute, more or less, mine had beat more than three billion times. Nothing wrong with your brain, he said, in that voice reserved for women over a certain age. Or my ears, I wanted to yell back but didn't, and at any rate, my ears are not what they used to be. When he dropped his voice to address Grace, who sat beside me, she nodded but I hardly heard a word. I've noticed that old things are popular now, furniture and houses and clothes. But not people. Old people are anything but popular, as if it's a disease we've got that others might catch rather than one they already have.

It can't just be my heart. There must be other body parts of mine bidding their time, my liver, my kidneys, those organs that work on and on through the night, cleaning my blood and body, my brain that won't stop, that doesn't rest even when I plead with it. My brain and its thoughts, its monkey business, as Grace called it in her brief Buddhist period. She'd become friendly with a philosophy student when she was at the university. Dying is easy, she told me when she was all of twenty-one. You just breathe out and then you don't breathe in again. I suppose I could have found her quiet confidence impertinent but it was almost sweet that someone so far from death could pretend to understand the view from here. It's not a pretty view, but it's not as bad as you might imagine.

I have turns—that's what I call them, because it sounds innocuous, although Grace calls them coronary-somethings, I must ask her. I'm afraid I'm beyond the age at which I might be

able to remember new expressions. I live with the words I already know, except the few I manage to pick up from schoolboys on the bus. I love to surprise Grace with my new knowledge. 'I went to the city yesterday,' I might say. 'It was cool.' She finds it so unlikely I would know how to place 'cool' in the vernacular, she asks what happened, did I forget my cardigan, those gorgeous green eyes that came straight from her grandfather and into her head, that can still make me take the occasional sharp breath in when I see them flash up at me from a book or task that requires concentration, those lovely eyes that have haunted me through all her thirty-nine years and will haunt, I suppose, a little longer, until I am reunited with Grace's grandfather and I no longer need haunting.

When Al died I thought my life too would end, in every sense but breathing in and out. We were not particularly physical—whenever he'd see couples strolling across the Story Bridge with arms intertwined he'd say they must have back trouble to need to support one another—but we were so used to each other, that was the thing. He was the one constant in my life. It was his breakfast that got me out of bed in the morning, his shirts needing ironing that kept me going, his dinner that made me eat. I worried about the days, how they'd pass. In the event, it was his smell I missed most. I didn't miss the ironing and breakfast at all but I kept his unwashed pyjamas by me in the bed where I spent most of my time. It was months before I gave them up to the washing.

Lately, I've got to wondering whether when you get to Heaven you'll be the age you die or some other age, a favourite perhaps. If I'm the age I die, I'll be old and most of those I lost will be young. If I'm given a choice, indeed if Heaven's where I'm going, I'll pick five so I can remember my mother, or twenty so my

life is yet to be decided. And then I'll do it all differently. Ah, regrets. Where do they take us? Not here, not to happiness.

After breakfast—two wheat biscuits and a cup of black tea instead of the coffee I'd made—I felt a little better. I sat down on the front porch and looked at the envelope again. It's from the Fondation Royaumont that runs the abbey these days. Inside is a folded card, the edge glinting in the sun. I open it up. It's an invitation. They've asked me back. They've asked us all back because come December they're laying a plaque to commemorate our service, to recognise us, *les dames écossaises de Royaumont*, the Scottish Women of Royaumont. It's sixty years since the war ended, if you can believe it, and they know if they wait for a hundred none of us will be left.

Whenever I contemplate my coming death, which I can still do without anxiety—it remains theoretical even now I suppose—I know there is one task left undone. I have found myself wondering what became of Violet, whether she's living, whether she's happy. And the older I get, the more I wonder, late in my night when it's her morning. Water under the bridge, I told her once, it's all just water under the bridge. Well, it seems Violet's not only alive but able to speak, to speak on behalf of the women of Royaumont, to speak, can you believe, about what women can do. It says so on the invitation. I finger the smooth white card, the logo embossed, the tail of the R so long it trails off the page. I turn the card over, half expecting the tail to continue on the back. I put the invitation back in the envelope.

At twenty-one years of age and alighting from the train in Paris, I felt as certain as I do now of my coming death that my life was truly beginning. The other life I'd lived, at Risdon with Daddy and Tom and at the Mater in Brisbane, even Al, was like a rather pleasant interval, a practice for the real life

that was now mine. I remember it was a grey day and the light refracted through the grimy roof windows of the station and gave everything a singular shining beauty. I thought I would never again see people so illuminated by the stark purpose of their lives.

I sit on the steps in the sun, teacup in hand, and contemplate the likelihood of death or travel.



At first it was the summers I remembered, long warm days under the palest blue skies, the cornflowers and iris and forget-me-nots lining the road through the Lys forest, the buzz of insects going about their work, Violet telling me lies. He loves you, he loves you not, she'd recite, skipping along the road until all the petals were gone. She'd finish with 'he loves you' no matter what the flower told her. I'd seen her cheat like that. Violet showed me an iris and told me what it was. Beautiful like you, she said. She couldn't believe I'd never seen one. They're common as weeds, she said. No offence. None taken.

But now in my mind's eye, it's winter, that first winter we arrived, Miss Ivens and me alighting from the train in Viarmes, the darkness descending, no one to meet us. And there's Miss Ivens herself, charging ahead to walk, not a thought for our luggage, abandoned on the station platform when we'd failed to rouse the porter. 'Where's M Bousier?' Miss Ivens said, as if I might know. I shrugged but she'd already moved off down the hill at a cracking pace—even with my long stride I could barely match her—turning back to me every now and then, those large straight teeth somehow adding to my trepidation, all the better to eat you with going through my head. What was I doing? I'd boarded a train with a perfect stranger. I'd listened to her story

for an hour from Paris and now I was following her to a place called Royaumont. 'Better to walk at any rate,' Miss Ivens said. 'Nothing like seeing it on foot,' turning back to smile, 'the world, I mean,' and then she was off again.

'You should know that you and I and the rest are at the beginning of something momentous,' she'd said on the train, a curl of her dark hair slipped from its moorings and dangling between her eyes. 'It's going to be grand,' she insisted, reading something in my face that suggested I disagreed. I'd been assigned to the British Casualty Clearing Station in Soissons, close to Amiens where we thought Tom had gone. A Sergeant Fleming would be there to meet my train unless Matron had sent word, and no one sent word of anything in these strange days, not as far as I could tell. I'd signed up in London with the Red Cross and already, I'd had orders changed, waiting those three days in Paris, I assumed because of a change in the fighting. And then I'd happened upon Miss Ivens and everything changed again.

