

Dawn

**30<sup>th</sup> June, 1916**

He's killed a lot of men this morning, but this one, if he does it, will be so much harder.

He knows this one. He knows those hands, swollen now and dark with cuts, but he can remember how they held a pen or a cup of tea. That bruised mouth, creased with dried blood, still holds the remnant of a smile that he'd once courted.

He reaches out to touch the mouth, to wipe the blood, but stops himself; he mustn't wake them.

He looks at the clouds above the sandbags, warmed and made plump by a hint of dawn. It will be light soon. If he does it, he must do it quickly. He must be sure. If he does it, he must do it well.

He looks down at the pistol, turning it over in his hand. The little dents and scratches glint in the half-light. The wooden grip is marked with cross-hatched lines. He watches the pattern it makes in his palm; pinched white, then fading as the blood rushes back into his skin.

He can hear the soldiers coming along the trench. If he does it, he must do it now. But it's so much harder if you've known them, if you've *loved* them. And this one, if he does it, will be murder.

## The Mule Cart

**4<sup>th</sup> March, 1916**

‘Any more for the war?’ yells the cart driver, pulling hard on the reins. Hooves and cart wheels grind against wet cobbles.

Alex steps back, too late to stop mud spraying across his uniform.

The driver peers out from the hood of a rubber poncho. ‘Where you off to, Son?’

‘Neuve Chapelle,’ says Alex. ‘D Company, 12th battalion, Royal Sussex.’

‘Then tonight’s your lucky night! I’m going past exactly where you need to be.’

It’s taken the whole day for the train to bring Alex the sixty miles from the coast to Hazebrouk. He’s supposed to find his own way to the regiment from here. But he’s been outside the station, up and down the line of transport vehicles, covered supply lorries, officer’s motor cars, and nothing is going in his direction. It’s dark now and raining so hard he feels like he has to take deep breaths just to reach the air between the water. He’s soaked and cold. He hoped there would be something a bit more comfortable than an open mule cart, something covered at least.

‘There’s nothing else going up that far tonight, Son,’ says the driver, seeing Alex’s expression. ‘Go on, throw your valise in the back there.’ He jabs his thumb towards a pile of wooden crates in the cart behind him. ‘Just mind them bombs.’

Alex doesn’t move.

The driver laughs. ‘I’m joking with you, Son. Those are tins of stew! Climb up.’

Alex carefully places his valise in the back of the cart, making sure he doesn’t touch the crates. Then he climbs up and sits on the bench next to the driver.

‘Don’t ever eat that stew,’ says the driver, hunching over and snapping the reins.

‘That’s Maconochie stew in them tins. Eat your boots if you have to. But never that stew.’

The mules ease out into the flow of traffic and plod along the muddy road. ‘Just come off the ship, have you?’

‘No, I’ve been training in Etaples for the last two weeks.’

The driver stares. He wears an eye patch, the good eye glimmers like a wet billiard ball. ‘Training for what? How to shave?’

‘Officer training, actually,’ says Alex, lifting his chin and feeling for the epaulette on his greatcoat. ‘Second Lieutenant.’

The driver whistles and clicks his tongue as the mules, heads down, ears flicking, wet backs like black treacle, plod through the town.

Slowly, the red brick houses make way for flat, open fields and rows of poplar trees, swaying and hissing in the darkness. On the horizon, occasional blossoms of light, hazy behind the rain, hint at low rolling hills and woods that remind Alex of the South Downs. He thought everything would be more French, more foreign.

The driver glances at Alex. ‘How old are you, Sir? If you don’t mind my asking?’

‘I’ve just turned twenty,’ says Alex, although he doesn’t see what that has to do with anything.