# SOLDIER BOY

Copyright © 2010 Azita Crerar

All rights reserved.

# SOLDIER BOY

Azita Crerar

Also by Azita Crerar:

**Maid to Order**

**Me, Jack, and Madeleine**

**not-for-bedtime stories**

**Please visit www.azitacrerar.com for updated list of titles**

# Soldier Boy

*In memory of Uncle Lotfi*

# Chapter 1

*August 2nd, 198-*

*A new life grows inside me. What a bounteous gift from the Almighty! Malcolm and I are thrilled beyond belief. No one else knows yet. It is too soon. I do not even feel the life stirring yet. But I know it is there.*

***

Kathleen looked up at her grandfather with shining eyes. “Tell me again, Grandfather. Tell me how you saved the day.”

Grandfather pulled on his pipe slowly, deliberately. Then he laid it down on the side table and began. “It was a bitter battle we were fighting. It seemed no matter how many of the enemy we killed, fresh recruits would just keep pouring in. Meanwhile our side was getting beaten, and badly. Most of our men were holed up in Sick Bay. I suppose if they had had the energy they would have been rooting for us.

“Well one day the bugle sounded bright and early, and there we were, all of us getting ready to charge into battle. We were lying in the trenches, ready to pull out, when all of a sudden there came a sound. I peered above, and there was a man, coming staggering towards us.

“He was dressed in our uniform, and at first I thought one of our men had disobeyed orders and gone charging out ahead of the rest of us. But I didn’t recognize him any, and all of a sudden I smelled a trap.” Grandfather tugged on his hair in excitement as Kathleen listened breathlessly.

“I could see that he was injured. Either that or he was faking it pretty good. But I wasn’t about to take any chances. ‘What’s the word, Comrade?’ I said to him. And he mumbled

something out, but it wasn't anything like the password, and all on a sudden I knew my hunch had been right.

"Of course I didn't quite understand what the trap was, but it was a gut feeling. So I jumped right out of the trenches, with my fellows bawling at me about just where in heck I thought I was going. But I didn't pay them any mind. I figured there'd be time enough later on to explain it all. That is, if I didn't get caught in the trap.

"So I jumped out and grabbed the man, and I start pulling him back towards his side, which lay a good five hundred yards away. Well, even though he was injured, and now I could see that he wasn't faking it, he had lots of fight in him, and he started putting up the biggest kind of opposition so as I wouldn't pull him back, you see.

"But I paid him no mind and I just kept on dragging him. Mind you, once in a while I'd have to give him a piece of my mind, if you know what I mean (and here he winked at Kathleen), then he'd stop struggling for a while, and it would be smooth going after that.

"At one point the dirty hound pulled out a little hand dagger he had concealed somewhere on his person, and stabbed me in the calf with it. That was painful, I can tell you. I stumbled and

fell, feeling as though I'd gotten the biggest charley horse in Christendom. I held my leg and I all but screamed with pain.

"I say I all but screamed, because I didn't want to give the enemy any notion that I was coming their way. I forgot about the pain in a mighty hurry though, when I saw that dirty scoundrel trying to double back after all that work I'd had dragging him up to that point.

"So I gave my leg a good shake, and started hobbling after him. It was short work catching up to him, seeing as he was a good deal more injured than I was, even though I was mystified as to the cause of it all. I couldn't see his side deliberately wanting to injure one of their own men.

"I tackled him to the ground, and this time I really let him have it. When I pulled him to a sitting position he was more dead than alive." Grandfather had started making imaginary punches in the air, and he was sweating profusely.

"But that man had pluck. I'll give him that much. As we neared the enemy trenches, I saw him fumbling for something. It caught my eye because I was being wary as anything. I saw that he was reaching for a whistle that he had around his neck, but which had been hidden inside his shirt. I yanked it from him straightaway, and it was the most uncanny thing.

"It was as though in the process I had yanked away his soul, because he suddenly seemed to give up. He didn't try to pull any more pranks. I left him lying about ten yards from his trenches, and all of a sudden it appeared to me what a foolhardy thing it was that I'd been doing.

"I got the fear of the Lord into me then, and I started half-hobbling, half-running towards my side and my men. I got about halfway across the field when I heard a terrific explosion which sent me reeling head over heels. As soon as I got up, I kept running and didn't stop till I'd made it to the trenches and jumped in, exhausted.

"Of course in a minute everyone was around me shooting questions like they had just gotten out of journalism school. As soon as I caught my breath, I explained what had happened, at least as far as I understood things.

"But I'm afraid I was rather incoherent. One of them told me later on they didn't understand a blessed word I was mumbling. They thought I was touched. They also thought I was a traitor! Imagine! The details only came out later.

"Later on I also found out that that luckless soldier had lost some crazy kind of bet, and as a result he'd been strapped down with tiny bombs. Our troops would have gotten a mighty beating

that day. At best we would have all ended up in the tents, as they saw to our wounds. But instead it was their side that was laid up for a few days. After that they sent me to the tents, even though I wanted to stay in the trenches. They saw to my leg, and I was as good as new."

Grandfather turned to Kathleen. He rolled his pant leg up and indicated an old scar on the calf of his left leg. "And that's all, my dear."

Kathleen looked up at him with stars in her eyes. No matter how many times he told that story, she reveled in it. She forgot about her surroundings. Gone was the living room where Grandfather sat in a sofa chair, a mahogany table at his side, where he would lay his pipe down as he recounted his story.

She was whisked away to the battlefield where she found herself by Grandfather's side (she had an awful time picturing him young), and together they would do battle against the enemy soldier, who had bombs galore strapped to him. Later on she was in nurse's uniform, seeing to his injuries in one of the tents set up for the wounded.

Kathleen never tired of hearing of Grandfather's exploits. Unwillingly she brought herself back to the present. She leaned against the armchair, and pulled herself up to a standing position

from where she'd been kneeling. She stooped and kissed the top of his head. It was tousled and grey, leaning towards white. Once it had been brown, and he had charged into battle with flaming cheeks.

She peered deep into his face, trying to see beyond, to smooth out his wrinkles and see the boy that had been. "I love you, Grandfather."

He squeezed her hand.

"I have to go into town to run a few errands," she continued, "but I'll be back soon." She let go his hand and, smiling back at him, walked towards the front door.

Kathleen let the sun warm her face. She walked along dreamily, with eyes half-closed, letting the sun soak into her. It had a hypnotic effect. It made her feel lazy, and she longed to sink into the grass and lie there for the remainder of the afternoon. She walked by the row of white picket fences that looked for all the world like little wooden soldiers, intent on guarding the trust that was theirs: their owner's lawn.

Not even knee-high, it would be the work of a moment to step over the line of defense onto somebody's well-kept lawn, and sprawl out under a tree that afforded a generous amount of shade

for the rest of the afternoon. Kathleen was just making up her mind about whose lawn looked most inviting (absence of a dog being a critical factor), when a brisk wind came along, and whipped her long dark hair across her face, jolting her out of her reverie.

