



## Chapter One

### ‘The enemy is within the gates’



**21 March 1918: Bray, Northern France**

Aimee sped down the lane, her pigtail streaming out behind her. Dust clouds swirled up as her boots flew over the stony cart track and the cows near the hedges shied away. A mist hung over the fields and crept through the streets and wrapped itself around the chimneys like a scarf. The distant drumming of the thousands of guns to the east sounded louder and closer this morning.



Aimee skidded as she turned into the school gates and she tumbled through the door into the cool, dark hallway. The school cat, the colour of rust and ashes, jumped up from its seat outside the school office.

She threw open the classroom door and stood gasping to get her breath back. Master DuPont glared at her, his hand that held the chalk frozen in the air and his face as sour as green plums. ‘Aimee Fletcher, you are late.’

Aimee nodded and panted. ‘Yes, but...’

‘Again. What is it this time? Did your hen get its head stuck in the wire of the chicken shed? Or was it the cow today, kicking over the milk bucket? You have a different excuse every day. Maybe you found a mermaid in the horse trough and stopped for a chat?’

‘No, sir, but...’

‘You have been late three times this week and you must be punished.’ The teacher picked up a small book covered in green leather. ‘You will take this book by Cicero, the great Roman writer. You will stay behind after school and turn his wise Latin words into French.’

Aimee's nut-brown face turned bright red. 'Oh, I'll like that.'

The teacher closed his tired eyes and sighed softly. 'You will, too,' he murmured.

'I love Latin,' Aimee went on. 'I lie in bed at night and tell myself the old folk tales but I change the words into Latin for fun. The big bad wolf is *lupus maximus malam...*'

'I know that,' the teacher snapped. 'Now sit at your desk. We have just started an English lesson.'

'That's not as much fun as Latin,' Aimee argued.

Master DuPont gripped the chalk so hard it cracked and the white dust floated through a morning sunbeam. 'The British soldiers are our friends. They are fighting against the Germans who invaded our land, our own big bad wolves. We must be polite to the British and, when we see them marching through our village, we must speak to them in English.'

Aimee spread her hands. 'My dad is English... though he's joined the French army... I can speak it very well already.'

The teacher put the broken chalk down on his desk and rubbed his weary eyes. 'I am sure you

can, Aimee Fletcher. You are the best pupil in Latin and English in the class.'

'And history,' Aimee put in.

'And history.' The teacher nodded. 'But you must learn to be on time. You will stay behind after school today and translate some Cicero.'

Aimee shuffled from one foot to the other. 'But, sir, that's what I was *trying* to tell you... there won't be any more school.'

Some of the children giggled. Aimee was mad. No more school? What next? No more sun in the sky? No more River Somme at the end of the road?

Master DuPont glared at her. 'What do you mean?'

'I can't say. The younger children would panic.'

'Aimee Fletcher, if you are making up some story to escape punishment then I can tell you...'

'*Intus est hostis*,' she hissed.

The teacher blinked. 'Cicero?'

Aimee nodded. 'Yes... so the young ones aren't scared. *Intus est hostis*.'

But then the teacher did just what Aimee hoped he wouldn't do. He said the Latin words in French.

'The enemy is within the gates? You mean the Germans are coming?'

Aimee groaned. The younger children gasped and whimpered and panicked. A shiver from the trembling pupils seemed to chill the room. Little Marie Picard screamed and pointed at the glass in the classroom door. Everyone's eyes followed her finger.

A soldier was standing outside.

### 21 March 1918: Saint Quentin, Northern France

Marius Furst stepped out of the trench and looked to the west. A mild breeze blew in the boy's face and carried the smell of stale death into his nostrils. But it didn't disturb the fog of the spring morning or the thunder of the heavy guns in the battles ahead of him. 'So this is no man's land?' he asked.

The soldier with a face of flint gave a laugh as sharp as a dog's bark. 'Never seen it before, lad?'

'I've never been near the trenches before. I just left Germany to help us win the war.'

The soldier had a stripe on his arm that showed he was a corporal. 'You look too young to fight.'

‘Yes. No,’ Marius mumbled. ‘My grandmother taught me about herbs and healing. I thought I could work in the hospitals.’

‘But they let you join the army?’ the corporal asked. ‘They gave you a uniform.’

‘No. I met a soldier on the road. He was running away... a deserter. He swapped clothes with me.’