I was just what she needed, Miss Ivens said. She smiled so quickly I almost missed it. Her French wasn't the best, she said, book-learned, she could write but no one understood her spoken word, and no one else at Royaumont had time. 'You'll be my shadow,' she said, 'my voice. Just what I need. I can't believe our good fortune. There's a little work to be done at the abbey, of course,' dismissing it like a fly with a flick of her wrist. 'The building's not quite ready. It's rather old,' making shapes with her hands, collapsing them into her lap. 'I need someone who understands the language and can liaise with the tradesmen, someone with common sense. I believe that's you.' If I was silent, she never noticed, just kept on talking, more to herself really, setting out on her fingers the work she wanted to do that night,

the supplies they'd need to order before Christmas, the long list of people to meet the next day. I listened.

And then Viarmes itself, at the base of the hill, a main street, a few shops, already shut up tight although it was barely four pm, a little stone square defined by the church and town hall, the smell of incense—benediction or death—and we soon saw which. There was a funeral procession ahead of us. A boy had died, we learned from some stragglers. His leg went under a plough and no one knew to stanch bleeding. Miss Ivens was furious at that. Knowledge was something the whole world had a right to and how could they, how could they, not be told?

We turned off the main road, watched the funeral at its slow march behind a black motor vehicle—M Bousier, our taxi driver, was also the undertaker—heading across a cold field towards the little cemetery in the nearby town of Asnières-sur-Oise. We took a narrow road out of town, more a path really, which was flanked on either side by pine trees. 'Blanche de Castille rode her horses through here,' Miss Ivens said. Perhaps I looked perplexed. 'Her son built the abbey, Royaumont. Louis IX, the saint.' She sniffed the air. 'They were all white—the horses I mean. But Blanche was marvellous. Such an example to women. I'd love to have known her, just for an hour.'

We passed a grand house that at first I took for the abbey Miss Ivens had told me about. 'No no,' Miss Ivens said, 'that's the palace, built by the last abbot. Absolute indulgence. M Gouin lives there now. Delightful fellow but completely impractical,' as if I should know who M Gouin was or why we might wish he were practical.

It began to snow. Miss Ivens took no notice, walked on ahead, asked me, without turning back, what I knew about drains. Drains were a problem. I must talk to Mrs Berry. Berry

knew something but not enough; we needed a plumber. I should go into Asnières tomorrow and arrange it. I should take Berry although she didn't speak the language. 'Berry is a brick, though, she's good for me. Don't know what I'd do without her.' And then forging ahead, failing at first to notice that I'd stopped, turning, seeing me, laughing, for I was looking straight up, my mouth wide open. 'Snow,' she said matter-of-factly. I must have looked blankly at her. 'You've never seen snow?'

'No,' I said. 'Frost in the winter, but nothing like this.'

'Wonderful stuff. We'll make angels tomorrow if there's time.'

By the time we turned into the abbey grounds, the day was almost gone. The pines of the long drive were newly dusted with the snow which also dotted our coats and Miss Ivens's hair. She looked wild, a little mad even. She charged ahead once more, the gravel along the drive crunching with an alarming efficiency under her boots. Snow makes the world quieter and louder at the same time, she said quite loudly. Imagine never having seen snow, she said more softly, so softly I had to strain to hear, for I'd stopped again and was standing still. I was standing still, for when you round that last bend and begin along that long drive, you see Royaumont Abbey for the first time, and you never forget it. You must stand still, or you'll miss the chance. Even at the end of that cold amazing day, even with the wonder of my first snow at hand, the abbey took my breath away. And the feeling in my heart? That feeling surprised me, for it was joy, joy and fear in about equal measure. I now know the name of that feeling to be awe.

Until three months before, I'd only ever travelled between Stanthorpe and Brisbane, less than two hundred miles, the towns at each end with their proud little post offices and hotels as their architectural achievements, the space between them

mostly bush. Royaumont Abbey was some other order of place, a feat of engineering or evidence of God, depending on how you saw the world. To one side were the remains of the chapel, recollecting a structure that once nudged the spires of Paris's Notre Dame in size but was now just one tall tower looking as if it might topple over. Next to the church tower were the monks' buildings, menacing in the winter twilight. I could just make out the window recesses along the front wall. No light shone within.

I know I was exhausted. My life at home had been simple, divided between Risdon and the Mater nursing quarters, with the occasional train trip to St Joseph's to see one of Tom's teachers about something he'd done or hadn't done. I knew from one day to the next what lay in front of me and mostly it was much like what lay behind me. And now this, where every day was full of the strange. And through it all—the ship journey from Australia, the days in London, the Channel crossing, the days in Paris—in the back of my mind was that other thought that could creep up on me when I least expected, as it did now, the thought of my brother Tom, telling me of his plan to run away, me agreeing, letting him go when Daddy said I should have told him, should have done whatever I could to stop him.

Tom now, just fifteen years old, somewhere out there in this cold, fighting the wicked Germans.

As we drew closer, I made out two large wooden doors. Darkness would soon be with us but no light shone inside the abbey. I looked to Miss Ivens, her hair flecked with snow, her arms out to the sides, hands not touching anything, those enormous boots. It was so cold now my breath caught in my throat. The doors looked as if they hadn't been opened for years. Miss Ivens knocked, waited, said, more to herself than

to me, 'Where the devil are they?' I still heard no sound nor saw a light within. A notion lodged in my brain that there was no one here but us. It took hold quickly, the cold feeding my imagination. Miss Ivens was mad. She'd led me here to the pixie twilight on a merry chase, and her talk of drains and equipments and hospitals was nothing but a product of her madness. Oh Iris, you fool, now look what you've done, acted impulsively, followed your most wrongheaded instincts, followed this mad Englishwoman, and here you are in the middle of a dark forest with no way back.

I was not given to hysterics, but the cold, exhaustion, the newness of it all, Miss Ivens herself so much larger than life, like a character from Dickens, made me less than logical. My excited mind worked quickly. What would we do? We had no lamp to walk by, and the road was rough in parts. There had been a light in the window of the last house, the Gouin residence; Miss Ivens had pointed it out. He might be impractical, he might be Mr Ivens for all I knew, but if we could make it back we might be able to beg a room. There was sure to be a train to Paris in the morning. I could be in Soissons by nightfall. I could be back at what I was supposed to be doing. Daddy need never know. And Miss Ivens could . . . Miss Ivens rapped on the door a second time. Just as I was about to suggest that we go quickly to try to reach somewhere before dark, the door swung open with a whine.