Impatiently she shook her hair out of her eyes. They were a deep dark blue, blue as the deep blue sea, and just as thoughtful. As she walked along, her mind was in the past. She acknowledged neighbors with a nod, but her thoughts were centered on a battleground, almost sixty years ago.

There had been a fierce rivalry between two adjoining villages, and rather than either of them giving up land rights (and they had been considerable), they had both chosen to fight it out. Of course Kathleen's village of Middleford had come out victorious, and her grandfather was the hero, even though it had been a narrow win. Casualties on both sides had been heavy.

Kathleen wished herself in the past. It must have been such an exciting time. She would have joined the forces in the trenches. She would have gladly fought and bled with them. Maybe she could even have warned Grandfather about the dagger, and thus spared him the pain. She longed for excitement with all her soul.

In all her life Kathleen hadn't been five miles outside her village. Middleford was all she knew of the world. Oh sure, she

read history books like everyone else, and heard the news on the radio, but somehow to her it was all very far away and unimportant, and Middleford was the centre of the universe.

Sometimes she thought when God was doling out luck he must have skipped her and given someone else an extra measure; both her parents had died when she was very young, and she had been entrusted to the care of her grandfather. She didn't mind, of course. She had been too young to remember feeling sad, and there was no one on Earth like her grandfather, only sometimes she wished she knew what it was like to have parents. But mostly she didn't mind.

At seventeen she was more grown up than most girls her age; maybe it came from keeping company with Grandfather. She was willful and had a decided temper, which she seldom showed. She had finely chiseled features, and if she ever bothered to groom herself, people would have called her beautiful. But since she always roamed around with flyaway hair and scruffy-looking clothes, people simply called her the Wild One, and wondered when she would grow up.

Kathleen knew most of what was whispered about her, and didn't give two shakes of a stick for it all. Truth to tell, she secretly gloried in it, in the fact that they considered her wild and unkempt. Beyond that she was an angel, and much as they would have liked

to, the town tongues could add nothing else to their meager gossip. Kathleen pretty much kept to herself, steering clear of the town boys whom she had a marked distaste for.

She looked up and caught prying Mrs. Geets' curious eyes following her hungrily. Privately Kathleen called her Mrs. Geeks and felt much the better for it. She was Middleford's Gossip Queen and Kathleen generally gave her a wide berth.

And there was Ma Porter and her half-wit son. Kathleen slowed down and smiled at him. Ma Porter took affront. She was always taking affront with people who pitied her. But Kathleen didn't pity her anymore than she pitied her orphan self. She simply thought it her duty to be kind to those less fortunate than herself.

Alfie Dunhill, new in town, headed her list of Annoying Boys. True, he hadn't yet done much, but he hadn't had time to. It was the way he *looked* at her that Kathleen didn't like, she had decided. She didn't want to be looked at. She wanted to be left alone to do her own thing. She didn't want to be like every other girl in town who had no higher aspiration than to catch a town boy, marry him, settle down and have a family. The town boys were hardly a catch, to her mind.

She wasn't yet sure what she wanted to do with her life, but she did think she could aim a bit higher than that, even if she tried only a little bit.

Alfie was only slightly different than all the boys in town. He was an outsider for one thing. His family had moved to Middleford only a short while ago. His father ran the drugstore and his mother had opened a teashop, brewing herbal remedies. That in itself was an oddity, the fact that the mother ran a shop. Middleford was as yet undecided on whether this was acceptable or not. All the other mothers stayed at home and attended to the housekeeping.

Alfie was sitting on a crate outside the drugstore humming a tune as Kathleen passed, and he looked up at her and smiled quietly. She brushed the hair out of her eyes and pretended she hadn't seen him. But she felt his eyes boring a hole into her back as she kept walking. She almost screamed with the tension.

Kathleen was coming to the town square now, and as she crossed it she waved to the workmen in the centre. They were getting the ground prepared for the statue. First would come a big cement block, and afterwards a bronze statue of her grandfather in battle: *Jeremiah Preston*, it would read beneath it. On plaques around the base would go the names of all the men they had lost in battle.

Upwards of a thousand men had died in that battle, a not inconsiderable number for a village so small. Indeed the loss was felt keenly. And of the survivors, Grandfather was the last.

The plaques were being etched in town, but instructions for the statue had been sent out to a great bronze factory, where they would pour the molten bronze into a mould. Within a short while it would be ready, and then it would be sent back to town in time for the grand inauguration. Needless to say, Grandfather was to play a big role in the proceedings. She herself had a modest part, and was looking forward to it.

She didn't know whether it had been Grandfather's story a little while ago, or the sweltering heat, or the thought of the bronze statue, or maybe a combination of all three, but all of a sudden she felt like doing something absolutely zany. She had an insatiable urge to visit the scene of the battle.

Just why, she wasn't sure. Never in all her seventeen years had she ventured in that direction. True, she had never been forbidden, but how often did grownups figure a child would get a foolhardy notion like that? It had probably never crossed their minds to forbid it. The field itself lay about eight miles out of town, and even though Kathleen had never seen it, she knew exactly where it was. She could recognize it from description alone, if nothing else.

And suddenly Kathleen's mind was made up. The errands could wait. There would be plenty of time later on. With determination she turned her steps towards the east side of town, choosing a narrow alley between two shops as her exit. A narrow strip of tall grass brought her to a road. She continued along the road for a few miles before veering to her left, onto a seldom-used path into the forest. Rivulets of sweat meandered across her face and she had just begun to regret her impulsive action, when the shady branches overhead made her forget the hot noonday sun.

It was incredibly cool in the forest. A gentle breeze blew on Kathleen, and she lifted her matted hair to allow some wind to blow against her nape. The path wound its way through the forest. There was only one path, and Kathleen had implicit trust in it. The only thing she wasn't looking forward to was passing the Witch's house. Now deep down she knew the woman who lived there was no more a witch than Kathleen was a cat.

The woman was probably blameless enough, but in a small village when someone got a name affixed to them, it stuck. She chose to live alone, apart from the village, in a house in the woods. She kept to herself and only came to town when she absolutely had to. Usually it was because she had run out of supplies. But when she *did* come to town, she made a day of it.

She would go to the hairdresser's and get her hair done, and then go and sit at the ice cream shop and enjoy a dish of ice cream. She almost looked presentable after the hairdresser's, but her raggedy clothes were an odd mismatch. No one knew how long her hair stayed the way it did. Inevitably when she came to town the next time, it hung limply around her shoulders. Some speculated that she shook it out as soon as she went home and only did it up in the first place to make people talk.

There was nothing very witch-like about any of this, and Kathleen was well aware of it. But when you grow up with neighborhood tales that children whisper to each other in the schoolyard and at play, fear, even an unfounded one, doesn't die easily. And so it was that Kathleen walked with trepidation as she neared the Witch's house. She hoped against hope that the Witch would be out of view. But maybe that was worse. Perhaps she would be staring out at her from an upstairs window. The thought made her spine tingle.