The soldier nodded his head and a dark fringe of hair flopped over his eyes; pale eyes that glowed bright. He had a tiny moustache like a small paintbrush. ‘We need more brave lads like you... and fewer of the cowards that run from the fight. If they were all like you – and me – we’d have won this war years ago.’ He patted Marius on the shoulder. ‘Brave lad.’

‘I don’t want to kill anyone – just help our injured countrymen. I’ve seen a few that came home wounded.’

‘Just a few? Then you’re lucky,’ the soldier said. ‘I’ve been in and out of these trenches for four years and seen things that will haunt me for the rest of my life.’

‘What sort of things?’ Marius asked, wide-eyed and pale.

The man just shook his head. ‘It’s over now. This trench war is over. We’re moving west. We’re moving fast. We’ll drive the British into the sea and send them back to their puny little island. Four years of mud and blood and we’re on the move at last. They’re running away like trench rats,’ he snorted.

Marius stepped forward. ‘I’d better get after them. The hospital is packed and ready to follow our great army.’

The soldier just nodded. ‘They say we drove the British back fifteen kilometres yesterday. Get your running boots on, lad.’ He hefted a pack on to his bony shoulder, gripped his rifle and headed to the road where lorries full of soldiers trundled westwards.

‘See you,’ Marius called after him.

The man turned and scowled. ‘I hope not. If I see you then it means I’ll be wounded in hospital. I’ve been there once and don’t want to see you nurses again.’

Marius grinned. ‘I suppose so, Corporal.’

The soldier stared towards the sinking sun in the west. His pale eyes glowed icicle-blue. ‘When we have beaten the British we’ll take their empire, then crush the French and rule the world.’

Marius blinked. ‘You think so?’

The soldier sniffed the rank, dank air. ‘I know so... or my name isn’t Hitler. Adolf Hitler.’ He turned on his heel and marched off.

Marius picked up his own pack of bandages, potions and pills and set off over no man’s land. For four years this ground between the British trenches and the German trenches had been gashed and gouged, shaped, scraped and scored by shells from the big guns. The boy knew the sour smell of the killing ground from the bodies and the clothes of the soldiers he’d patched up, back in the Saint Quentin hospital.

He stepped carefully on to the softened soil. In the watery shell-holes there was a green metal-sheen of slime made by the poison gases the armies had fired at one another.

New grass was already beginning to grow over the ruined earth and, high above him, a skylark sang. It seemed to sing what the soldier had said: ‘It’s over now, it’s over now.’ Marius walked another hundred metres and reached the trenches that had just been deserted by the British. This was where men had crouched below their sandbags and had burrowed shelters into the sides of the trenches.

The boy stepped down on to the damp boards of the trench and peered into one of the dugouts. The mud walls were lined with old waterproof capes and pieces of boxwood. A crate made a table and the enemy had found a shabby old horsehair chair to sit on.

A soot-black kettle sat on a rusting paraffin stove, its water cold as Christmas now. Marius shook his head at the misery the British had suffered here. No wonder they had fled down the road home. The German trenches – the ones he'd seen a hundred metres away – were dug deep and snug.

He felt brighter after what that little corporal had said. He stepped back into the evening air and turned west to catch up with his troops who were striding forward and driving the British like cattle before them. Marius whistled a tune of a song from an earlier war...

*'Dear Fatherland, no fear be thine, dear  
Fatherland, no fear be thine,  
Firm and true stands the Watch, the Watch at  
the Rhine.'*

He hurried through the evening air and his heavy pack now felt light as a butterfly. 'Firm and true, that's me. Firm and true.'

## 21 March 1918: Bray

There was a clatter and a rattle of tumbling chairs as a dozen children fled to the corner of the room. Aimee sighed. The number of children in Bray school had fallen since the war started – now there were only enough to make a single class – and she was the oldest. Sometimes she felt like a mother hen to the little chicks.

The soldier tapped on the glass and opened the door. Master DuPont swallowed so hard his stiff collar creaked.

‘Do you speak English?’ the soldier asked, tugging off his cap and tucking it under his arm.

The teacher stared and his mouth opened but no sound came out. The whimpering children fell silent.

‘I speak English,’ Aimee said quietly. Then she turned to her classmates. ‘It’s all right. He’s British. He’s a friend. Go back to your seats.’ The children slipped back shy as smoke and watched wide-eyed.

For four years they had lived with the distant trembling of the mighty war guns to the east. Most of the younger ones still had nightmare memories of the days, back in 1914, when the Germans had arrived

and taken over their homes. They remembered the hard-faced, stone-faced, grey-faced men with bayonets glinting in the sun.

