Sunrise glow through canvas panels. Foul smell of gas gangrene. Men moaning all around her. Pandemonium and chaos.

She floats inside a cloud. Cottony, a little dingy. Pinpricks of light summon her to wakefulness. She drifts, and then she sleeps.

Distinct sounds of metal on metal, used instruments tossed into a pan. She tries to remember why she lies on a cot, enclosed within panels of canvas, a place where men who die are prepared for burial away from the rest of the wounded, a task she has performed any number of times.

She glances down and finds that she is wearing mauve men's pajamas. Why do her feet hurt?

A small piece of cloth with a question mark on it is pinned to a uniform hanging from a hook. For several minutes, she studies the uniform before realizing that she does not know her own name. She receives this fact with growing anxiety.

* * *

The name *Lis* floats lightly into her thoughts. But she does not think Lis is her name. Elizabeth . . . ? No. Ella . . . ? Ellen . . . ? Possibly, though there ought to be a sibilant. She ponders the empty space where a name should be.

The name *Stella* bubbles up into her consciousness. Can Stella be it? She examines the letters as they appear in her mind, and the more she studies them, the more certain she is that Stella is correct.

Again, she drifts into a half sleep. When she comes to, she cannot remember the name she has decided upon. She lets her mind empty, and, gradually, it returns.

Stella.

Such a small thing.

Such a big thing.

Stella has no idea where she has come from. She senses it might be an unhappy place, a door she might not want to open. But no one's entire past can be unhappy, can it? It might contain unhappy events or a tendency toward melancholy, but the whole cannot be miserable.

All around her, the hum of flies and the beat of fast footsteps. Orders are shouted; a new batch of wounded is coming in; the staff will want her bed, of course they will. There is nothing wrong with her, and she has simply been allowed to sleep a long time.

She rubs her feet together. A sharp pain through the muffling of bandages. How has she injured her feet?

A panel is moved aside, and she hears a woman speak in French. Seconds later, a nurse, a nun, enters the small canvas compartment. As she moves toward the bed, she looms large in her starched uniform and wimple. She scrutinizes Stella's eyes, scanning, the patient knows, for dilated pupils. "You are British?" the sister asks.

"I am not sure," Stella answers.

"You have been unconscious for two days," the sister explains, stepping back and fussing with the sheets as she slides Stella's feet from under the covers. "Your feet had bits of shrapnel in them when you arrived. Someone with a cart left you outside the tent in the middle of the night. I should like to examine your feet."

This is someone else's story, Stella thinks, not hers.

"What is your name?"

"Stella." She pauses. "Where am I?"

"Marne."

"Marne is in France?"

"Yes," the sister answers, pursing her mouth. "My name is Sister Luke. I am British, but almost everyone else at the camp is French. We believe your boots blew off when you were knocked unconscious by the first shell and that a second shell injured your feet. You had not a scratch on you otherwise, apart from some bruises from falling."

"Will I be able to walk?" Stella asks.

Sister Luke studies her. "I think you are American."

"Am I?"

"From your accent. But you were found in a British VAD uniform."

Stella cannot explain this.

"You are a VAD?"

"I don't know."

Stella can see that the sister is annoyed and has other, more pressing matters to attend to.

"But I know how to drive an ambulance," she blurts out.

Is this true? If not, why does she think it is?

"You know this, and yet you do not know your posting?" the sister asks with barely concealed disbelief.

Yes, the paradox is bewildering but does not seem urgent. Beyond the canvas, Stella knows, everything is urgent.

The sister moves toward the opening in the compartment. "Apart from your feet, I can find nothing wrong with you. You will have them examined and dressed on a regular basis. Then you will rest and eat and drink while we ascertain your identification. We will contact all the nearby hospital camps. You cannot have come very far. When your feet are better, you can work. Perhaps we will see if you can drive that ambulance after all. In the meantime, you are to remain here. What is your last name?"

Stella simply shakes her head.

* * *

Orders are given, and a nurse's aide arrives with a tray. The dressing of Stella's wounds is more painful than she would have thought possible. The aide, who looks exhausted, helps Stella drink two glasses of water. Stella feels sorry for the young woman and does not ask questions because she knows the effort it will take to answer them.

Stella's last name comes to her the way a bird takes flight. She tells the aide, "I am Stella Bain."

When the aide leaves, Stella closes her eyes and then opens them. She repeats this exercise several times. But no matter how often she does it, she cannot remember what regiment she was attached to or what she was doing on a battlefield.