In this regard at least Kathleen was lucky, because the Witch was in her garden. She felt she had to be civil, and so she raised her hand and gave a feeble wave. The Witch simply stared at her. Kathleen kept walking.

"Nice manners," she muttered to herself.

"Joan?" called out the Witch.

"No," answered Kathleen with a backward glance. Nervously she quickened her pace. Joan had been her mother's name.

She didn't trust herself to look back until a few minutes later, and by then she was out of sight and earshot of the Witch's house. She had half-expected the Witch to follow her, but the path behind her remained empty.

A few miles more brought her to the edge of the forest, and by now Kathleen was seriously regretting her decision to come all this way. And for what? In the end she would have to walk all the way back, once again going past the Witch's house. By now her errands would have been done and she would have been on her way home.

Instead of which, she was miles away from the village. But she had made it this far, and it would be absolutely senseless to turn around at this point and go home. She could see a clearing up ahead. She marched resolutely on, and in a moment she was blinking in the sunlight.

Gone was the momentary regret that she had previously felt. It had all been worth it, just to come and gaze on these vast

majestic fields. Kathleen forgot about her fatigue. Fresh energy had been infused into her. She kept walking further from the forest in order to get a better view of the fields. Then without warning she was knocked from behind, and went sprawling onto the ground.

# Chapter 2

*October 14, 198-*

*The life within me is stirring. I can feel it now. She kicks. Why should I feel such a deep conviction that it is a she and not a he? I know, yet know not how to explain. Anyways, I needn't. Explain that is. I am thinking of names. But it is too soon. I am thinking of bedroom wall colors too. I know, it is too soon. Nine months seems like an eternity to wait to hold my little dear one. But I must be patient. She is still busily forming, I know this.*

***

Kathleen picked herself up slowly. She was wondering what in the world had bowled her over like that. A boy whom she judged to be about nineteen years old was staring at her angrily.

"Watch where you're going. What are you doing here anyways? You belong over there," and he pointed with a finger before stalking off.

Kathleen stared after the retreating figure. She was too bewildered to feel offended. Where had he come from? And dressed in army uniform? For that matter where had any of them come from?

She was just beginning to absorb her surroundings. She was standing on the same field, or at least she thought she was. She looked back towards the woods. They seemed much farther off and a good deal dwarfed. She turned her attention back to the field.

Soldiers were milling around everywhere. There was a great deal of noise and bustle. It seemed it was lunchtime. Long tables were set up with pots of food, and soldiers were heading in that direction. She supposed the rude boy had also headed that way.

She glanced towards the place he had pointed to with his finger. A row of white tents was set up. She idly wondered why

she should be there, and not out here on the field. True, there were no other females out here. She decided to humor the Soldier Boy's order and sauntered off towards the tents.

Here was another hoopla with women running back and forth with a great deal of energy and what she felt was unnecessary noise. A woman thrust a shallow pan into her hands, muttering something about finding work for idle hands, and an order to fill the pan with water.

Kathleen was slightly taken aback. What was she in the middle of, and why did people accept her unquestioningly? Didn't they notice that she looked different, that she wore a different style of clothing? Kathleen wandered helplessly from tent to tent, wondering where she was supposed to find water.

Peering into each tent she could see that there was lots of activity. It seemed she had landed in the Sick Quarters, what with men laid up in beds and women poring over them like bees in a beehive. For this reason Kathleen felt too shy to ask where the water was. She simply supposed she would eventually find it.

As good luck would have it, she noticed a soldier carrying a pitcher of water towards the lunch tables. She looked in the direction he had just come from and decided it couldn't hurt to retrace his footsteps. The unmarked path brought her behind the

tents, and to a well. She breathed a sigh of relief. Someone was at the well, pulling up a bucket of water.

She watched carefully, and when it was her turn she lowered the bucket, and was delighted to see it come up, filled to the brim with water. She used the first bucketful to wash her face; she felt that muggy from the walk through the forest. She knew her hair and the rest of her must be an awful mess, but she didn't care. For the first time since her long walk she felt cool and clean. Then she lowered the bucket again to fill the pan.

She and Grandfather had a well in their front yard, but it was more ornamental than anything else. It hadn't been used for years, and had finally been stopped up. They had topped it with dirt, and flowers were growing out of it.

Gingerly she started walking back towards the tents. She was concentrating so hard on carrying the pan, that she wasn't looking ahead, and before she knew it she had careened into someone coming the other way. Half the water spilled on her, soaking her from the waist down. Kathleen was livid. She looked up with sparks in her eyes.

It was the Soldier Boy. He regarded her with quiet amusement. "You just keep following me everywhere I go today, don't you?"

Kathleen pursed her lips together. She was getting ready to vent her rage and indignation when he suddenly said, “Here, give me your pan. I’ll go and fill it up again for you.”

All of a sudden her rage was gone, and she followed him meekly back to the well.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you before,” he offered as a conversation opener.

Kathleen knew the time had come. It was now or never, and if she blew it, well… no good could come of it. So she took a deep breath. “I just arrived today. I’m… visiting.”

“And on your first day, already you’ve come to help with the troops.” He smiled.

Kathleen breathed a sigh of relief. She knew she was okay for now. Later on, she would have to add more details to her story, make it more plausible, more believable. But for now it would have to do.

And her hunch had been right. Incredible as it seemed, she had been whisked back in time to the great battle that had taken place here, just outside their village. She had gotten her wish. And now what? She supposed that she would stay as long as she could.

The Soldier Boy didn't say anything more, but applied himself to the task of drawing water from the well. Kathleen looked at him curiously. She wondered why he had been in such a foul mood the first time she had come across him, and why he had been friendlier this second time. True, he didn't seem to be the talkative type, but that didn't make him unfriendly.

He had what she supposed was light brown hair. It was cut so short she could hardly tell. His eyes were green with spots of yellow, rather like a cat's eyes, and he had a light sprinkling of freckles over his nose and cheeks. He looked like a farm boy, and rather out of place in a soldier's uniform. The uniform itself was an ugly green, leaning towards brown. She decided the Soldier Boy could be handsome enough, if he ever let his hair grow back.

"Here you go."

Kathleen broke out of her reverie to see him standing there, holding the pan out towards her. She blushed crimson. Had he noticed her staring at him like that?

"Tha-thank you," she managed to stammer clumsily, and taking it from him, walked back up the path towards the tents.

Kathleen was just making up her mind as to which tent the pan belonged to, when the Matron issued forth from one of them with her hands on her hips.

"Well you've been a time!" she exclaimed impatiently. "I was just after sending somebody for you. Thought you might have fallen down the well," she finished off with a chuckle. She relieved Kathleen of her burden, and stalked off towards her tent.

What now? Were her services still required? She stepped uncertainly towards the tent. The Matron was expecting her.

"Tie your hair back, Girl. You should know better than that. There's a basin in the corner with a bar of soap. Wash up and then come and help me tend to this soldier." She clucked impatiently as Kathleen remained motionless by the entry to the tent. "To look at you, anyone would think you were born yesterday."