They remembered hiding in their cellars as the British army swept in from the west and drove the invaders back. And back. And further back. And then the armies stopped. They faced one another in trenches dug into the soft soils near the River Somme.

The children heard stories of how the armies put up barbed wire between themselves and their enemies then tried to smash the trenches opposite with the great guns that made the Bray school walls shiver.

Sometimes the guns fell silent but the village was never free of the motor-lorries and wagons drawn by sweating horses. They were like a circus passing through the town as they pulled supplies to their tired army and their hungry horses. It was a carnival train of shells and bullets, cannon and tanks, wood and wire and gas masks and grenades. A daily carnival of death.

The traffic snarled and snaggled in the narrow village streets, where it met with traffic going the



other way: the marching men and the wounded, bandaged soldiers that were being carried to Amiens or back home to Britain.

Master DuPont found his voice. ‘How can I help, sir?’ he asked.

‘Good morning, I am Captain Ellis.’ The young soldier had a kindly face under the dust from the roads. The children watched, agape, though they didn’t understand much of what he said. He went on, ‘The British army needs to take over your school. We want a command base for General Bruce.’

Master DuPont blew out his cheeks. ‘The general can’t command the army from here,’ he argued. ‘The trenches are twenty or thirty kilometres away.’

The soldier sighed. ‘Not any longer. The enemy has broken through our lines. They smashed us with thousands of shells then marched over no man’s land under cover of the fog. The Germans are coming.’

Aimee smiled and spread her hands wide. ‘I told you,’ she said to the teacher.

Master DuPont’s face turned cloud-grey. ‘The children will have to leave. They’ll have to go to Amiens. There are homes waiting for them there. We never thought we’d see this day.’

Aimee whispered the news to the children and they gathered their pencils and books and got ready to exit the classroom. The teacher watched them and despair ran through the wrinkles of his old face. ‘What will I do?’ he groaned.

‘Give me the keys to the school,’ Captain Ellis said.

Master DuPont reached into the desk and passed a tarnished set of clanking keys to the captain. He looked at the children and tried to smile. ‘Wherever you go, my young ones, remember you are French and our spirit shall never be defeated. Let us sing our anthem one last time before you leave.’

Captain Ellis stood to attention. Aimee stepped across to the piano in the corner of the room and struck the notes firmly. The quavering voices of the children filled the room.

*‘Arise, children of the Fatherland,  
The day of glory has arrived!  
Against us tyranny’s  
bloody banner is raised.  
Let’s march, let’s march!*

*Let an impure blood  
soak our fields!*'

Aimee finished with a crashing chord that shook the windows. Master DuPont sniffed and blew his nose loudly. 'God speed and prosper you in all you do,' he said.

The teacher lowered his head and walked out of the door into the misty air without looking back, and Aimee suddenly saw the fearsome old man was frail as dead leaves.

### 21 March 1918: Amiens, Northern France

Brass buttons shone and medal ribbons were a rainbow of colour on the drab uniforms of the officers who sat and stared at the map on the wall. There were enough moustaches in the room to make a yard brush and the lips underneath them were tightly turned down when they heard the grim news.

General Bruce stood in front of the map with a pointer. 'We knew the German army was going to

launch Operation Michael against us but I didn't think they'd get so far so quickly.' He turned to a small man with a uniform as neat as a needle. 'What went wrong, Colonel Wright?'

Wright stepped forward and took a pencil to point at the map. 'The morning was foggy. The Germans hit us with thirty divisions in the first wave. When the fog lifted, no man's land was swarming with horses and men. They had rifles and "potato-masher" stick grenades. Their shells hit our trenches, which were soon filled with dead or wounded. The British men left alive were ready to surrender.'

General Bruce shook his head. 'A dark day. The enemy drove through our trenches and on for eight miles. We have to stand and fight somewhere.'

A sergeant was standing by the door and there was a murmur of talk as someone passed him a sheet of paper. The sergeant had cropped dark hair and the eyes of a hawk, over a thin nose and a cruel mouth. But the strangest thing that caught your eye was his shining left hand. It was silver. A false hand taking the place of one he'd lost.

The man with the silver hand held up the paper in his right hand. ‘Excuse me, General Bruce. It’s a message from General Haig.’

‘Not now, Sergeant Grimm,’ Colonel Wright snapped.

‘Sorry, sir. It’s important,’ the sergeant said. He marched over to General Bruce as stiff as a puppet and handed him the paper.