A month later, Stella has recovered from her wounds and serves as a nurse's aide in a French uniform. Again, she puzzles over the way her skills have returned to her, even though she does not know where she learned them.

Stella is appalled by her surroundings: the soil thick with manure; mud-laced wounds causing suppurating infections; compound fractures imposing a death sentence. A swab of Lysol along with gauze dipped in iodine is all the medicine on offer. A gas-gangrenous wound, not to be confused with the effect of poisoned gas, balloons up to grotesque proportions. Stella watches a doctor play an idle beat upon a man's flesh with his fingers. The sight is awful, the sound hollow. Almost all the men die.

Sometimes, the doctors' screams are louder than the patients'. The surgeon's job is beyond belief, a hell on earth worse than any hell imagined. Stella wants to know how many of them go mad, all sensibility and religion violently stripped away during the endless succession of amputations.

Always look a man in the eye, no matter how terrible the wound. This the English sister teaches, orders, her to do. The wounded's journey is long: from the trenches of no-man's-land to the aid post to the field dressing station to the casualty-clearing station, only to die on the train on the way to the base hospital.

In her off-hours, Stella mends tears in her skirt, brushes mud off her hem, and searches for lice in the seams of her clothing. She washes collars and cuffs and the cloth of her cap, and if there is water left over, she tries to clean her body.

One day, she asks the sister on duty if she might have a piece of paper and a pencil. In her tent, Stella begins to sketch what she can see around her: a lantern, a canvas table, a cot in the corner. Her roommate, Jeanne, catches her at this activity and marvels at Stella's ability. In broken English and using a kind of sign language, she asks if Stella will draw her portrait so that she might send it back to her family. Jeanne has hollow eyes and a vocation. As she draws the young woman, Stella wants to ask her how her religion has survived the sights they have both witnessed, but Stella's grasp of French is not good enough for any sort of meaningful conversation.

When Jeanne brings a fellow aide to the tent and asks Stella if she will draw her friend's portrait, Stella agrees on the condition that Jeanne find her more paper and pencils and a knife for sharpening the pencils. This Jeanne happily does. Jeanne's friend insists on paying Stella for her sketch. Gradually, a number of nurses and their aides line up to have their portraits done as well.

But between the portraits, when Stella is alone, the private drawings she makes disturb her. She sketches the exteriors of unknown houses, surrounded by grotesque trees and bushes. When she tries again, the drawings are nearly the same, but the atmosphere of claustrophobia grows even more pronounced. The sketches produce a keen sense of distress, but she cannot stop herself from continuing to make them.

Stella does not know how she came by her skill at drawing. It seems to have appeared simply out of a desire to do so.

The English sister must have remembered Stella's statement that she can drive an ambulance, for she receives her first assignment on a June night.

"Over and up," the French orderly beside her says. The ambulance bucks, but does not stall. Stella has to feel her way along the road, since no lights can be used. Her eyes strain and water. In the distance, rockets throw a greenish light over the countryside.

Stella screams when a shell bursts two hundred feet ahead. First, a large splash of earth, and then a ball of smoke, which

drifts away. The orderly swears, French words that she understands. The orderly is fluent in English, which is, Stella supposes, the reason he has been assigned to her.

"It's going to get rough," the man explains. "Especially when we pull in. That is where we are most vulnerable. As soon as I jump off, you turn the truck around and keep the engine running. Someone will help me load. When I pound the back here, you start driving, no matter what is happening. You find a way to get back."

Physical fear begins to climb Stella's spine, and yet she has done this before, has she not? Her hand shakes on the gearshift. She squeezes her shoulder blades together, expecting a direct hit to the Croix Rouge symbol on the roof. She has no idea where the road begins. She struggles to see the slightest indication of tracks, but smoke clouds the path. How will she find her way back to camp with the wounded inside? Regulations prohibit her from stopping at any point, even if the men behind her start to shout.

She senses the bump of each stretcher as it is loaded into the back of the bus. She waits for the pounding on the wooden panel.

Stella does not know how many are in the back, how badly wounded they are. She cannot even be sure it is the orderly himself who has signaled to her. She wishes he were up front so that she could talk to him.

"Left," she says aloud to herself as she finds and follows the tracks. And later, "Slow down."

When she arrives back at camp, she slides like a reptile from the driver's seat. Despite the cold, she has perspired through to her coat. She counts the wounded as they are unloaded. She is struck by their apparent freedom from pain. Stranger still, she can hear one of them whistling. She feels stronger and lighter than she has in months.