My thoughts were interrupted by the telephone and at first it sounded exactly like the porter's horn at Royaumont. That's what confused me. How we came to dread that sound. Of course, the porter's horn—what was her name, a big girl from Newcastle

with fair hair—was nothing like a telephone but it took me a moment to come back to my senses and realise where I was, in my house in Paddington not at Royaumont waiting for wounded.

I got up slowly, felt a little dizzy in the bright sun. I stood there until it passed, using the railing to keep from falling. The phone was still ringing. I bent down and picked up my teacup and saucer and went inside. I walked carefully.

They say that our greatest sense for memory is the sense of smell and Royaumont was full of smells, the perfume we sprinkled on our beds to try to rid ourselves of the awful reek of decay that always accompanied new patients, the clean smell of snow, almost like petrol and, later, the spring flowers, the fresh cut grass of summer. But it was the sound of that horn I couldn't get out of my mind now. I can just imagine what Miss Ivens would say to me. 'Oh for goodness' sake, Iris, who cares a fig for a silly horn?' But I know she'd have remembered it too after we left. That horn ruled our lives. You'd hear it in your sleep, over and over.

The phone stopped before I reached the kitchen. Then it started again. I walked over, steadied myself on the bench. 'Hello?' I felt like my voice was coming from somewhere else.

'Iris, is that you? Are you all right?'

'Grace. Yes, I'm fine. I was just out the front in the sun and I dozed off.' My lips wouldn't work properly and I could still hear that porter's horn, in the distance now, as if I were one of the patients approaching in the ambulance along the drive. I wonder did it reassure them that someone knew they were coming, that someone would help them now, ease their suffering.

'I just rang to say I'll drop in on my way to work,' Grace said.

'You don't need to do that. I'm fine really.'

‘I’ve got time. David’s taking the girls to school and he said he’ll take Henry to day care. I’ll just pop in.’

Grace had started ‘popping in’ a lot over recent months, ever since the appointment with the heart doctor. But I didn’t want to see her today. The invitation had unsettled me. Violet Heron. Violet Heron, after all these years. ‘The flower bird girls’, she called us, Iris Crane and Violet Heron, the flower bird girls. What young fools we were.



The door swung all the way open and there was a woman, dressed like Miss Ivens, in a long grey skirt, black boots and a coat, brandishing a candle lantern. ‘Oh Frances, thank God it’s you. We had no idea what had happened.’ The woman was considerably smaller than Miss Ivens and me. She held the lamp high to guide Miss Ivens in. Around her everything was blackness.

‘I missed the morning train,’ Miss Ivens said. ‘And there shouldn’t have been another. They ran two today because there was none yesterday.’ Miss Ivens started making her way inside, and the woman moved to close the door. ‘Wait, wait,’ Miss Ivens said. ‘Come in, Iris, quick, before Cicely shuts you out.’

‘Who’s this?’ Cicely made way for me to walk past her and then quickly closed the door, although there seemed little point; inside was colder than out. I could just make out her face in the candlelight.

‘Cicely Hamilton, may I present Miss Iris Crane, recently of Stanthorpe, Australia, come to rescue us from my ineptitude.’

‘Charmed, I’m sure,’ Cicely said, in a way that suggested she wasn’t at all. ‘And what will Miss Crane be doing?’ I felt like a speck she’d found while dusting.

‘She’s a nurse,’ Miss Ivens said enthusiastically, ignoring Cicely’s tone. ‘And she speaks French like a native.’ It was the first time I saw the skill Miss Ivens had for ignoring a person’s faults. Initially, I thought she was lacking perception but it wasn’t that. It was that she always dug deeper to find the better feelings inside people and encourage those. Their petty feelings she simply ignored. I later saw that even the worst of them often rose to her expectations.

‘Good for her,’ Cicely said. ‘Do we need more nurses?’

‘Nice to meet you,’ I said, for something to say. I felt the entire distance between Australia and England, between Cicely Hamilton and me, could be heard in our voices. I hadn’t felt it at all with Miss Ivens, whose Warwickshire accent was warmer and more musical. Cicely Hamilton’s voice was deep and melodious, floating above us to the cold ceilings. Next to Cicely’s, my voice was harsh, like the summer sun, you couldn’t escape from under it. With every syllable, she alienated me further. I wanted to remain silent, not hit the walls with my loud flat notes.

‘Come through to the kitchen now,’ Cicely said warmly to Miss Ivens. ‘Quoyle’s done up a barley soup. No idea how. And we’ve bread and cheese. Oh, and a knife. Just the one, but a knife all the same. I think Quoyle got it in the village today. She’s charmed the locals, you know, without a word of French.’ She continued to ignore me and led the way through the abbey, holding her lamp above her head. At one stage I looked up to try to find the ceiling but the columns disappeared into darkness and then I tripped on the uneven stone floor and decided to keep my eyes on where we were going. I could smell the damp that had made its way up through the floor or down through the ceilings. There was the smell of animal droppings too. Something—rats, I assumed—scurried off as we approached.

After what seemed an age of turns and corridors, we came to a large square room with an enormous wood stove at its centre and oil lamps in makeshift holders along the walls. A dozen or so women were gathered on benches around one of two long tables. Each woman had a plate or bowl of sorts in front of her, none seeming to match any other. Most were empty. Some looked as if they'd been licked clean. In the middle of the table was a large tureen with the dregs of a thick soup beside a wooden board with torn pieces of bread and slabs of yellow butter. As I looked around the group, I was struck by how bright their eyes were.

'Look who I found at the door,' Cicely said. 'Here is Miss Ivens, home from Paris but without our beds.'

'That's not true,' Miss Ivens said, smiling. 'I found some mattresses that will do nicely, but we'll need to send up to the station for them. We've had to walk.' Miss Ivens told them about the funeral and M Bousier's being the undertaker. 'Terrible business,' she said. 'You think farmers would have some inkling that we can't live without blood but apparently not. It's asparagus they grow around these parts, isn't it, which likely doesn't bleed, and perhaps they don't keep animals. I have no idea where the local doctor was and didn't feel I should ask.' Cicely continued to watch Miss Ivens which meant I could study Cicely. Small and slightly built, full of nervous energy, she had a long handsome face, a Greek profile, and dark eyes that flitted about taking in everything except me. She couldn't have worked harder at ignoring me if she tried.