Bruce looked up and said to his officers, ‘Go back to your men and read them a copy of this message.’

‘What does it say, sir?’ Colonel Wright asked.

General Bruce read it quietly. *‘Today the enemy began his terrific attacks against us. Many amongst us are now tired. To those I would say that Victory will belong to the side which holds out the longest. The French army is moving quickly and in great numbers to help us. We have no choice, we must fight it out. Every yard must be held to the last man: there must be no retreat. With our backs to the wall we must fight on to the end. The safety of our homes and the Freedom of mankind are in our hands right now.’*

Colonel Wright nodded. ‘With our backs to the wall.’

One of the officers asked, ‘Where is our wall? Where do we stop them?’

The general pointed to the map. ‘Here,’ he said and drew a line on the map. It passed through the village of Bray. ‘Sergeant Grimm will take the orders to our troops,’ he said, nodding towards the man with the silver hand.

‘Can we stop them?’ a young captain asked.

‘We *can* stop them. Then we will drive them all the way back to Germany,’ the general said with a sly smile. ‘You see, we have a new weapon that will win the war. It is so secret hardly anyone outside this room knows about it.’

A shiver of excitement ran through the officers. ‘Are you going to tell us about this new weapon?’ the captain asked. ‘Is it a new tank? A new plane?’

General Bruce gave a wide smile under his moustache. ‘A new sort of gas. DM gas. When it is fired at the enemy it will turn them into statues. I have the formula here,’ he said and waved a brown envelope at the men in the room. He turned and handed it to the sergeant. ‘Grimm?’

‘Yes, sir?’



‘Take this and lock it in my safe, then take a car to Bray. See that it’s ready for us to set up a new base. Captain Ellis is already there and I’ll be along tomorrow when I’m finished here. Help Captain Ellis till then.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Grimm said and his good right hand trembled a little as he took the envelope of secrets.

## 21 March 1918: Bray

The young children of Bray school hurried past the watch-cat at the door. Its tail swished, annoyed at the bustle and banging of those pupils fleeing school so early in the day. Aimee followed more slowly, then began to run down the street, the nails in her boots chiming on the cobbles. Everyone in the village looked as grey-faced as the morning mist. Grey with fear. Even the red-faced butcher, Mr Albert, had faded to pink.

Aimee turned into the dusty lane that led to her farm and the cows seemed restless as ripples on the River Somme. The rumble of the guns should have been muffled by the foggy air but it was louder, closer, more menacing now.

The girl ran into the cobbled courtyard where the washing on the line flapped against her face. Her mother was pegging Aimee's clean smock dresses to the line. Colette Fletcher was a strong woman, running the farm while her husband fought in the French army. Her dark hair had strands of grey in it and her pale eyes were calm and smiling. Aimee panted, 'The Germans really are coming.'

'The ribbon in your pigtail is coming loose,' Mrs Fletcher said.

'You *said* the Germans were coming, Maman. Before I left for school, you said. We'll have to move to Amiens. We'll have to leave the farm.'

Mrs Fletcher picked up the empty clothes basket and moved into the kitchen. 'We won't be going to Amiens,' she said.

'But...'

'The Germans will not hurt us. We are farmers. They need our land for their horses, our barns for their men, our eggs and cattle for their food. When the Germans were here four years ago they treated us well.'



Aimee had been so young back then. She had memories seen through a fog of time. ‘They bombed us,’ she said.

Mrs Fletcher laughed. ‘No, our friends the *British* bombed us to drive the Germans out. And it worked. If the Germans get this far again they will treat us well.’

Aimee was soothed by her mother’s gentle voice. She watched her put a log in the stove and heat another pan of water for the washtub. ‘Maman... no one in the school knew the Germans were on their way. Not until a British Captain told them.’

Her mother didn’t answer.

‘But *you* knew. You knew before anyone in Bray. How did you know?’

Mrs Fletcher poured a cup of milk for her daughter and sat at the table. She was silent for a long time and finally said, ‘Aimee, I am going to tell you a secret. It is so dangerous I really shouldn’t. But... I want you to know in case the Germans do get as far as Bray. Then I may... I may do some strange things and I want you to understand why.’

Aimee shivered though the weak sunlight beamed through the dusty window and the stove hissing with logs made the kitchen warm. She waited. Finally Mrs Fletcher started to speak.

‘The British and French armies have a team of spies. Not soldiers. Ordinary men and women living in France who want them to win this endless war. The group is known as the White Lady.’