"Tomorrow, more like," muttered Kathleen to herself, and immediately felt better for her attempt at humor.

The next few hours were simply a blur. She lost count of the number of times she had to return to the well, set a pot of water boiling, sterilize strips of white cloth by dunking them into boiling water and pulling them out with tongs, apply them to the soldier's

wounds, and remove them when they were soaked with blood. It surprised her how quickly she overcame her initial nausea. It was as though she had been treating soldiers all her life.

The Matron kept up such a fast pace that Kathleen didn't really have time to sit back and absorb her surroundings. This came as a blessing in disguise, because the harried pace didn't leave time for her to be very repulsed by the work at hand. The Matron herself was running from bed to bed, and Kathleen noticed that there were other incompetent-looking women like her trying to help.

Kathleen was thankful that she only had one charge to concentrate on. When her soldier fell asleep, momentarily leaving his pain behind, she stood up, and walked towards the washbasin in the corner. Slowly she washed her face and arms. She felt as though she had been running a great marathon. Then she dried her face and walked towards the entrance of the tent.

Looking out, she was shocked to see that it was nearing dusk. She quickly recalled that she had some errands to run in the village and that Grandfather would be waiting. Glancing furtively behind her to the Matron who had her back towards her, Kathleen slunk off slowly, appearing an aimless wanderer at first, and then as she got further from the tents she quickened her pace towards the forest. She wasn't even sure whether or not she would be

transported back to the present as soon as she stepped off the field and into the woods.

She stepped into the forest. Everything seemed to be the same. With rising panic she wondered whether she was stuck in the past. Glancing behind her she quickly calmed down; the white tent tops were nowhere to be seen. The rest of the evening was a blur as she rushed by the Witch's house, not even bothering to glance up or feel the least bit tremulous.

When she reached home she let herself in through the garden gate and hurried to take a shower. As she collapsed into bed it occurred to her that she had neglected to run her errands in town.

# Chapter 3

*December 3rd, 198-*

*We have settled on a name: Kathleen. She shall be Kathleen Winifred Preston. And she shall carry the Preston name proudly, as does her father. As does her grandfather. We have told Jeremiah, told him that he can expect a grandchild to be born to him some time in the spring. He is a man of few words but of great deeds. He has started fashioning a crib. I believe that man can work miracles out of wood. Give him a shapeless lump and he becomes a creator.*

*I have told Winifred as well. It was the least I could do. She is my closest and dearest friend. I told her our daughter would bear her*

*name and she was most pleased. She did not stir up trouble for a week.*

*I have often warned her against being at loggerheads with the leading prima donnas of Middleford, but what will she have? She will grow into a cantankerous old woman if she doesn't have a care. Sometimes I am afraid for her. She is too strong willed, too opinionated. Sometimes I think she is at odds with people just to have something to do.*

*We laugh and say one day she'll be a complete outcast and go and live in the forest and do what she likes there. She'll have a little house and live by herself and be known as the Witch of Middleford.*

*"But you'll visit me, Joan, won't you?" She says in her anxious way.*

*"Of course I will," I hasten to reassure her.*

*But it is all in jest anyway, or so I believe. What catastrophe so large could happen as to cause her to be an outcast of Middleford, a tiny village in the middle of a big landmass called America that no one has ever heard of?*

*We live a world apart, like busy little ants so intent on their teeny tiny lives. For the ants, that is all they know of their world. It is their centre, their universe, their reason for being. We look at the*

*ants and laugh. But what are we, if not bigger ants? And who knows but that the Cosmos is not having a good laugh at us as well?*

***

Kathleen was very quiet at home. Grandfather asked her what was wrong but she only shrugged her shoulders and muttered, "Nothing" so he let it go. In his wisdom he knew that whatever her trouble was, it would eventually come to light. So he went about his business and left her quite alone.

Kathleen was relieved. She wished to be alone with her thoughts. What had happened to her? Had she actually been whisked through time, or had it all been an illusion, the result of a long walk on a hot day?

She wasn't quite sure why, but she took to musing. She would sit at the breakfast table for hours, leaving her toast half-nibbled and forgotten. On a sudden her thoughts were far away.

She was in a tent, and she was properly dressed, not the scraggly figure that she had actually been. Her hair was tied back in a bun, and she was leaning over her patient, administering care.

The Matron was in the background and forgotten; in her thoughts Kathleen was competent and had no need of a Matron.

More often than not, her thoughts would turn to a certain encounter at a well. Only this time she didn't spill the water over herself. She deliberately poured it into the bushes at the approach of the Soldier Boy, thus giving herself the opportunity to walk back with him to have it refilled and get into light conversation, but without the added annoyance of being soaking wet from the waist down.

Kathleen tried to snap out of her reverie by getting busy with chores. Grandfather would walk in on her only to find her with broom in hand, staring off into space. A light cough on his part was generally enough to break the spell, and she would quickly get back to work. He would pretend not to notice, and Kathleen would pretend he hadn't noticed, so they got along swimmingly.

She tried to shake it off – this mode of thought she had gotten into – but only half-heartedly, which is to say not at all, and so she kept thinking. She thought of green eyes and a freckled nose, and finely chiseled cheekbones. Once in a while her thoughts bent in the direction of an injured soldier – her particular trust – and she idly wondered how he was getting along and whether he was out of the tent and back on the battlefield again.

It momentarily crossed her mind that it was rather pointless to patch them up only to see them go charging off into battle again, but she dismissed the thought quickly because it made her feel vaguely uncomfortable. After all, where would they be today if those same soldiers hadn't fought and won for them?

To take her mind off the past, at least momentarily, Kathleen got busy with the present. That abominable Mrs. Geets had invited her over for tea that afternoon and Kathleen had promised to bake some squares. It was one of those things she would do anything to get out of but that she couldn't say no to unless she was on her deathbed, so she said yes and she said she would bring apple-oatmeal squares – her specialty. It was a rather easy recipe and simple to prepare, but she liked to drizzle melted chocolate over the top to make it appear more complicated and indicative of greater skill than was actually required. The inevitable oohs and aahs were thanks enough.

So she did her baking in the morning, had a quick lunch, showered and dressed, combed her hair for once and hoped she looked presentable. Armed with her platter of squares, she marched off towards Mrs. Geets' house.

"Oh, I must remember to call her Mrs. Geets," she chided herself. "I almost forgot last time. Luckily she was only half listening, as usual."

Mrs. Geets opened the door and beamed at Kathleen. "Why, my dear, you're quite presentable today."

Kathleen pressed her lips together and forced a smile. "Yes, I decided to comb my hair today."

Mrs. Geets stared at her and then burst out laughing. "Oh, what a joker you are! In you come, my dear. You know," she whispered conspiratorially as she ushered her past the cloak room, "with a ribbon in your hair you would be the catch of the town. You could have your pick of the town boys, you know."

"That's why I decided to skip the ribbon."