One day, walking through the camp, Stella hears a man curse the institution that assigned his brother to a ship that sank. Her mind snags on the word *Admiralty* in the sentence. She puzzles over it so much in the days that follow that *Admiralty* becomes a kind of mythic goal, a monolith drawing her toward it. She believes that she will one day reach it, and she hopes that once she sees the building or the landscape, she will remember why it seems to be so important. But how strange, because to her knowledge she has never been in England. Can her quest be the result of an event in her former life?

Admiralty hums in its own layer, the one behind the present moment and before the void that is her memory. A word. A title. A note. It presses and troubles her, even when she actively tries to think of something else.

Stella learns that the Admiralty, headquarters to the British Royal Navy, stands in central London. She begins to cherish the word because she believes it comes from her previous life, perhaps the first chink in the armor of her inner mind, where memory and identity lie. Has she ever worked at the Admiralty?

Lived close to it? Did she once have a husband who worked there? The notion threatens her, because she cannot imagine having forgotten something as basic as a man she loved and the intimacy they shared. Often she studies her fingers, searching for a tiny circle that might signal the previous presence of a wedding band. But she has found nothing. In the privacy of her tent, shortly after her arrival, she conducted a physical examination. A husband or a lover is a possibility.

Throughout the summer, Stella's life consists of tending to the wounded, driving an ambulance, and drawing on paper with a pencil. In this way, she sometimes forgets that she cannot remember.

In October, Stella is granted leave. She thinks this might be her one chance to get to England. She must find the Admiralty and discover its importance. Jeanne tells her she should go to Paris.

Stella asks for and is given a canvas satchel in which she packs her British uniform, her sketches, and the money she has earned from making portraits of nurses and their aides.

Once in Paris, she catches a train for the coast, where, she has heard, English hospital ships carrying wounded men are setting out for home. But the train, due to heavy bombardment, has to stop before it reaches Étaples. Even from a distance of ten miles, the shelling can be heard. The hospital personnel are urged to stay in their seats; the train will be rerouted.

With her satchel, Stella slips from the train and makes her

way into the woods. If her exit has been seen, will they bother to look for her? She cannot imagine a doctor or a train conductor trying to find her. Stella remains, for the moment, a stateless woman in a lawless country.

The journey through the forest is arduous and frightening, but gradually the woods thin out to reveal the coastal village. Along the way, she encounters a chaos such as she has never seen before. She begins to cough, whether from the smoke or illness she cannot tell. In Étaples, Stella discovers that the large Red Cross hospital ship to which the wounded were headed has partially sunk.

She ducks inside a tent and changes into her British VAD uniform. "I've lost my way," she tells the first official-looking British man she meets.

"They're using smaller ships now to get across the Channel. There's a dock at the eastern end you might try."

Stella locates a ship that was perhaps a ferry or a pleasure boat. There is no pleasure aboard it now. When she sees the cargo, she gasps. The wounded and the dead have not been separated. The calls of the injured sound as if they come from an underworld she has only dreamed about. Here and there, she observes nurse's aides like herself comforting men and applying dressings.

No one asks to see her identity card. No one cares. She does what she has been doing for months in Marne, tending to the wounded and assisting with operations that cannot wait until they reach the shore.

When in England, Stella boards a train with the most seriously hurt, the ones who might not, even with a doctor's ministrations, make it to Victoria station. En route, the men are sick and their bowels loosen. There is a priest on board to deliver last rites, and it is one of Stella's duties to make sure she can find the man at any given moment.

In London, Stella silently wishes the wounded well and then leaves them. Trading with the soldiers heading toward the front, she exchanges her French money for English money. Exhausted, Stella follows a crowd along what looks to be a main thoroughfare. She walks in a direction she thinks will lead to the Admiralty, but after a while senses that she has made a mistake. Finding herself on a narrow lane, she tries to retrace her steps. She walks without food or water, fingering the unfamiliar British coins inside her pocket. She moves forward until she can walk no more, but still she keeps trudging. She walks until she comes to a stop against a wrought-iron fence. A woman in a rose-colored suit asks her a question.

LONDON, OCTOBER 1916

A woman in a rose-colored suit, which strikes Stella as both odd and beautiful because she has seen little color on anyone in London, asks her if she is unwell.

"My name is Lily Bridge. From my window across the garden, I saw you leaning against the fence. Pardon my candor, but you seem to be overwrought."