‘Are they led by a white lady?’ Aimee asked.

‘No. There is a story that one day the ghost of a woman, dressed in white, will appear. When she is seen it will mean the end of the German king’s rule.’

‘And are you one of the White Lady group? Are you a spy?’ Aimee breathed. She had read stories about spies but in her mind they were men dressed in black, creeping through night-dark woods.

‘In every village there are men and women waiting to serve our armies. If the Germans come to Bray, I’ll report it to the British – I’ll count how many troops and guns the enemy has. I’ll report on where the soldiers are staying... where their railway lines are laid and what fields they are using to land their aircraft.’

Aimee's mouth went dry. 'The Germans would shoot you if they ever caught you doing that.'

Mrs Fletcher spread her hands. 'I'll just have to make sure I'm not caught then. The radio is well hidden in the barn.'

'I've never seen you talking on a radio,' Aimee said.

'I do it at midnight when you're asleep. The villages to the east have been reporting on the new enemy attacks. The Germans call it Operation Michael.'

Aimee's eyes brightened. 'That's how you knew they were on their way before anyone else in the village?'

Her mother nodded. 'Your father is fighting with rifles and bombs. I will fight using my eyes and ears.'

'And me?'

'You can go to Amiens, if you like. You have cousins there who'd take you in. You'd be safe there.'

Aimee had met her older cousins before the war. They treated her like a maid-servant and called her 'stupid peasant'.

'I want to stay,' she said.



Colette Fletcher grinned. ‘And I want you to stay. The enemy would never think a schoolgirl could be carrying secret messages.’

‘You’d let me carry messages for you?’ A shadow crossed Aimee’s face. ‘If they caught me I would never betray you.’

‘You wouldn’t have to,’ her mother said. She picked up a broom from the corner of the room. ‘This is a magic broom.’

Aimee looked cross. ‘Don’t be silly. Magic is for fairy tales.’

‘Maybe. But this broom holds a secret message that may help us win the war.’

Aimee frowned and picked it up. ‘It’s a broom,’ she said. ‘Stop teasing me, Maman.’

The girl had left the door of the kitchen open. A man’s voice said, ‘It is the broom of a White Lady.’ And Aimee thought her heart had stopped.

## 21 March 1918: East of Peronne, Northern France

Marius Furst had walked eight weary kilometres before he came across a canteen at the side of the



road. It was well away from the smoke-fogged street of houses. The ruined buildings had broken windows and cracking walls. They trembled with the roar of the guns. The boy joined a line of soldiers grumbling as they waited for the thin soup and black bread.

‘Oh I wish I was back in my bakery,’ a large man with a dust-covered face moaned. ‘My bread is the best in Uttafeld.’

A skinny man beside him sneered. ‘That was in the days before the war. When we had real flour... not this acorn powder.’ He dipped the black crust in the soup and sucked on it.

The fat baker poked the skinny man in the chest.  
‘I could still get real flour... if I paid enough.’

‘Yes and then charged us poor folk enough.’

‘The baker’s hand grabbed the little man’s tunic and shook him. ‘It’s the farmers who grow the corn that make the money. Not me. It’s the millers who grind it in their mills that are getting rich. Not us poor bakers.’

‘I only said...’

‘Well don’t say anything, you worm.’

A sergeant stepped forward and slapped the baker’s hand away from the little soldier. ‘Save

your fighting talk for the British or I'll have you charged. You'll be peeling potatoes for a week.'

Someone in the queue sniggered. 'What's a potato? I haven't seen one of them in years.'

The weary men laughed. 'Don't let Franz near any potatoes – he'd eat the lot, skins and all.'

Marius watched in wonder. He never dreamed the soldiers could squabble like foxes fighting over a chicken bone.

'If you've all finished your delicious soup, get back in the wagon,' said the sergeant. 'We'll be in Peronne tomorrow if you fight your way there. The Brits are running so fast they're leaving their supplies behind. By Saturday night you'll be feasting like King Wilhelm.'

The men gave a cheer and began to climb on the truck. 'Feasting like the king... if we're not shot first,' the skinny soldier groused. The cheering died in the throats of the men.

'Or if the flu doesn't kill us,' a pale man in a worn and faded uniform wailed. His eyes were rimmed with red and his skin was shiny as wax. He gave a ratcheting cough and the men on the seats shuffled away from him. They were all aboard, the



driver turned a starting handle and the engine gave an answering cough.

The sergeant looked back at Marius standing by the canteen. ‘Come on, lad. Get aboard.’