'Now what was I talking about?' Miss Ivens said. 'Ah yes, mattresses. Before you all go dreaming of feathers, they're far from that. And we'll be sharing for now. Cicely, perhaps one of the drivers could go?'

'I'll see who I can find,' Cicely said.

Although the kitchen was not warm, it was a furnace compared with the corridor we'd come from. Miss Ivens and I peeled off coats and gloves and scarves, dripping our melted snow onto the stone floor. We hung our things over the chairs that lined the wall.

'Quoyle,' Miss Ivens said to the woman standing over the stove. 'What's this you've made? Barley soup I hear.'

'Yes Miss and there's plenty more. Sit down now and eat.'

I was introduced. I don't remember now everyone I met but it must have been most of them. There was Quoyle, just mentioned, who'd worked as Miss Ivens's secretary for fifteen years in Liverpool, she said. She was happy to be the cook for now. 'But I'll turn my hand to anything,' she said. 'I'd have learned to be a nurse if it meant I could come here.' Quoyle was not a young woman, perhaps fifty, with spectacles, a substantial bosom, wide waist and hips. She looked as if she might prefer to be kind but with a temper that might at times let her down, like some of the matrons I'd worked for.

Seated at the table was Dr Agnes Savill who seemed not much older than me, tiny with curly hair, dark eyes and high rosy cheeks. Agnes was going to be responsible for the hospital's radiological equipment, Miss Ivens said. 'Responsible's going just a tad far,' Dr Savill said to Miss Ivens, and screwed up her nose and smiled at me. I loved her immediately.

And then there was Mrs Berry, whom Miss Ivens had mentioned on the train. She'd studied with Miss Ivens, although she looked older, long greying hair parted in the middle in two plaits to the side, big brown eyes, beatific smile. She looked like someone you could trust.

I remember the orderlies too, sitting in a group at the other end of the table, Vera Collum from Liverpool who grinned and

bade me welcome, and Marjorie Starr, a Canadian, who started singing a song about bears she thought I might know but didn't, the others whose names have gone now. They were like excited schoolgirls at a play, giggling and hooting and talking among themselves. They'd come to do whatever was needed, Collum told me. She was a journalist and photographer before the war. 'But here I'm happy to be a mere orderly,' she said.

Dr Savill and Mrs Berry made room for Miss Ivens and me at one end of the table. I realised I hadn't eaten since early morning when I'd set out from the pension for the station. I was hungry and the soup, fairly plain in all probability, tasted heavenly. The bread, my first taste of a fresh baguette, was a marvel.

Miss Ivens talked as she ate. She seemed to have boundless energy. 'Ruth, tell Iris about the drains. Iris knows about drains.'

At Risdon we had a bore whose water tasted of the earth and showed its red-soil pedigree. I had no experience of drains and hadn't given any indication that I did.

'I think the cesspits need to be emptied,' Mrs Berry said, leaning forward to meet my eyes. She had a deep quiet voice. 'Either that or the grease trap's not working. We've a plumber coming in the morning.'

'Good, well have Iris with you when you meet him. She can tell him what to do. It's not the trap. It's a blockage in the pipe. I'm sure of it.' Mrs Berry smiled at Miss Ivens and then at me.

'And then perhaps you and Iris should go into town, find out who we should see about letting the locals know we're here. I'll warrant they'll be glad to have a hospital nearby. Make sure you tell them we're Scottish doctors.' I must have looked puzzled. 'The Auld Alliance. Scotland and France against the English. The French have long memories. I'm perfectly willing to be Scottish if it makes them happy.'

Dr Savill turned to me, those dark curls framing her pretty face. She asked how long I'd been in France. 'Three days,' I said. 'I'm actually going to Soissons but Miss Ivens asked if I might come here on the way.'

'She's going to be my assistant, Agnes,' Miss Ivens said. 'The new hospital administrator. She speaks French like she grew up here.'

'Isn't that my job?' Cicely said. She was standing over at the door and I was surprised she could even hear what we were saying.

'Cicely,' Miss Ivens said and smiled, 'you're our bookkeeper. You can't be running round after me all day as well.' Cicely turned and walked out of the room without saying anything more.

'Poor you,' Dr Savill said to me. 'Can you work twenty-three hours a day and keep four million things going at once?'

'Stop it, you'll terrify the poor girl and we can't have that,' Miss Ivens said. 'Tell me what's happened about the x-ray machines?' She reached across and tore a piece of bread from the loaf and spread it thickly with butter she'd put on her plate.

'Cicely wired Edinburgh again today,' Dr Savill said. 'No one will freight for us. As soon as they know who we are, they tell us there's no room.'

'Well, let's just tell them we're someone else,' Miss Ivens said. 'Is it the Scottish or the Women they object to? I assume Hospitals are all right.' She bit into the bread.

'Either? Both? Elsie's got a bit of a reputation, you know. She wouldn't come out against the hunger strikes.'

'Elsie Inglis runs our organisation,' Miss Ivens said to me after she'd swallowed the bread. 'The Scottish Women's Hospitals. You'll meet her soon.' And then, to Dr Savill, 'Let me see what I can do tomorrow. My father's company uses a Greek shipping

group. They might be able to carry the heavier equipment. We're not fools, just women. If I get a chance . . .'

'Did you want me, Frances?' A new face had appeared at the door. It was another woman, tiny and slight, younger even than Dr Savill by the look of her. She smiled over to me, pursed lips, raised eyebrows, like a little pixie.

'Ah, Violet my love. Mattresses,' Miss Ivens said. 'We left them at the station. Can you go up in the car?'

'For a mattress, I'll drive to Paris,' she said. Her voice was surprisingly deep for such a little thing. She looked at me. She had green eyes like a cat, with blonde hair that fell to her shoulders in soft curls. 'You must be Iris.' She read the surprise on my face. 'Word travels fast in a house full of women. Cicely Hamilton's got your name in her book. Want to come back into town?'

I didn't. I was exhausted. 'Of course. I'll get my coat.'

I used my bread to mop up the rest of my soup—when in Rome—then got up, pulled on my coat and followed the woman out into the cold abbey.

'I'm Violet Heron,' she said just outside the kitchen door.

'Iris Crane,' I said, taking the warm dry hand she offered.

'Flower bird,' she said. I must have looked puzzled. 'Our names—we're both flower birds.'

I laughed. 'Yes, I suppose we are.'

'Well, come on Miss Flower Bird. Let's flit.'

We walked back through the abbey, taking a different route from the one I'd taken with Miss Ivens. Violet carried a lantern. 'What did you mean, Cicely Hamilton has my name in her book?' I said.