Who, Stella would like to know, is not overwrought in this time and place?

Stella can barely lift herself upright. All of life, it seems, resembles static from a radio, full of people and words and smells, if only she could sort out the frequencies. Sometimes the confusion taxes her intellect, as if it were a problem she had to solve. At other times, it is a soft cocoon that comforts her.

"Will you walk over to our house and come inside and sit for a minute?" Lily asks. "It's quite raw out here."

Stella does not want to give herself over to another, but at the moment, she is not sure she will even make it to the woman's front door.

Lily takes Stella's arm. Stella coughs deeply and is rattled

by a searing pain in her chest. After she steps inside, a butler takes her cloak and gloves and satchel. Lily urges her toward a fire in a large, welcoming room. In the warmth, Stella becomes aware of the awful stench that wafts from her. It is, she knows, the smell of French muck, of men's leaking wounds, and of fear. She has not washed in two days.

Stella cannot remember the last time she stood in someone's house. The shiny red tiles of the fireplace surround, the mantel with its diamond-paned frieze below the shelf, and the tulip chandelier intrigue her. Many volumes have been pressed together on the shelves of a bookcase.

Stella cannot sit, as she has been asked to do, on the striped red silk settee. She wants no part of her filthy uniform to touch the pristine surroundings. When Lily insists, however, Stella lowers herself to the edge of a paisley wing chair. Lily, who seems attentive to her mood, murmurs soothing words from time to time.

A man comes through the front door, bringing with him the bluster of the weather and an air of affability. "I've come to tell you that I'll be late tonight," he says, addressing Lily. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know you had a guest." He gives his hat and coat to the butler, whom he calls Streeter.

"August, this woman is a VAD," Lily explains. "I found her quite exhausted, and I invited her to sit for a moment."

"Yes, of course," says the man, who studies Stella.

In turn, she notices a tall tuft of dark hair, a clean-shaven

face, navy eyes inside silver spectacles. She senses a strong intelligence.

The butler returns with a tray of biscuits, cheese, and apple slices as well as a large pot of tea. Stella takes her cup and holds it with both hands, not trusting herself not to drop it. An odd quiet descends. It is the silence of embarrassment, apprehension, and ordinary kindness.

"My name is Stella Bain," she announces after a time. "As you must have guessed, I am an American."

Lily persuades Stella to go upstairs and lie down. As Stella follows Iris, Lily's maid, she hears Lily, on the bottom step, speaking in a low voice to her husband in the hallway. "I think she isn't at all well."

"I agree. I'll telephone Michael Fain straightaway."

Lily shows Stella her bedroom. In it, she waits for the maid to draw her a bath.

"You can sleep here," Lily says.

"You are very kind."

Stella is used to being told what to do. In any case, there is no thought of doing otherwise. After her bath, she changes into her nightgown and slips between the sheets. She drifts off, but is woken often during the night by her worsening cough.

Dr. Fain makes several visits, alarmed by Stella's rising fever. She is aware of a genial man whose hair might once have

been blond and who wears golden spectacles. She is unused to doctors who have the time to perform proper examinations, to talk to their patients, and even, occasionally, to smile.

The doctor prescribes medicine, but Stella does not seem to get any better. Feverish, she soaks her sheets at night and sits outside her room while the maid changes them. Lily, in her dressing gown, stands near Stella, sometimes resting a hand on her shoulder.

Stella drinks hot bouillon and cool water. On the fifth night, there is an unexpected crisis, and Dr. Fain is summoned to the home. Stella's fever is dangerously high, and she is having trouble breathing. Lily, the doctor, and Iris take turns sitting with Stella during the night. She hallucinates a fire and tries to climb out of bed. Her head aches nearly all the time. She sweats and shivers and coughs so much her throat hurts.

When she is alone with Dr. Fain, she asks him his diagnosis. He hesitates, knowing that she is a nurse's aide and will understand the gravity of the pronouncement. "Pneumonia, I think," he says quietly.

"I thought as much," Stella replies, turning her face away.

Her recovery is both agonizingly slow and remarkable. As her cough eases up, her temperature gradually returns to normal. Lily brings fattening lunches to Stella's room and often stays to eat with her. They make pleasant conversation. Stella learns that Lily is originally from Greenwich, that she

and August have been married eight years, and that she volunteers at a settlement house three days a week. Stella is surprised to discover that Lily's husband is also a doctor, a cranial surgeon with a clinic in Harley Street.