Again Mrs. Geets stared for a moment before breaking out into laughter, nervous this time. "Come and meet the rest of the company, and remember your manners," she warned in a hushed voice.

"Mrs. Porter, Miss Lindstrom, Mrs. Synacure, J.C., how do you do?" Kathleen curtsied demurely. She could be as polite as anyone, when she chose to. J.C. was a year younger than her and Mrs. Synacure's daughter. She lifted doe eyes to Kathleen and sat up haughtily. Wonderful, so this was the company she would have to tolerate for the remainder of the afternoon. She could think of at least 6 things she would rather be doing.

It seemed everyone had only just arrived and was still in the exchanging-pleasantries stage. At least they would be polite. It was funny the way they pretended their village was so big that they hadn't actually seen each other for ages. In all probability, they ran into each other at least once a day and knew each other's business inside and out.

"Oh, Kathleen," tittered Mrs. Synacure. "You really *must* show me how you do these squares. Why I was only telling Jennifer Cynthia *yesterday*, wasn't I, Jennifer Cynthia?"

J.C. looked up from her cup of tea and smiled sweetly into her mother's face. Kathleen could have gotten up and slapped her just for that, but of course one did not go about slapping people's faces at tea parties, did one? For one thing, one was assured to never get a repeat invitation.

"I said, Jennifer Cynthia, we really *must* get that recipe from Kathleen. It's *too* divine. Simply to *die* for."

Mrs. Synacure prattled on for the next five minutes about how much they enjoyed Kathleen's baking and how they would love to have the recipe. Kathleen reflected that she could have stated her whole wish in thirty seconds. She rather thought it was because she wanted to show off her new jewelry and the only way

to show them to advantage was to speak in unnecessary italics and thus do a lot of hand waving and angling of the head.

Kathleen suddenly realized no one was talking and Mrs. Synacure was looking at her expectantly. She supposed that Mrs. S. had come to the end of her speech and that an answer was called for.

"Well Mrs. Synacure, you know I would dearly love to divulge my recipe to you. But if I did, whatever would I be known for? No one would invite me to their tea parties anymore," and she smiled as sweetly as she could into the shocked face of Mrs. S. and the no less shocked face of J.C.

This tea party wasn't half bad. Kathleen seemed to have finally understood the inner workings of these half-formal affairs. As long as you smiled and appeared innocent, you could get away with murder.

She turned to her hostess. "Mrs. Geets, could I bother you terribly to top off my tea?"

Mrs. Geets, for once at a loss for words, poured the tea absentmindedly. Slowly, the conversation picked up again and people paired off. Mrs. Porter and Miss Lindstrom the librarian

started discussing books and crochet patterns, after the usual awkward formalities of inquiring after “poor Mrs. Porter’s son”.

Mrs. Synacure decided to turn her back on Kathleen and pretend she wasn’t there. She jumped into a conversation with Mrs. Geets about the simply *divine* curtains hanging in her best parlor. Unfortunately that left J.C. and Kathleen.

J.C. pretended to be very busy with her tea and scones and Kathleen decided to make a study of the pictures sitting atop the piano. They always looked so sad, these black and white pictures of unsmiling men and women. They would have told you photo taking was a most serious affair back then, one that you dressed up for accordingly. Kathleen wondered idly when people had started smiling in pictures. It made them look happier, but it was probably just as much of a pose as the serious ones.

There was Mrs. Geets’ father who had gone and fought in the village war, and there was her grandfather, Kathleen supposed, in the Great War. She studied Mrs. Geets’ father’s face. Had she seen him in the past? Had she met a Geets? She would have to make inquiries. What would she say if she met him?

*You’ve got an awful daughter. You should train her to be less nosy and not to pry into people’s affairs.*

But maybe he had died. Maybe he was already dead in the past. In the Soldier Boy's present. In the present that Kathleen visited in the past. She shook her head. She was getting all muddled again.

"Oh, J.C.," said Mrs. Synacure not bothering to lower her voice or anything. "*Do* go and talk to that poor Kathleen. She hasn't got any parents you know. We must forgive her her lack of manners and her ummm… wild ways."

The words floated across to Kathleen and her ears fairly burned. Her hand holding her teacup shook. She took a deep breath and walked over to the sideboard to refill it. She affected not to look at anyone in the room, a rather challenging task considering that the parlor itself was small and cluttered with too many knickknacks, and the gathered guests suddenly odious.

She poured some cream into her tea, stirring slowly and deliberately. What should she do now? She selected a few choice pastries and went and sat down unobtrusively. Of course J.C. had not come and spoken to her, as her mother had suggested.

Kathleen didn't want anyone's pity or sympathy. She didn't have a mother or a father. What of it? What would she rather – Mrs. Synacure for a mother? The thought cheered her up and she smiled quietly into her tea.

She tuned into the conversations around her. It was rather hard not to.

"…hasn't got anything at all to do. An absolute shame is what I say."

"…whole town is talking about it. A scandal is what it is. Right under the parents' noses too. I mean to say, if they can't see what's going on right in front…"

"The dress was ruined. Absolutely ruined. And I only wore it twice. I went right back to the dry-cleaner's and I gave him a piece of…"

"No one makes preserves like Hilda. She's busy now getting ready for the bake sale…"

"Did you notice that awfully loud tie of Mr. Hanover's? What a shame his wife can't dress him better. Why if I had the task of dressing that man…"

"…cuts of meat at Turner's are awful. He's lucky he's the only butcher in town. When my cousin Gertrude was here on a visit only last week, she was appalled, absolutely appalled. She said to me, she said…"

The voices droned on and on, inconsequential events in their inconsequential little lives. Kathleen wondered why on earth she had come. She cast a surreptitious glance at her platter of squares. Almost completely devoured. Well, when the platter was empty she would make her excuses and leave.

"Her mother was always hanging out with that awful woman. Shouldn't wonder if some of that rubbed off onto her. Of course, what do you expect when someone's been brought up solely by a grandfather? No female figure at all. No housekeeper. Shouldn't wonder if the house is completely topsy turvy…"

Kathleen froze partway through chewing on a millefeuille pastry. It took her brain roughly 10 seconds to register that she was the topic of that conversation. Abruptly she stood up. She set her teacup and saucer down noisily. She was through with formalities. She was dimly aware that conversations had ground to a standstill and that all eyes were trained on her. Let them be.

She made her way to her platter of squares. There were two left. Should she take them home? No, they would only serve as a reminder of the miserable afternoon she'd spent at Mrs. Geeks' tea party. She slid them off onto a nearby dish. Then she turned and addressed her hostess.

"I'm afraid I must be going."

"So soon? Must you? Are you not feeling well?"

"Well, truth to tell, Mrs. Geeks – she finally forgot to call her Mrs. Geets and didn't care – I am feeling rather nauseous."

Mrs. Geets looked worried. "Oh, I hope it's not the cream. I took a whiff this morning and it seemed to be all right. But you never know…" Her voice trailed off.