'She keeps a book on troublemakers,' Violet said. 'She thinks you're a troublemaker. But don't worry. My name's the first entry.'

Yours won't be the last. Eventually we'll all be in there and then she'll be alone, won't she?

'Why?'

'Who knows? Cicely's an *actress*.' Violet said this with considerable emphasis, as if it would explain everything. 'She thinks she's in charge. Frances and the rest go along with her because she's a good bookkeeper. But she doesn't like anyone getting between her and Frances. If Frances likes you, and she does, apparently, you're doomed.'

'I think I went to school with girls like Cicely. You can never please them. You're better off ignoring them.'

'You got that right, my dear.' Violet's voice had started to echo. We'd moved into a large space.

'I can smell horses,' I said.

'We're in the refectory. The Uhlan used it as a stable, dear hearts.'

'The Uhlan? I thought Miss Ivens said they were Cistercians.'

'You're out by five centuries and a mile of vocations. The Uhlan are the German cavalry. The Cistercians are the monks who built the abbey.'

'The Germans were here?'

'My word. Two months ago, Royaumont was between them and Paris, more or less. The mayor of Asnières fled and left the poor old curé Father Rousselle to meet the Germans at the crossroads into town. Even the government of Paris evacuated. Apparently, what stopped the Germans was the taxi cabs. Some French general commandeered all the Paris taxi cabs to take more soldiers to the front. The Germans retreated. I'd retreat too if I were up against a Paris taxi cab. They're even more daring than the ones in London.'

The smell of horses, which had always seemed to me sweet and honest, was suddenly associated with the thing I most dreaded, the Germans who'd started the war. I dared not breathe lest I took some of their evil into my lungs. I thought of Tom again suddenly. I had a picture of him in my mind as clear as day, younger than he really was, a boy of twelve out there on his own in the cold snow, and I felt a pull at my heart.

Violet said she'd been in Paris in the summer but now it was like a different city. 'Miss Ivens says they've only just got over the last war with Germany. Life's just dismal. You can't even get absinthe these days.'

'Absinthe?'

'Marvellous stuff, better than champagne,' Violet said. 'But it's been banned because it makes you feel so good. We're not supposed to feel good.'

We emerged into the cloister and I was relieved to breathe the clean air. It was colder than within the abbey now and the stars were out, the snow a white so bright it was nearer blue. I wrapped the two lengths of my scarf around my neck.

Violet turned to me and smiled. 'Who taught you to wind a scarf?' She pulled at the scarf gently and repositioned it, making a long side and wrapping it twice. 'There,' she said. 'Snug as a bug.' It was something Daddy would say as he tucked Tom and me into bed at night, and I felt a twinge of homesickness.

We were walking down one side of the cloister. Violet pulled a pack of cigarettes from her coat pocket and offered me one. I took it. She pulled one out for herself and stopped and struck a match and held it. I put my face forward and sucked on the cigarette as I'd seen others do. I leaned back and breathed it in and coughed violently and pulled my face away. Violet extinguished the match. 'Do you smoke?' she asked.

‘No,’ I said, through my cough, holding the foul thing away from me.

‘Oh for goodness’ sake, you don’t have to,’ she said, taking the cigarette from me and putting her own back into the pack as she nursed mine between her lips. ‘Aren’t you a trick?’ She led me out of the cloister, around the back of the abbey. ‘These are our garages,’ Violet said. ‘Mine’s this one.’

‘You can drive a truck?’ It was an enormous contraption, two seats in front and a canvas-covered tray behind. I’d driven a car just the once, the Carsons’, over their top paddock which was big enough so I wouldn’t hit anything, or at least that’s what Tom had said. The steering wheel rattled under my hands. The engine was louder than anything I’d ever heard. It was nothing like a fast horse, which was the way Tom had described it. I screamed at him to tell me where the brake was, slammed it on as soon as he did, stalled the car and never asked for a drive again. Tom was the opposite, of course, loved anything with a machine in it, drove the car whenever he could, much to Daddy’s consternation. They would have fought about cars, Daddy and Tom, if they’d ever got to it. But they had plenty of other things to get through first.

‘This isn’t a truck,’ Violet said. ‘It’s an ambulance, or it will be.’ She pulled herself up into the cabin, holding her cigarette between her lips again to free up her hands.

‘I might be a trick,’ I said, ‘but you’re amazing. Did you study with Miss Ivens?’

‘Study? Oh God, no. I’m not a doctor. Whatever gave you that idea?’

‘I don’t know. You called Miss Ivens Frances.’

‘Frances is her name, darling. No, I’m a driver. I’m going to drive this ambulance.’

‘So, did you know Miss Ivens from before?’

‘No. They advertised for drivers so I thought I’d come along. You had to bring your own car.’

‘So how old are you?’ She seemed so young to have so much experience.

‘Twenty-four. You?’

‘Twenty-one. You own a car?’ I said.

‘It was a friend’s but yes, it’s mine now. I don’t think he’ll want it back when he sees what they’ve done to it.’

‘Are all the drivers women?’ I asked.

‘We’ve brought two men because the Croix Rouge said women can’t drive in a war zone. Frances says we’ll see about that and they’ll just need to get used to us. But as for the rest of us, we’re women, yes, last time I checked.’

‘How on earth are they going to make that abbey into a hospital? It’s a wreck.’

‘You’re not supposed to say that. We all have to pretend the abbey “just needs a little work”.’ It was a perfect imitation of Miss Ivens, complete with the little shake of the head. I laughed.

‘So, tell me about Australia.’ Violet had her right arm over the back of my seat as she reversed. She smelled like flowers and spoke like my English teacher had implored us to speak. I wondered how you could muster up the energy for such perfect diction all the time, but I suppose it was what she was used to. ‘My brother had a book about Australia and I’ve always wanted to go there.’

‘What do you want to know?’

‘Is it true the men are giants?’

‘Well, I’ve nothing to compare them with except the few little Frenchmen I met at the railway station. But based on Miss Ivens, I’d say women from Warwickshire are giants.’

'Amazons. She is truly wonderful, isn't she?' Violet said.

'Is she a bit mad?'

'Oh yes, completely, but don't you find mad people interesting? They go out in the deep where something's happening. The rest of us just bathe in the shallows. I'd like to be mad. Wouldn't you?'

'Not at all,' I said. 'No, thank you.'

'Well, I don't think you're too much at risk, at any rate,' Violet said. 'Nor me, more's the pity.'

'So, what made you decide to come here?' I said. Violet was so charming and sophisticated. I couldn't imagine her working for a hospital.