"He works all the hours of the day," Lily says, perhaps offering a subtle apology for why he has not visited Stella. She is surprised that he did not once come to see how she was faring.

Lily is petite, with coloring opposite from Stella's. Whereas Stella has acorn-colored hair and golden brown eyes, Lily is blond, with light blue eyes. She dresses well, but not extravagantly—a nod to the war, Stella suspects.

On the eleventh day, Stella opens the velvet drapery to sunshine. She feels better than she has in weeks. In the mahogany wardrobe, she finds, in addition to her uniform, two dresses tailored in the style of the uniform. One is navy wool with silver embroidery on the collar; the other is the color of tea with milk. She is to make a decision then. If she chooses the uniform, the garment will announce, once she descends the stairs, her intention to leave the house. If she picks either the navy or fawn dress, she will be signaling that she will stay, even though she has not been formally invited to do so. With some reluctance—she wants nothing more than to return to the bed—she puts on the uniform, appreciating its cleanliness.

Stella does not want to leave the room. Apart from its

comforts, which are many—the bed with its ironed sheets, the enormous bath and warm towels, the pretty arrangement of boudoir chairs nestled in front of the tall window—she knows that to open the door is to reenter the world as she knew it just eleven days ago, the world of battlefields and guns and shrapnel and dead and dying bodies. She has nearly as much fear of leaving the bedchamber this late October morning as she might have of entering a ward of grotesquely injured men while deafening German shells pound the earth.

Lily, who is waiting for Stella at the bottom of the stairs, holds her smile even though Stella is in uniform. "You are intending to leave us," she pronounces.

"I find I must."

Lily, flustered, backs up as Stella descends the stairs.

"My gratitude toward you and your husband is immense," Stella says. "I can never thank you enough, though I hope you will allow me to pay for my care."

Stella opens her satchel, but Lily waves her hand away. "Nonsense," she says. "I'd have done the same for anyone in your condition."

Stella reluctantly closes her satchel and sets it by her feet.

"August will be home in ten minutes for the luncheon. He'll be upset with me if I have let you go. Besides, you cannot leave without some nourishment."

Stella does not mean to seem formidable or ungracious;

Lily is a lovely woman. Stella has no way of knowing whether she was ever a lovely woman herself.

"The clothes in the wardrobe," Stella says. "Did you have them made for me?"

"Yes, I did," Lily says. "You must at least take those. They won't fit anyone else."

"I will do that, then. Thank you."

Stella must find the Admiralty, and she does not want to waste another minute. But equally, she understands that she cannot refuse the woman who has taken such good care of her. "I will stay to eat," she says. "But I should like to take a breath of fresh air first, if I may. Perhaps I could go out to your garden—the public garden in the center of the square."

Lily opens a desk drawer and gives Stella the key.

Stella makes it as far as the nearest bench, the gate quivering behind her. Just inside the tall iron fence, a thinning box hedge echoes the garden's rectangular shape. Pink town houses and a few cream-colored mansions surround the garden. Pollarded plane trees thrust upward from the ground, reminding her of arms with fists.

The air, though cool, is exhilarating. She admires a bed of late-blooming bronze roses, then later a tree, the leaves of which have done a delicate turn from pale green to gold. She hears a motorcar on an adjacent street, somewhere the rasp of coal down a chute.

"Good morning," Dr. Bridge says as he approaches her from the gate. "I've just been home. I understand you plan to leave us."

"Hello," she says. "I am to stay to luncheon and then I must go. You and your wife have been more than generous."

"Where exactly *will* you go?"

"I have an appointment at the Admiralty," she says quietly.

"Indeed? You've said nothing about this. Well, not that I know of."

As he is speaking, the gate clangs open again. Three children and their nanny enter. Though Stella can see Dr. Bridge speaking and even gesturing, suddenly she cannot hear his voice. Despite this, Stella feels calm as she watches the children, all under the age of ten, crisscross the lawn in a game she does not understand.

The nanny sits and waves at her charges, but she looks, with her drawn face and slouch, worn and frayed. From time to time, a girl disappears into the evergreen bushes, later to emerge triumphant. All the anxiety Stella has felt since arriving in London disappears, and it is as though she inhabits a cocoon of warmth and light.

It is only when the children go off with their nanny that sound startles Stella: shifting leaves, motorcars, horses' hooves on pavement, men in conversation, a woman raising her voice. She does not question the disappearance and appearance of her hearing, since this is not the first time it has happened.

"I think we'd better go back to the house," Dr. Bridge says, looking at her oddly.