‘He’s not one of ours, Sergeant,’ someone said.

‘Where are you headed?’ the sergeant asked.

Marius glanced at the map he’d torn from a school atlas. ‘A hospital... near Peronne.’

‘Jump up, then.’

Marius was pulled up on to the crowded lorry as it popped and wheezed, rolled and groaned along the rutted road. The soldier in the faded uniform wheezed like the lorry. ‘Hospital worker, eh? Can you cure the flu?’

Marius frowned. He knew his grandmother had a potion for fevers. ‘I have a cure. Yes,’ he said.

The men in the back of the lorry laughed. ‘Then you’re not a doctor – they don’t have a cure, son. You are a magician. A miracle worker.’

The boy smiled shyly. The coughing soldier leaned towards him and his breath stank and stung Marius’s nose like dragon smoke. ‘Have you got something for *me*, lad?’



Marius reached into his backpack and pulled out a small brown glass bottle. He handed it over and said, ‘A little sip...’

But the soldier had pulled out the cork and sucked on the bottle greedily. ‘That’s all I had,’ Marius whispered.

The lorry trundled on and the men began to sing softly. A gloom-filled song of a soldier’s girl who’d died of a fever.

*‘A long black coat, I must now wear.*

*A sorrow great, is what I bear.*

*A sorrow great and so much more,*

*My grief will last for evermore.’*

As the sun sank in the west, and the amber sky turned to old bronze, the men fell silent and began to doze. Marius fell into a deep sleep, exhausted.

## 21 March 1918: Bray

Captain Ellis stood at the kitchen door of Mrs Fletcher’s farmhouse and grinned at Aimee. ‘Did I startle you? I’m sorry.’



The soldier took off his cap and strode across the room, holding out his hand to Mrs Fletcher.  
‘Colette Fletcher? I am Captain Ellis.’

Aimee’s mother smiled warmly. ‘We’ve spoken on the radio. It’s good to meet you.’ She turned to her daughter. ‘Captain Ellis is a spy chief in the British army. He’s my contact there.’ She turned back to the soldier. ‘Sit down. Have a glass of wine. I was just telling Aimee about the broomsticks.’

‘Sounded like a fairy tale to me,’ the girl grumbled, still annoyed because she felt she was being teased.

Captain Ellis sat down at the table as Colette Fletcher served him red wine in a stone flagon. ‘The broom handles are hollow,’ he explained. ‘Our White Lady spies put beans inside the hollow handle to send us a message in code. Runner beans are the number of German soldiers in the area... three runner beans means there are three thousand men in Bray, for example. Haricot beans are the number of heavy guns the enemy have to attack us with, and so on.’

Aimee nodded. ‘So then you know how many British soldiers and guns you need to fight against them?’



‘Exactly. When the Germans get to Bray your mother will send messages to General Bruce in Amiens using the brooms and beans code.’

Aimee was shocked. ‘*When* the Germans get to Bray? You mean *if*?’

Captain Ellis leaned forward and lowered his voice. ‘Your mother knows this – so it’s not a great secret – but the enemy are attacking in great numbers and at great speed. It is best if we back off.’

‘Run away?’ the girl cried. ‘Leave them to capture Bray?’

The soldier stayed calm. ‘They are moving so fast they will leave their supplies far behind. By the end of the week they will have to stop and wait for food and bullets and hospitals to catch up. Especially the hospitals. We will pull our army back to Amiens. Then, when they are exhausted, we’ll strike. We’ll drive them all the way back to Germany.’

Aimee frowned. ‘What do you mean, especially the hospitals?’

Captain Ellis gave a small smile. ‘You’re a bright girl, Aimee. What I mean is we have reports

coming in from our White Lady spies to the east. The enemy hospitals are filling up... and so are their burial grounds.'

'Because you are shooting so many?'

'No. Because there is disease spreading through the German army. They are falling sick in their thousands with influenza – or flu.'

'Master DuPont, our teacher, had that last Christmas. He was off for three days and I had to teach the little ones,' Aimee said with a shrug.

'Then I was sick for a week.'

'Then you are lucky. This is a new type of flu. It is deadly, but if you've had it – and then got better – you won't catch it again.'

'But it's killing the Germans?'

'When their soldiers are crammed into the motor-lorries that carry them forward they are spreading it. A few recover. Many are dead in three days. By the time the enemy reach Amiens they will be starving, they'll have empty rifles and full hospital tents.' He drank the red wine and rose to his feet. 'Now I must get back to the school. General Bruce will arrive tomorrow morning and I want you, Colette, to be there.'