'What else would I do? Sit at home? We're at war. I don't know. Why did you come?'

'It's complicated,' I said. 'My young brother ran away and signed up. Our father told him he wasn't to go but he went anyway. He's very headstrong. So I'm to find him and bring him home.'

'Is your father a pacifist? How exotic.'

'I don't know. What's a pacifist?'

'You know, peace at any cost. Lay down your weapons. I wouldn't tell anyone else if I were you. We're all pretty patriotic at the moment. God save and all that.'

'I wouldn't say my father's a pacifist,' I said. 'Actually, he has a pretty bad temper if it comes to it and doesn't mind taking anyone on. But he doesn't believe we should go to war.' Daddy's older brother had been killed in the Boer War and it broke their mother's heart. He said Australia wasn't Britain and shouldn't be in a British war.

I peered into the snow ahead of us. 'It's very dark.'

‘Night tends to do that. Cicely said you were supposed to be in Soissons with the hospital there. Frances has told her to “fix it will you dear”. I think Cicely’s planning to ship you off as soon as she can.’

I smiled. ‘I think you’re right about that. The Red Cross gave me a choice—a hospital ship in the Aegean, nursing typhoid cases, or France, where there were vacancies in Soissons. When we last heard from Tom, he mentioned Amiens so I asked to go to Soissons. To be honest, I don’t quite know what possessed me to follow Miss Ivens,’ I said.

‘I do. She’s put one of her spells on you,’ Violet said. ‘Frances could convince rain to fall upwards.’

‘She probably could.’ I laughed. ‘And I’m very glad to have come to meet you all. It sounds marvellous, what you’re planning to do. But I really must go tomorrow. I’m supposed to be looking for Tom, not having fun.’

‘Surely you can do both,’ Violet said. ‘We’re just as near Amiens as Soissons is, and we’re a good deal nearer Paris, more to the point. It’s criminal to be too far from Paris when one is living in France, my dear. Perhaps you could just stay with us until you find him. That wouldn’t hurt.’ She looked over at me, screwing up her nose and giving me a little pixie smile.

‘Perhaps I could,’ I said. ‘I mean, it’s not as if I’ll be able to locate him just like that anyway.’

‘Exactly. I imagine it might be quite difficult to find one young man in all this war. Even if he started in Amiens, he would have moved south with the troops by now.’ I was nodding agreement. I hadn’t given much thought to how I’d actually locate Tom, and Violet was right. It might take quite a bit of time. ‘Hurrah,’ she said, although I hadn’t said anything. ‘Someone I can have a laugh with. I have to warn you, Iris,

the others take everything very seriously. And don't get me wrong. I like being at Royaumont and I'm frightfully serious, but goodness me a little fun now and then never goes astray.' I didn't reply.

'So why does your father want you to take your brother home?' Violet said after a pause.

'He's only fifteen,' I said. I felt a pull of emotion. 'We're very close, Tom and I.' Suddenly I thought I might cry. I narrowed my eyes to stop the tears.

'Oh, that *is* young,' Violet said, failing to notice my upset. 'And so you've come all that way, all by yourself?'

'Yes,' I said, recovering my composure. 'Actually, the ship journey was fun. But then we were held up in Folkestone because of the Channel storms, then Boulogne, then Paris. I've been to the train station for three days running but there were no trains to Soissons. The line's been blown up.'

Violet laughed. 'There is a war on, dear.'

'So I hear. I didn't mind at all. I loved the station, just watching all the people.'



Gare du Nord had been exactly as I'd imagined it, the rafters thickly lined with pigeons, moving about aimlessly, mirroring the people milling about below. The uniforms were there, the khaki of the British, the blue and red of the French who looked so gallant wrapped in their greatcoats with their caps low. Ordinary French people were scattered among the soldiers, their baskets and bags and need to travel in front of them like signs against enchantment. Porters were moving about slowly as if there had never been a war. They looked at their watches, at their shiny shoes, and cast sly glances at the soldiers.

On the second day, having confirmed the train was cancelled again, I'd left the station and wandered the city. 'We weren't supposed to be on the streets unaccompanied but how could I stay inside?' I said. 'It was Paris,' I added, trying to sound sophisticated like Violet. And it *was* Paris, the Paris that Claire had made so real for me. From the way Daddy had talked, I'd expected the city to be in ruins because of the war but it was nothing like that at all. You'd hardly have known there was a war on, other than that the streets seemed quieter than they did in the pictures I'd seen. I went to all the places I'd read about. I started to feel as if I could be someone else, not plain Iris Crane from Risdon but someone who might be present at important places and important moments, someone more like Violet seemed to me to be, perfectly relaxed in the world. This new Iris ate lunch in a café in Montmartre called Chartiers—baked ham with cabbage that tasted heavenly, like nothing she'd ever eaten at home—and drank red wine that came in a little glass bottle and tasted like the fruit it had once been. In the afternoon, she stood below the Arc de Triomphe. From there, she could look straight ahead to the Place de la Concorde, right to the Tuileries and beyond those to the palace and Eiffel Tower. She walked along a street on her way back to the pension kicking a little rounded black pebble that skipped along in front of her merrily. The street was empty but for an old man in a cap with an old dog and a boy playing marbles. She kicked the stone and felt she had found perfection itself.

Later I wondered if that girl, that Iris, was still there on the street in the Latin Quarter kicking the stone, and I could go back and find her, and change the rest of the story. But of course, you can't do that. If I was to be that new Iris, I would have to give up the old Iris. There would be no going back. There never is.

At dinnertime, I ate a ham and cheese toasted sandwich that came with more wine in a little glass jug. I felt giddy when I returned to my pension where my roommate—still waiting for her orders to be finalised—was playing solitaire as she had been when I'd left. How could you be in Paris, I thought, and play solitaire? I didn't say as much. I'd already given up on the notion that Mary Jefford and I would be friends. I was relieved she wasn't coming with me to Soissons. Mary had experience with typhoid. She'd opted to go to the Aegean to serve on the hospital ship.

I told Violet about Mary. 'In the four days we spent together, counting one night on the held-up train from Dieppe, she gave me lessons in the job of nursing soldiers. Her most memorable tip, and it had many memorable tips to compete with, was what to do when a soldier gets an erection while you're sponging him. You simply carry around a glass of iced water and a teaspoon and give his pecker a tap. That's what she called it. "Problem solved," she said.'

Violet laughed. 'No, she didn't say that.'

I nodded. She did.