A fire has been laid adjacent to a round walnut dining table. Stella notices that two places have been set. In a sapphire-blue day dress, Lily gestures for Stella to sit, but she is confused. Where is the third place?

"I have to return to the settlement house," Lily says, answering Stella's unspoken question.

"I hope they won't keep you too long," Dr. Bridge says. "For once I should be on time for dinner tonight."

"Are you uncomfortable?" Dr. Bridge asks when Stella has settled into her chair. Like many surgeons Stella has known, he is a man to get straight to the point.

"Yes and no," she answers as Streeter enters with bowls of what he announces is oxtail soup. "I am grateful for your hospitality. But I worry that I am using up your valuable time at the clinic."

"The clinic is well staffed. We have patients suffering from intense though as yet undiagnosed head pain remaining for observation, while others, recovering from cranial surgery, recuperate." The butler offers them both bread and butter. Dr. Bridge eats like a man who knows to the precise minute how much time he has left to finish his meal. Stella has seen this among men and women at the front.

"Yesterday," he says, "I had a particularly challenging case.

An officer with the British Expeditionary Force was sent to my clinic directly after his stay at the Royal Victoria Hospital. His lower mandible had been shot away, and some attempt at crude reconstruction had been made. I assume you have seen similar cases."

He is trying to put them on an equal footing—professional to semiprofessional—another kindness Stella much appreciates, but his anecdote tightens her stomach. "I never saw the reconstruction," she says, picking up her spoon.

"Where were you exactly?"

"Just before my leave, I was billeted at Marne with the French infantry. You were speaking of your patient?"

Dr. Bridge is not an unhandsome man, and she puts him in his late thirties. Though he is careful in his dress and his speech, she senses an ebullience kept tightly bound, as if he had reluctantly left his youth behind.

"When the patient arrived, his lower jaw was badly infected, and I could see that to save the man, the reconstruction would have to be cut away, the infected tissue abraded, and a recovery period endured before we could implant a better device for him. When the officer received this news, he had to be restrained. Having already survived one painful surgery, he was understandably unhappy at the notion of undoing that work, having to live with the misery of saliva constantly dripping from his open wound, and going through all that surgery again. Do these details upset you?"

"Not at all," she says. "Though I am sympathetic."

"The patient began to shout and flail, and I wondered for a moment if his mind hadn't been permanently affected as well."

"I have seen men whose minds have been severely affected by combat."

"Have you?" Dr. Bridge asks, staring intently at Stella.

Streeter removes the bowls and sets down pear salads. As they wait for him to leave, Stella finds herself intrigued by a portrait on the wall of a woman who clearly is not Lily.

"My mother," Dr. Bridge says, noting Stella's gaze. "This was her house, which I inherited upon her death. It's too big for us, really. We are lucky to have Streeter. He injured his leg early in the war, poor man. We have Iris, whom you've met, and Mrs. Ryan, our cook, and Mary Dodsworth, who is our chauffeur. Her husband, Robert, used to drive the Austin before he went to the front. We only use the motorcar when going any distance. In these times of scarcity, we lend it to friends who have necessary errands. Indeed . . ." He pauses. "I have often been called upon to tend to a wife or a father who has had the worst possible news."

The car has been used for funerals. Stella hopes there has been a wedding or two as well.

The doctor sets his bowl aside. Stella picks up her fork. To her knowledge, she has never eaten pears, and she savors each slice. A faint smell of fish cooking in a pan drifts into the dining room.

"I signed up to go to France," the doctor says, "but I was

disqualified because of scoliosis and abysmal eyesight. The fact that my spine doesn't bother me one bit or that my sight is easily corrected did not, I'm afraid, budge the board. 'We need you here, too,' they said by way of consolation." The doctor looks off as if still angry.

"That must have been difficult for you," Stella offers.

"And later, when it became clear that Englishmen were being slaughtered across the Channel and replacements were needed, I tried again, and again I was refused. I have contented myself with treating some of the most severe head wounds that return by hospital ship. I often deal with patients as soon as their trains pull into Waterloo."

"You are doing important work," Stella says.

"No more than any other man." He looks at her. "Or woman." Stella feels a tingling in her feet.

Oh, please. God, no.

She holds her breath a moment, and the tingling subsides.

"You were going to leave us before I even came home?" Dr. Bridge inquires.

"It was not out of disrespect," Stella says. "I felt it was time to be on my way. Your wife persuaded me to stay."