‘I can’t spy on the Germans from Aimee’s school,’ the woman laughed.

Captain Ellis put his hat back on his head. ‘No but you can help me spy on the British. The Germans have spies too. And one of them is in our general’s office, passing our secrets to the enemy. I want you to help me trap him.’

‘How?’ Colette Fletcher asked.

‘Act as a cleaner for the old school. Then you can go everywhere. The spy is too careful to let me see him at work. But he won’t pay any attention to a cleaner.’

‘Or a girl,’ Aimee said. ‘I’m coming too, Maman. I’m going to be a White Lady like you. *Intus est hostis*,’ she said.

‘The enemy is within the gates.’ Captain Ellis nodded. ‘He is indeed. You are welcome to join us in the hunt for him.’

And that was how Aimee set off on the search for the most dangerous man in France.

## 22 March 1918: East of Peronne

Marius woke from a restless sleep with dreams of finding his wounded father on a battlefield, pouring



the potion into his mouth and seeing him rise up as strong as ever. He shook his head. He knew it was just a dream and he remembered a poem from his school days...

*'That no life lives for ever;  
That dead men rise up never.'*

He remembered where he was and looked up into the face of the fat baker who was grinning down at him. 'Well done, lad, well done.'

'Sorry? What?' he muttered as he rubbed at his tired eyes.

• 'Your magic drink. Look what it did for the little shoemaker.' •

The skinny man who had seemed so sick the night before was looking as pale and grey as ever, but his eyes were clearer and his breathing was now easy. 'I thought I was finished,' he said. 'I was sure I'd wake up dead.'

The lorry had stopped at a camp of tents in a field that led down to the River Somme. There was bustle and the noise of lorries with groaning springs and coughing engines, the smell of petrol and horse sweat and the toilet trenches.

‘Come on, lad, they need you over there,’ the baker said. Marius clutched his backpack and let the large man lead him over to a long tent bearing a white circle with a red cross inside. The smell of blood hung heavy. ‘Who’s in charge?’ the baker cried. A worried-looking man in a red-stained white coat glanced up from where he was kneeling beside a croaking soldier.

‘What do you want?’ he snapped. He pushed his spectacles back on his nose. His brown hair fell over his face, too long and neglected.

‘This lad wants to join the hospital service, doctor. He has the most marvellous cure for the flu.’

The doctor snorted. ‘We need nurses not miracle-workers. Here, lad, take your pack off, put a white coat on and help me with this new lot of wounded. Mostly shell and shot wounds from the battle for Peronne.’

The baker shrugged and walked back to the lorry waving. ‘Good luck, lad.’

Marius found himself spending the rest of the day cutting off boots and uniforms so the doctors could see the wounds then changing the bandages that had been roughly tied on in battle. He pressed

down on spouting wounds while the doctors sewed them shut and he helped when there were shattered arms and legs to be removed. There were lice to be dodged, which was tricky as some men were swarming with them.

And still lorries arrived with new batches of sick and dying. Some of the wounded stayed cheerful. ‘We’ll be in Peronne tomorrow,’ a limping soldier told the tent and there was a weak cheer from those who had the strength left.

‘We’ll be in Amiens a week from now,’ he went on.

Someone laughed and shouted, ‘Not with these wounds, my friend. The war’s over for me.’

‘Where will I be on Tuesday?’ the sour-faced doctor asked. ‘It’s my birthday. Will I get to spend it in Paris with the best French wines?’

The limping soldier seemed to take the question seriously. ‘Paris in June, I’d say. But next Tuesday? Ah, next Tuesday I’d guess we’ll be nice and comfy a dozen kilometres down the Somme... probably that nice little village by the river. We took it four years ago.’

‘What’s it called?’ Marius asked, looking at the tattered map he pulled from his pocket.



‘Bray, I think it’s called,’ the soldier told him.  
‘Bray-on-Somme.’

## 22 March 1918: Bray

As Aimee and her mother walked down to the school they struggled to get through the traffic. The sleepy village of Bray had become a whirlpool of war.

Motor-lorries and horse wagons of weapons were heading east to supply the men fighting the enemy who were driving forward. The precious heavy guns and tanks were being sent west to Amiens to save them from being captured. As before, when the two convoys met in Bray, they became tangled in the tiny, twisting lanes.