On the third day, I'd been fully ready to go to Soissons. Matron had sent word that the train would surely come today and I'd be on my way. I said goodbye to Mary again and set off.

I remember seeing another nurse in a wool coat like mine hurrying along the platform with a confidence I admired. She was older than me, perhaps middle forties. I thought to wave but she didn't look my way. Nearer me was a young French couple, leaning towards one another, focusing on a bundle the woman held in her arms, an infant. They looked so forlorn, I was wondering whether I should ask them if they needed help when the man looked up past the woman and child and met

my gaze. His eyes were dark and wet. He looked from my face to my shoulder, saw the red cross emblazoned on my coat, the red cross of hope. 'Please, please, will you help us?' he asked in French. 'Our little one is sick.'

I could hear the tension in his voice, like Daddy if he ever had to ask for help. I went over immediately, with no idea what I might be able to do. 'I'll do what I can,' I said. I led the mother, whose gaze was fixed on the child, over to a bench. When she did look up at me finally I saw dark smudges under her eyes and tear lines down her face. I put a hand on her shoulder and smiled with what I hoped was reassurance. She kept both arms firmly around the child. Her husband remained a little distance away.

I was trying to remember what I'd learned about newborns, for the child looked very new. A boy, his mother told me, her voice croaky. He'd been sick with a fever for three days and they'd come to Paris but there were no doctors available because of the war so they were going back home. The night before, the boy had gone completely rigid—they'd thought he was dead—and then he'd slept. He'd been asleep all night now. The woman's voice shook with emotion. I kept my own voice as even as I could, remembering how Al would do this when faced with strong emotion and how it calmed patients. 'Is he on the breast?' I asked matter-of-factly. He was. 'Was the fever very high?' She nodded, yes. The boy had had a seizure, I surmised, brought on by the fever, no bad thing but not really relevant to the underlying condition, which was . . . 'I'll need to have a look at him,' I said. She brought the child down to cradle him in her arms. I felt his forehead. 'The fever's broken,' I said. 'That's good.' Gently, I peeled back the shawl and a blanket. I checked glands, no swelling; pupils, normal as far as I could tell; belly, no distension. 'He has a rash,' his mother said.

‘Show me,’ I said. There were serious illnesses that started with fevers and moved to pox. The mother cradled the child in her left arm and lifted the nightdress with her right hand. I pulled up a little vest. The skin was red with raised white papules, all around the child’s torso. It wasn’t chickenpox, which came out everywhere, nor shingles in a newborn. Nor measles; the spots were too small. And then I knew it. It was false measles. A high fever resolves into a rash like this that spreads. Roseola was the name. It used to be confused with measles, thus the common name of false measles.

‘I’m pretty sure it’s harmless,’ I said. ‘The fever has worn him out. Exhausted, needs fluid.’ I was talking more to myself now. The little boy’s lips were as dry as his mother’s. ‘And so do you. You must look after yourself to keep your milk. Have you expressed?’ I didn’t know the word and made a pumping action with my hand on my own breast. The girl smiled for the first time and she was beautiful suddenly. She had, she said. ‘Good. He’ll wake soon, I hope, and be ravenous. Feed him as often as he likes. The rash should move out from his middle before fading in a day or so. If it does anything differently, you should find a doctor.’ The girl looked worried again. ‘I’m a nurse,’ I said, ‘not a doctor.’

The other nurse I’d noticed when I’d arrived at the station earlier was talking to the little porter. I wondered if I should ask her advice. I caught snatches of the conversation. The porter was rocking from the balls of his feet to his heels as she spoke. ‘I’m sorry madam, he said in French then, there are no sleeping cars on account of the war. You will have to sit up like everyone else. The journey is not long. Oh, for God’s sake man, she replied, can’t you speak English?’ She made a pillow of her hands and put her head there in a mock sleep. She even snored gently. The porter

told her again that there were no berths because the journey was too short. She wouldn't need sleep. Her cheeks were flushed with exasperation. She looked straight at me then and called over. 'Can you help me?' she said. 'He doesn't seem to understand.'

'Mattresses,' I said in French to the porter. 'She has mattresses she wants you to put on the train.'

'*Oui*,' said the little porter. 'Of course. Why didn't she say so?'

The porter went off to get help with the mattresses, and the woman came over. I stood. We were about the same height, a rare enough experience for me. I had been the tallest in my class all through school.

'You're a marvel,' the woman said. 'If I don't get their beds on the train, my girls will have another rough night of it. Frances Ivens.' She held out her gloved hand, which I took.

'Iris Crane.'

'You're not English.'

'Australian.'

'Where on earth did you learn to speak French?' Before I could answer she was looking beyond me to the mother and child.

'Have you nursed babies? This child is sick,' I said. 'I didn't look after children very much in my training.'

'You're a nurse to boot,' she said. 'Why don't you come with me?'

'What?' I said. 'Where?' But Miss Ivens had moved on to the child and his mother. She smiled and I felt a great sense of relief. 'My bag's over there, dear one,' she said, placing a hand on the young woman's shoulder. 'I'll be back,' and she strode off, returning directly with a little leather case. When she opened it up, I saw the stethoscope and instruments, and that was when I realised she was a doctor, not a nurse.

'I really didn't expect to see a woman doctor,' I said to Violet now.

'You're lucky Frances didn't bite your head off. I shouldn't think she'd like being mistaken for a nurse. She's even particular about women doctors being employed as nurses. That's what they do at some of the hospitals, employ women doctors but only to nurse. Frances says we'll never do that at Royaumont.'

Miss Ivens sat down beside the mother and confidently took the sleeping boy into her own arms and examined him while I recounted the symptoms.

'And what did you conclude?' she said, looking at me so intensely I felt nervous and unsure.

I told her what I'd told the couple. 'The rash,' I said.

'Well done. It's roseola. Reassure this poor woman her child will live.' Miss Ivens smiled at the mother. 'She must make sure he takes in fluid while he has the diarrhoea. She should give him sugar water. Where are they from?'

I asked the woman. 'Senlis,' she said.

'That's near enough,' Miss Ivens said. She took out a pen and scrap of paper and wrote down an address. 'Tell them that's a hospital where they'll always find a doctor who can help them.' I told the woman who thanked us both, tears streaming down her face. 'Tell her she must bring him when he's well so we can see if he needs extra care. The seizure has probably done no harm, but . . . we don't need to worry about that just yet.'

I interpreted as confidently as I could. 'You need to bring your baby to the hospital when he's better,' I said. 'No urgency.'