He laughs. "She has amazing powers." He smiles to indicate that these powers are benign and usually put to good purpose. "Why did you come from America to Europe, and how did you get here? Perhaps you've talked about this already with Lily."

"Sometimes it all seems a blur," she answers, half smiling,

trying to make the answer seem as casual as possible. Lily *had* asked her the same question, early on in her stay, and Stella had been guarded then as well.

"You have a soft voice for someone of your height. You're nearly as tall as I am. Six feet?"

"Do you always ask your guests such personal questions?" she asks, again feeling the tingling in her legs.

"Surgeons are rude. I'm sorry. I suppose we think we can get away with it."

"You have seen dreadful cases."

"As have you. Did you enjoy your war work, however exhausting?"

"I can't believe anyone enjoys such work, but I did appreciate the obliteration of thought."

"You were trying to blot out memories."

She shakes her head quickly, a sign to desist, but he presses on.

"I can't help but think," he says, "that someone who tried to get to Europe during a war—a war in which her country wasn't even involved—was either running away from something unpleasant in America or was searching in the most desperate, the most dangerous of ways for the obliteration of self that you speak of."

Stella scoots her chair away from the table and puts her hands on her thighs. She clenches her jaw. Dr. Bridge looks bewildered and stands, but she waves him off with a sudden harsh movement of her hand.

She bends and rubs her legs through the cloth of her skirt, from the tops of her thighs down to her ankles, along the sides of her calves, and up to her thighs again. She is aware that these gestures might be seen as improper, but she is in too much pain to care. Unable to control herself, she utters small, gruff cries. The doctor stands beside her with his hands open.

The pain is unspeakable, and she cannot assuage it no matter how hard she tries. She rubs her legs with increasing frequency and finds it mortifying to be acting in this way in the dining room of a man she barely knows. If she could manage it, she would stand and run out of the house.

"Miss Bain, what is it?"

She is unable to speak for fear of uttering an ugly sound.

"Is the pain terrible? Would morphine help?"

Stella shakes her head.

After a time—fifteen minutes or forty—Stella unclenches her jaw. Her arms tremble, as if she were cold. She wants to be anywhere but in this dining room. The doctor holds her water glass to her lips. After she has taken a sip, she hunches over herself.

"What happened to you just then?" Dr. Bridge asks. That he of all people should have seen the attack is unbearable to Stella, because she knows he will not let it go. But there is no use denying what was perfectly visible. "My legs hurt," she says plainly.

"Do they now?"

"No, the pain is gone."

"Completely gone?"

"Yes."

"Can you describe it?"

For a few minutes, Stella remains silent, and he does not interrupt that silence.

"I have recurring pain in my legs," Stella says finally, "as well as a deafness that is quite real when it happens." She pauses. "Just then it felt as though someone were running a wheel with pins up and down my legs, only the pins were digging deep into my bones."

"I'm so sorry," he says.

She takes a handkerchief from her cuff and blots her face, knowing that her scalp is wet. She has another long sip of water. "I'm embarrassed."

"No need to be. No need at all. It was, I could see, completely beyond your control. The pain looked ghastly. Have you ever broken your legs? Bad fractures can result in lifelong intermittent pain."

She considers how much to tell him. "Seven months ago, I was found unconscious with shrapnel in my feet. The shrapnel was removed, but I had very little infection. It would be tempting to think that was the cause, but most of the time, I haven't any pain and am perfectly able to walk."

"Your feet don't hurt?"

"They did immediately after the surgery to remove the shrapnel, but they healed well."

"Forgive me for my direct questions," the doctor says. "It's mystifying. Do you suffer from arthritis?"

She laughs, feeling giddy as she always does after the cessation of pain. "You think I'm that old?"

"No," he answers, coloring. "Arthritis can affect the very young, as you know. Do episodes such as the one that just occurred happen often?"

"I don't know what 'often' means."

"Once a day? Once a month?"

"It has no schedule."

The tops of her thighs are sore from the rubbing, and she wants nothing more than to lie down. She thinks of excusing herself and going straight up to the room she so recently left.

Dr. Bridge resumes his seat and rests his chin on his hand. The sunlight through the window glints off his spectacles. She is a puzzle to him, one he thinks he ought to be able to solve. She is a puzzle to herself.

"I thought you went deaf in the garden."

"Yes."

The doctor appears to ponder that episode. His roving eyes convey his desire to understand. "Have these occurrences increased in frequency?"

She thinks a minute. "Yes, I suppose they have."