Angry drivers swore and struggled with sweating horses. Weary wounded men stumbled along at the edge of the ditches. Some had their eyes bandaged and rested a hand on the shoulder of the man in front.

‘They’ve been blinded by German gas attacks,’ Colette Fletcher explained. Aimee gave a small gasp and her mother said quickly, ‘Most of them will see again, once the wet bandages are taken off.’

As they reached the corner of their lane a sergeant stood and sent the wounded up to their farm. The day before Captain Ellis had said, ‘We need to use your barn as a hospital.’

Colette Fletcher had agreed at once. ‘We won’t be needing it for hay for a couple of months.’

The walking wounded were followed by ambulances carrying the men too sick to march. The crunching of the wheels on the rutted lane was echoed by the moans of the men inside the red-crossed wagons.

When they reached the school the cat had gone. There was as much turmoil in the old building as in the rest of the village. School desks were out in the schoolyard and heavy cabinets and office desks were being moved in. ‘Waste of time,’ a tired soldier grumbled. ‘The enemy will be here in a couple of days and we’ll have to move out again.’

‘We’ve been sent to help with the cleaning,’ Colette Fletcher said. That was the story they’d agreed with Captain Ellis.

‘Report to Silver Hand,’ the soldier told them.

‘Who?’

‘Sergeant Grimm. He has a metal hand. He’s in charge of General Bruce’s office.’

Mother and daughter entered the building and found the man easily. He was standing in the middle of the school hall bawling orders at soldiers who were scurrying around like beetles. ‘Start with the classroom in the corner,’ he snapped. ‘That will be General Bruce’s office.’ Colette’s eyes were fixed on his gleaming left hand of solid metal.

Sergeant Grimm raised his chin. ‘I see you’re wondering about my hand? Don’t be afraid to ask. It’s a war wound. I went into no man’s land and saved my commander. He was shot in the leg and trapped in a shell-hole. The enemy tried to bring me down with two machine guns but I crawled on my belly with the bullets bouncing off my helmet. I saved his life.’

‘And the hand was hit?’ Colette Fletcher asked.

‘Yes. I’d just got him back to the safety of our trenches – I was using my body to shield him – and one last bullet shattered my hand. As it happened the commander was from a rich family and wanted to reward me. He said I should have a new hand made of solid silver. If I ever fell on hard times, after the war, I could snap off a finger and sell it.’

‘You’re a hero,’ Colette said. ‘Did they give you a medal?’

‘They offered me one but I told them no. I was only doing what any true British soldier would do. I was proud to serve my country. I don’t need a medal.’

He turned on his heel and screamed at a small soldier struggling with a desk. ‘Put your back into it, you miserable midget.’

Colette and Aimee slipped into the classroom and began work. ‘Go into the wall cupboard and pack the schoolbooks in a box,’ Colette said. ‘I’ll start polishing the desk for the general.’

Aimee nodded and entered the cool, dark cupboard in the wall. The shelves were stacked with worn and dusty books. She saw her favourite, Cicero, and began reading as she heard the door to the classroom swing open.

‘Sergeant Grimm,’ said a man’s voice.

‘Yes, General.’

‘I need a word in private.’

‘Yes, General.’ Sergeant Grimm coughed. ‘Excuse me, cleaner. Can you leave the room for a couple of minutes? Sorry to disturb your work.’

‘Excellent work, by the way, Madame,’ the general added.

‘Thank you, sir, I’ll start on the school hall,’ Colette Fletcher said in a humble voice. She was playing a good game of being a spy. And she knew her daughter was quietly working in the cupboard. Listening. Whatever Colette missed, Aimee would hear. She remembered Captain Ellis’s words in her home the day before: ‘There is a spy in General Bruce’s office. We have to find him.’

Aimee put the book down quietly and pressed herself into the shadows as near to the door as she could without being seen.

General Bruce rustled some papers. ‘Before we do anything, Sergeant Grimm, I need you to make sure the secret papers you put in the safe back in Amiens are locked away here. Do we have a safe in this office yet?’

‘Yes, sir, on the floor under the desk.’

‘Good. Make sure they stay inside and always post a guard outside the door. They have a secret that can win us the war... so long as the enemy never gets to know about it.’

‘You can trust me, sir.’



‘Good work, Sergeant, now carry on...’ the general said. Aimee heard the office door open then close as he left the room. Aimee wondered if she should step out of the cupboard now. But she heard a small bell ring and a click as Sergeant Grimm picked up the general’s telephone and began to speak.

Aimee held her breath and strained her ears.