'Where did you say you were going?' Miss Ivens asked me when the couple left us.

'Soissons,' I said. 'My train has just arrived.' I was disappointed, to be honest, to see the Soissons train running. I'd hoped for another day in Paris.

‘That’s no good,’ Miss Ivens said. ‘I need an interpreter. Come to Royaumont.’

‘Where’s Royaumont?’

‘That way,’ Miss Ivens said, pointing north. ‘Not far. And much more exciting. Where are your things? Here’s the porter with the mattresses and the train will be off soon. Hurry now or we’ll miss it and I don’t know when there’s another.’

‘But I have orders.’

‘I’ll take care of those.’



‘And so, here I am,’ I said to Violet. We’d arrived at the station in Viarmes. Violet pulled around and brought the car to a sudden stop next to the platform. Our bags and chattels were just as we’d left them, the straw mattresses piled against the back wall, our luggage supporting them on one side, my own portmanteau, everything I owned in the world, standing bravely against its first French snow. The station remained deserted. We worked together quickly in the cold to pack the truck. Violet left the headlamps burning so we could see what we were doing.

When we’d finished loading the truck, we climbed back in and set off for Royaumont. ‘I’ve still seen no sign of this war they keep talking about,’ I said. ‘And for all I know, Matron is writing to my father right now to say I’ve gone missing in Paris.’

‘I doubt they’ll even notice,’ Violet said. ‘And if they do, Frances will speak to someone who knows someone and the orders will disappear. She has a way. I know what you mean about the war, though. Royaumont’s so strange. You don’t imagine the war could ever touch us there.’

Violet told me she’d grown up in Cornwall where her family had lived for generations. ‘We’re the Cornwall Herons,’ she said,

with a hint of mockery in her voice. ‘My father’s father, Duxton Digby Heron, had an extensive collection of stamps, inherited by my father, Digby Duxton—the names are not a joke, by the way. My father sold the stamps to pursue his own hobbies of gambling and drink. Gets me where I live, he used to say. It certainly did. He died of liver failure at forty-four, no mean feat.

‘My mother, from a less wealthy and less unhappy Scottish family, tolerated my father until his untimely death, and inherited the estate. No love lost, that’s for sure, although the cousins are not happy about the estate falling to the Scots, and my mother does tend to rather rub their noses in it by inviting her family to stay. There’s no money left, of course, so the place is slowly falling apart.’

‘How old were you when your father died?’

‘Sixteen,’ Violet said. ‘Away at school. I went home to make sure there was no mistake, that Digby wasn’t lurking in some corner of the house. He was always a bit of a lurker. My mother thought me ghoulish when I insisted on viewing the body.’ Violet had lost a brother too, she said, to pneumonia, when she was eight.

Violet told me her family’s story as if it was all a big joke, and it was funny, the way she put it, and I even found myself laughing, but later I couldn’t help thinking how unhappy she must have been growing up in a house like that. When I told her about my own family, it seemed much happier, despite the fact my mother had died when I was only six.

‘My father remarried, a woman from a farm near us,’ I told Violet. ‘Claire’s French. Thus my competence in the language,’ I said in French.

‘Ah, the wicked stepmother,’ Violet said, in the same tone she’d told me about her own life, ‘with an added French twist.’

‘I’m afraid not,’ I said. ‘More like I was the wicked stepdaughter.’

The year I turned nine, my mother’s sister Veronica visited us from Scotland. Until then, Daddy had been happy enough the way the three of us—me and Daddy and Tom—had muddled on together, but Veronica had put an idea into Daddy’s head I should be among women and girls. So he packed me off to All Hallows’ in Brisbane to board. I felt completely at sea among those girls with their girls’ games and perfect hems on their tunics. When I went home for the Easter holidays in that first year, I said I hated school and didn’t want to go back but Daddy made me. Two weeks later he came to town and brought Claire.

We met in the parlour of the convent, a neat room with heavy drapes and the smell of wood polish. Claire was a small, slight woman with straight brown hair surrounding a heart-shaped face. Much later I learned she’d married into a family on the Italian side of the French–Italian border and she and her husband had come to Australia to run an orchard. He’d been killed when he fell from a ladder five years earlier. After his death, everyone had expected Claire would go home. But instead she stayed on and engaged a manager to run the orchard. She and Daddy met when Daddy took our bull over to service her cows.

I liked Claire instinctively, although I had no idea why they were there until they were taking their leave and Daddy put a hand to the small of her back to usher her out. ‘Do you hate it here very much?’ she said to me in strongly accented English. ‘Would you rather be back home?’ I nodded yes, unable to speak for fear of crying. The next week they married and the week after that, I was brought home.

‘I should have been grateful she got me a reprieve from boarding school,’ I said to Violet. ‘And she worked so hard to

win our love, Tom's and especially mine, even after the twins were born. But for a long time, I just felt angry. I hated her.'

Claire never tried to be a mother to Tom and me but she was kind and interested and we came to love her almost in spite of ourselves. I was worse than Tom, loyal to a mother I thought I could remember that he could never have known—she'd died of toxemia just after he was born. To her credit Claire ignored my seething anger. She played to my finer feelings and eventually dragged them out of me. When I think back now, having lived my life, I know she was one of the most truly good people I ever knew, willing to raise someone else's children and even to love them. I came to love her too. By the time I went back to boarding school, the twins, André and René, were born. It was so different for me to be a half-sister rather than the child mother I'd had to be to Tom. Claire welcomed whatever help I offered but never made me do more than that. She taught me French and made me love the Paris she conjured for me. She also taught me how to sew and cook, which I never would have learned otherwise. I'd been blessed really and knew it.

As Violet drove, I watched the snow fall lazily to earth in the beams of light in front of us. Something niggled at the edge of my consciousness, vague, indefinable, as though I was doing a jigsaw puzzle and I'd just put a piece in the wrong place. It hadn't worried me at all, what Violet had said about remaining at Royaumont instead of going to Soissons. In fact, it made me feel valued. Of course, it should have worried me. I was young, so young, I think now, not yet an adult, not truly, but with an adult responsibility that had been mine since I was six, that of caring for my brother. And it wasn't as if I was deciding to abandon Tom. I wasn't deciding anything really. Violet was right. Royaumont was as good as anywhere to stay while I searched for

Tom, and there was something about Miss Ivens that made a person want to muck in and help her. All those things were true. But as I look back, it was that point, the point I met Violet, so worldly and yet so welcoming, so convincing about how much fun it would all be, that was the point at which I went horribly horribly wrong.