He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Think back to the moment when you first had the pains in your legs or felt yourself going deaf."

Stella does not like the memory. "I was driving an ambu-

lance from near the front to the hospital camp. I had a sudden and severe pain in my legs, so much so that I had to stop the ambulance, which I had been told never to do. Getting the wounded to the camp was urgent. I didn't know what had happened or how long the duration of the pain would be. At first, I thought I had been hit."

"With a bullet or shrapnel."

"Yes. But when I finally made it back to our camp, I examined myself and could find no blood or wound."

Dr. Bridge considers her answer. "Did you tell anyone about the pain?"

"No."

"No physician examined you? Looked at your legs or feet?"

"No. My only examination happened shortly after I arrived at the camp."

"And the deafness?"

"It happened simultaneously with the legs. It also occurs by itself, though, as it did today in the garden."

Aware that they have been talking in somewhat modulated tones, Stella sits back. Whether consciously or not, Dr. Bridge mimics her posture.

"Why didn't you tell anyone?" he asks. "I assume there were good doctors in Marne."

"I would have been sent to England or back to America," she explains. "Or worse, I would have been stripped of my duties as an ambulance driver. One couldn't have a driver who might at any moment become disabled."

"How did you become an ambulance driver?" he asks.

"Though I worked as a nurse's aide, I was asked to drive an ambulance. I told them I'd done it before."

"Truly?" he says, surprised.

Why has she added that bit of information? To impress him? To show him she is no ordinary VAD?

"Highly unusual, I should think, Miss Bain," he adds.

Stella remains silent.

"Are you all right?" he asks.

For one dizzying moment, Stella thinks the honorific incorrect.

After a pause, Dr. Bridge asks, "May I ask you what drew you to Bryanston Square?"

"Is that where I am?" Stella gazes through the window at the green-gold oasis. She wonders once again how much to tell him. "I need to go to the Admiralty. It feels urgent."

"You're about an hour away on foot. You must have been in great distress to have come straight from the hospital ship and not bother to first find a place to sleep for the night."

Heat rises to her face.

Streeter enters and sets down plates. The fish does not look appetizing, and she doubts that it will be warm.

"In the course of my practice of cranial surgery," Dr. Bridge begins, "I have come upon a number of bizarre physical phenomena. Though I'm a surgeon, I'm intrigued by these

odd occurrences and have often sought the advice of other doctors whose knowledge has helped to illuminate a thorny problem of my own."

"Hence your interest in me?"

"My interest in you is humanitarian. If I may, I should like to make a suggestion."

She meets his gaze.

"Even though you have improved tremendously, I think you know you are not entirely well. Do you understand that you cannot go back to France until your symptoms subside?"

"I must go back," she explains. "Otherwise I'll be written down as absent without leave."

"I doubt the penalties for American volunteers are as severe as for the English or French soldier, but I'll investigate."

"No, please don't," she says, then stands. "Thank you for your concern."

"You must finish your lunch," the doctor says. "I believe Mrs. Ryan has gone to the trouble of making a pudding."

Does the doctor imagine she cannot see through his transparent ploy?

The doctor eats in silence, perhaps mindful of the clock. Stella cannot bring herself to touch the fish, the sauce of which has congealed on her plate. After a time, Streeter enters the room to clear the dishes and to bring out a warm bread pudding with custard, a course Stella thinks she can eat.

Dr. Bridge speaks in the voice of a man who has composed his thoughts. "I wish you to stay a few more nights with my

wife and me. As you can see, we have plenty of room, and neither I nor Lily would feel comfortable if you left now. In fact, I should feel that I was putting you in harm's way or worse—that if I let you go, you might injure others should your symptoms overcome you at a critical moment."

Stella puts a hand up.

"This isn't to say that you aren't free to go," Dr. Bridge continues. "Of course you are. This is merely my recommendation. If you could but think of this as a temporary rest stop, I believe progress can be made. We can certainly get you back on your feet. We can speak further another time."

He has no idea who I am, she thinks.

I have no idea who I am.

Stella stands. "You think, Dr. Bridge, that my most acute problem at the moment is the physical occurrences you have witnessed. But it's not. My greatest difficulty is that I can't remember anything in my life prior to waking in a hospital tent in Marne in March of this year." She moves toward the door. "I appreciate your concern, but I have places I must go. Please thank your wife again. She has been extremely kind."

Streeter appears next to Stella with her cloak and satchel.

"Good-bye, Dr. Bridge," she says.