"I'm sure the cream is perfectly fine," Kathleen hastened to assure her. "It's umm… it's the conversation I don't much care for."

A spoon clattered to the floor.

Kathleen was beyond caring. Pointedly, she turned to the company. "If gossip you must, at least have the good taste to do it in my absence."

Stunned faces greeted her.

"And J.C., you've got a run in your stocking."

J.C. went red in the face and bent down.

Mrs. Synacure narrowed her eyes. "Never mind, Jennifer Cynthia. She never did have manners."

"Have a care, J.C. or you'll turn out just like your mom, gaudy jewelry and everything." Kathleen smiled sweetly.

Before she could hear any more, she hurried out of the room. But she wasn't quite quick enough. As she shoved her feet into her shoes, the conversation had picked up again.

"Spitting image of Joan Preston. I tell you. Bad manners and everything. That's what comes of marrying an outsider. My mother warned Jeremiah. But he's as bullheaded as anyone."

"Hush, hush, never mind."

"Did you just *see* the way she attacked my poor Jennifer Cynthia? Come here, dear…"

Kathleen was wrestling with the front door. "Come on, open," she gritted. The handle obligingly turned, and she slammed the door with a resounding thud behind her. The windows shook alarmingly but Kathleen was past caring. She dissolved into tears.

She marched home with angry tears that stung her eyes. A wind picked up and whipped her hair across her face. Boy, would she love to have a go at Mrs. Geeks and all the rest of them. Haughty J.C., Madame Synacure and her jangling jewelry – all of them unbearable. J.C. was sure to spread tales among all the girls

their age. Lindstrom Librarian would do the honors at the library, Ma Porter would…

But why did she care anyways? Why *should* she care? They didn't matter to her. She didn't need to be held high in their opinions. She didn't need to be part of their circles. With their conversations that were too shallow to drown a spider, what care had she of them? Let them be. They could go their merry ways, and Kathleen would go hers, as always.

Back at home Kathleen suddenly decided the garden could do with a complete overhaul. Her frustrated energy spilled over onto the unsuspecting flowerbeds and the vegetable garden. Two hours later, it was dubious whether the gardens were any the better for Kathleen's interference, but she felt a good deal lighter and freer of spirit.

Once she had the tea party nicely out of her mind, her thoughts flew straight as an arrow to the one she liked to call Soldier Boy, to his freckled face and his yellow-green eyes, to his hair that ought to be let to grow longer. She sat by her bedroom window and sketched him. But she was dissatisfied with each rendition and crumpled them up in turn.

Another week and Kathleen felt she was going out of her mind what with dwelling so much on the past. She decided she had

to return for another visit – she simply had to. She justified this second venture by telling herself she wanted to see how the injured soldier was getting along, but all she could see in her mind's eye was the Soldier Boy. Funny, she had never asked his name.

The next morning Kathleen rose bright and early – she wanted to leave ample time for herself in the past, and not rush back like she had the last time. She wasn't looking ahead to the long trek in the woods again, but luckily a brainwave hit her. She chided herself for not thinking of it before – she would take her bicycle. She donned a pair of comfortable loafers and was out of the house in a flash, dragging the bike out of the tool shed.

As she rode through town her daydreams came back to her, and she remembered that she had envisioned herself in nurse's uniform, with her hair tied back in a neat bun. At the moment her hair was prey to the wind, flying every which way, but she would see to that. Her next dilemma was that she was too early; the shops were still closed. She parked her bike in an alley and strolled around, inwardly fuming at the lost time.

She peered in at shop windows, staring at the mannequins and trying to decide if the same outfit would look good on her. She concluded that what she really needed were old-lady clothes. She didn't intend it as a negative reflection on senior citizens of the female persuasion, but it was actually quite logical. They had

picked up a certain style in their youth, and it had spilled over into old age. Kathleen laughed. Would she be wearing jeans as an old lady?

She remembered that the church was having a rummage sale. Of course they wouldn't be open yet, but… She strolled nonchalantly over to the side door of the church, and to her surprise it swung open effortlessly. She supposed it had never occurred to the minister that someone would deliberately want to rob the House of the Lord.

She traipsed in with a beating heart. She pictured lightning bolts being hurled down from the heavens, aimed at wayward girls like herself who thought nothing of abusing the Lord's charity.

Then another thought came to her. She recalled stories of people taking refuge in the Church, how it would open wide its arms to accept the needy and the fallen. Very well, her conscience became more relieved. The House of God was open to all.

With this thought she descended a spiral staircase into the basement. She clicked the electric lights on and blinked. Laid out before her was a vast panorama of color. The church basement had tables with wares set up as far as the eye could see.

Kathleen migrated towards the clothing heaps. Once she had turned her nose up at rummage sales; now she saw this particular one as her salvation. Pressed for time, she quickly selected a modest skirt, calf-length and somber plaid. A beige top completed the outfit. Hardly nurse's gear, but it would have to do. She doubted she would find any stockings; at any rate she wasn't sure she wanted them second-hand. So instead she navigated her steps towards the toiletry table.

She had intended only to pick out a comb – these at least were new – but she was quickly attracted by the array of perfumes and lipsticks. Looking at the packaging, she realized the drugstore must have donated some of its older merchandise that wasn't selling.

She was delighted to find a black pair of stockings. She wondered whether black and dark plaid and beige went together, and then decided she didn't care. She wasn't about to march down a fashion runway; she was going to nurse injured soldiers back to health. And in the process catch a glimpse of the Soldier Boy again.

As she made her way towards the exit, she mentally calculated how much her purchases would cost, bearing in mind that it was a rummage sale and that mostly everything went very cheaply. She deposited a bill and a few coins on a table hoping

they'd understand when they saw it, and then stuffing everything into a backpack, climbed the stairs.

Life was beginning to stir. True, the shops weren't open yet, but a few shopkeepers were up and about, pulling the blinds up, and in general ensuring that everything was shipshape prior to the CLOSED sign being turned over to reveal OPEN. Kathleen hadn't realized she had taken that long in the church basement.

She hurried across the square, waving to the workmen as she passed them by. They were busy at work on the base for Grandfather's statue, and they waved back at her. She heard one of them call out, "Jeremiah Preston, what a man!" She smiled and waved again.

As she wheeled her bike out of the alley, she thought about Grandfather. He certainly was a great man. By all accounts he had saved the town single-handedly. Jeremiah, Jeremiah. What had they called him when he was young? Jeremy? Jamie? Jim? Funny, she hadn't noticed him on the battlefield. But then again, what was she looking for – an old man with grey hair?

Truth to tell, she had been so bewildered she hadn't been looking for him at all. Her memories consisted of faceless men walking towards the lunch tables, a bossy Matron, helpless helpers,

and injured soldiers. The only soldier she could put a face to was the Soldier Boy.

But she was determined to look for Grandfather this time. It gave her an eerie, uncanny feeling picturing herself coming face to face with him. What would she call him? She couldn't very well address him as Grandfather. He would be sure to look at her as though she'd been touched. Jeremiah? Oh, she simply had to find out what they called him. Funny, she'd never thought of asking.

She smiled. If she had asked Grandfather at home what they used to call him (she was certain it wasn't *Mr. Preston* as the townsfolk were wont to address him), it would have been much easier to locate him in the past.

When she came to a straight part in the path she pedaled hard for a few moments, and then coasted down the hill, the breeze blowing her long hair back. Over and over again she marveled as to why she hadn't thought of taking her bike the first time. It was so much easier and half the work.

The shade the forest afforded was a welcome change, but she didn't need it as much as she had the day she foolishly came walking this way. The path for the bike was a bit more tortuous than it had been on foot. As a result she had to go more slowly, watching out for bigger-than-usual pebbles in her way.

She was concentrating so hard on the road in front of her that to her surprise she passed the Witch's house and didn't even notice. She realized this when she came to a tall oak tree. It was her landmark and stood for having made it safely past the Witch's house.

After a while the path smoothed out. She wasn't receiving as many bumps and jolts, and so she was left, if not to her own devices, at least free to think about more things than the condition of the road beneath her. Not surprisingly, her thoughts moved towards the Soldier Boy. She ran their short conversation over and over again in her head. It suddenly dawned on her that she had meant to come up with a story, to satisfactorily explain where she came from. She applied her efforts to this end.

"Let's see," she mused. "My name is Kathleen. I don't think that needs to change. Kathleen what? Preston? No, that might be too risky. What about my mother's maiden name? Kathleen Turner?" There, that sounded better. Anyway her mother had been an out-of-towner, so that should be all right. But what about a story? What was she doing here? Who was she staying with? Who would it be *safe* to say she was staying with? She racked her mind for an old town name. Grandfather was the last living relic of the war, but some families had been here for centuries.

The Jenkins. There. They were an old established family. Kathleen wished she knew someone's first name, but since the older generation was lying in the church graveyard, it was out of the question. If she'd had the time, she would have doubled back and checked the names on the tombstones, but she was in too much of a hurry to get to the battlefield, and anyway, she was almost there. She decided she would have to carry on and improvise as best she could.

She was nearing the clearing now, so she quickly dismounted and leaned her bicycle against a tree. She opened her backpack and pulled out her array of clothing. To put the skirt and blouse on, and to pull up the pair of stockings was the work of a minute. She smoothed the skirt down, and started combing her hair vigorously. She shaped it into a bun, and hoped it was okay, considering the fact that she hadn't brought a mirror. She made a grimace when she realized this, and promised herself she would bring one along the next time.

She didn't know when the next time would be; she couldn't think very clearly about these things. Nor did she want to. Details bothered her. For one thing she would have to justify to herself why it was she was acting in this crazy, scatterbrained manner. Why had the world turned upside down for her because of one encounter in the past?

True, voyaging to the past was not a daily occurrence, but she could have taken it in stride, accepting it as a phenomenal experience and carried on with her life. Instead of which, she found her every waking moment centered on a guy she had met once and whose name she did not even know.

For all this and more, Kathleen chose not to think, but instead to do things automatically. She added a light coat of lipstick to her lips and a dab of perfume to her throat and wrists. Could she have known it now, she was enough to take someone's breath away – someone a good deal more stalwart than the Soldier Boy. But she didn't know, because she didn't have a mirror. And so she only hoped that the clothes didn't look too frumpy, and that the bun was centered at the nape of her neck, and that the perfume wasn't too overpowering.

With these thoughts in mind, she stuffed her discarded clothes into the backpack and hung it on the bicycle handlebars. Leaving the bicycle leaning against the tree, she made her way out of the forest and started trudging up the hill.

This time she was careful not to appear in the middle of the foray; she wanted a quiet entry. She judged where the tents would be, and turned her steps in that direction. Timidly she inched a foot over the critical line, followed in quick succession by the rest of her body. She had misjudged; the tents were a good fifty feet off.

But at least no one was in her vicinity. She took a quick survey, and then certain that she hadn't been noticed, ambled across the green field and over to the tents.

She peered in at the first tent; there was no Matron in sight. A few mothers or sisters or wives were leaning over their wounded dear ones. It was obvious that she wasn't wanted here. She looked in at the next tent. It seemed to be completely empty. That was a good sign – empty tent, not many wounded.

She was about to continue when she heard a low moan. Curiosity getting the better of her, she ventured inside. She had been wrong; there was one cot and it appeared to be occupied. She edged closer. Poor wounded soldier, she thought. Why was there no one by his side?

She felt momentary anger at the mothers and sisters and wives who were so preoccupied by their own particular trust that they had neglected another's loved one. She was certain that somewhere he had a mother and maybe a sister. She bent over the moaning figure and was shocked to recognize the Soldier Boy. She started trembling and caught the back of a chair to keep from falling. She sat down hard. Her heart beat rapidly, and her breath came in quick short bursts.

A thousand thoughts went galloping through her head: he was wounded, he was ill, he was dying, she had spent a week in the present, and while she had been deliberating whether or not to return, the Soldier Boy had been injured. She only wished she knew how badly. After a while her heartbeat returned to nearly normal; at any rate she was capable of rational thought.

She bent over the Soldier Boy critically – *her* Soldier Boy now. She was claiming him for her own since everyone else seemed to have abandoned the poor boy. And if he had had someone to minister to him, she would have been beside herself with jealousy.

She couldn't fathom the nature of his illness. He was covered from his toes to mid-chest in a sheet. His bronzed skin was taut, and his biceps looked strong and firm. She put out a tentative finger to touch a bicep – thrilling to the touch, and then pulled it back. He had no hair on his chest, and Kathleen longed to reach out and run her hand along it. But she was half-horrified that he would suddenly wake up and half-embarrassed by this unexplained desire welling up within her. He looked like an Adonis, a David. He shouldn't have been lying helpless like this.

Every once in a while he would thrash about, but his eyes were more closed than not, and he mumbled to himself, not a word of which Kathleen could make out. He seemed to be delirious. One

thing she could perceive, and quite distinctly at that, was that he was sweating. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead.

Anger returned to her. Why had no one bothered to care for him? She went to the corner of the tent to see if there was a basin of water. There was, but hardly adequate, looking as though bits of shaving cream were floating about in it.

It was the work of a moment to dump its stale contents behind the tent and fill it up with fresh clean water from the well. She was a practiced hand now. She returned and dunked cotton strips into the basin and then gently wiped away the Soldier Boy's perspiration. He was probably dehydrated too. Well, if he ever woke up she would have a welcome pitcher of water for him.

She dabbed at his face and neck with her cloth. Wow, she thought in wonder, he must be simply burning. The cloth was dry in no time, and so she took a fresh strip and moistened it in the basin.

She bathed his shoulders and his chest. She ran a finger lightly over his collarbone. He was hot, very hot. She worried about him and contemplated waking him up to give him a glass of water. But she supposed great thirst would eventually raise him from his stupor.

Idly, she flipped his dog tags over. *David Stark* they read. David Stark. David Stark. She mouthed the words over and over again. At last she knew the name of her Soldier Boy. And he was a David after all – not an Adonis.

Of all the ways she had pictured herself running into him, this was not one of them. Romantic notions aside, she forgot about the perfume and the lipstick. Her hair became tousled from the numerous times she nervously swept her hands through it. The bun became undone, but she was too distraught to notice. Her mind swam with unwelcome grey, somber thoughts. What if he never woke up? What if his injury proved to be fatal? What if, what if?

How many times she went back and forth between the water basin and the cot, she did not know. She stopped to wash her face, to cool her neck. She sat at his side, studying him from head to toe. She noticed that one of his legs – the left leg – was elevated. With a sheet covering his trunk and lower body, it gave his leg a strange misshapen shape. She was about to peer underneath to see what the matter with his leg was, when he suddenly stirred.

He looked up to see a female face peering intently at him. Kathleen reddened to the roots and hoped he felt too groggy to notice the way she had been studying him. She poured a glass of water and helped him up to a half-sitting position. He downed it in great thirsty gulps and almost immediately sank back down again.

"How are you feeling?" she ventured.

He either purposely ignored her question or else didn't hear it – at any rate he didn't answer. He seemed to have forgotten her. His eyes roved around the room before alighting on her face once again. He seemed surprised to see her.

She held her breath and bent over him. "How are you feeling?" she asked again.

He opened his mouth to answer and then winced in pain, clutching at his leg. Kathleen lifted the sheet up gently, and saw layers of once-white bandages wrapped around his calf, that were now soaked through and through with blood.

"I'll be right back."

She left the tent in search of the Matron. Funny, now that she thought of it, there was no house surgeon. Two tents down, she sighted the bustling Matron, busy as ever.

"Excuse me…," she began.

"I've no time now, no time," she snapped impatiently. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

Kathleen was in no mood for games. She snapped, “Yes I can. And so is everyone else. Everyone’s trust is just as important as your own.”

The Matron looked up, startled.

“Now I have someone who’s in a great deal of pain. Can you give me something for him?”

The Matron seemed cowed. “We’re running out of supplies at a fast rate. I can’t spare much. But you can take a few pills from that table over there,” she said pointing to her right.

Kathleen gratefully took a handful of pills and made her way out the tent opening. Once outside she could feel her heart pounding. She hadn’t realized how tense she had been in the midst of her confrontation with the Matron nor did she know where she had found the courage to speak out like that.

She gave the Soldier Boy two pills, and as he sank back against the pillow, she proceeded to unwrap the dressing from his calf. He didn’t make a sound but she saw that his lips were pressed together, looking rather like a rosebud, and his fists were closed so tightly that the knuckles stood out white.

Kathleen pulled the bandages off as gently as she knew how. Within ten minutes his face relaxed and his fists opened, and

he fell into a deep, painless sleep. She was thankful because she could work faster now, and not worry about the expression on his face.

She was no nurse, but she could see that the source of the wound seemed to emanate from the calf, and not the shin. She was disgusted at the thought that they had left her helpless Soldier Boy alone for goodness knew how long. She didn't know what would have happened to him if she hadn't come along, and somehow, she didn't want to know.

She supposed they had attended to his wound in a hurry, hopefully first having disinfected and dressed it, before leaving to attend to a score of other wounded soldiers. They hadn't even bothered to turn him over onto his front. Leaving his calf without pressure was more favorable in her mind than elevating his leg.

First she took a damp cloth, lathered it with soap, and washed the crusted blood off his leg. She didn't touch the wound itself, choosing to work around it. It seemed to be sewn up with clumsy stitches. Next she wiped off the soap, dried his leg by patting it with a towel, and then proceeded to apply clean strips of cotton. The Soldier Boy stirred once, and Kathleen stopped, fearful lest he should wake, but after that he was quiet again.

When she finished dressing his wound, she folded and placed a few blankets under his ankle and foot, leaving his calf suspended in mid-air, as it were. After that she went and washed out the strips of cloth. She took them out along with the basin.

It was then that she noticed the sky was darkening and that she felt half-starved. She quickly dumped out the contents of the basin, promising herself to refill it before she left. She hung the strips of cotton on a line behind the tent, and then went in search of the Matron and possibly food. She knew it was high time that she headed back home but she wanted to assure herself that her Soldier Boy would be in good hands before she left.

# Chapter 4

*December 14th, 198-*

*I had a dream last night. I sat bolt upright in bed and shook Malcolm awake.*

*"Malcolm, Malcolm," I trembled.*

*"Wha-what is it?" he answered groggily. He struggled to wake up. "Is it – it's not the baby, is it?"*

*"Yes, no, it was a dream."*

*"Tell me in the morning," and he drifted back to sleep.*

*But I couldn't sleep. I shuffled into my housecoat and into a pair of slippers, and shuffled my way to the kitchen to boil a pot of water for a chamomile tea.*

*I dreamt of Kathleen, the baby. Only she wasn't a baby. She was quite grown up, and quite beautiful. She had long black hair in the dream, like me, and she had Malcolm's brilliant blue eyes. I read sorrow on her face. Now why should someone so young know sorrow? She was on a field and she was searching for something, no, someone. That was it, someone.*

*And then I woke up. It was the sense of sorrow that woke me up, I think. It was dragging her down and I could feel its weight.*

***

It is one of life's little ironies that things never turn out the way one thinks they will. If they did, "one of life's little ironies" wouldn't be a saying, and Kathleen wouldn't have been in a quandary. She had found the Matron, and she had been as short-tempered as ever, and *no* she couldn't spare anyone, there weren't enough to go around as it was. Kathleen pleaded and cajoled and finally got a half-hearted agreement that the Matron "would have

someone look in on David Stark from time to time."

Kathleen was more than a little uneasy with this arrangement, but it was all she could coax out of the surly Matron. She had a feeling David Stark would vanish from the Matron's head in no time, supposing that he hadn't already.

A hurried stop at the canteen provided her with a bowl of what had been lunch a good many hours ago. Where the soldiers were, she had no idea. She pictured a tin box where they were conveniently stored away until such time as their services were required.

As she hungrily shoveled the food into her mouth, she though with a qualm that the Soldier Boy hadn't had anything to eat all day either. Water could hardly be considered nourishment. True, he had been in a semi-comatose condition all day, but nevertheless…

When Kathleen decided, she decided in a hurry. She filled another bowl with food and carried it back to Sick Bay. She would leave it beside the Soldier Boy, and when someone came to check on him, they could feed it to him if he was awake.

She left the bowl by his side and was about to hurry off with thoughts of Grandfather pacing the living room, when almost

as an afterthought she felt the Soldier Boy's forehead. It was burning; much hotter than when she had last left him. She couldn't leave now. She sat down and resigned herself to a sleepless night. She tried not to think of a worried Grandfather staying up late.

She sat through the long desperate hours, willing the fever to break. If it did, all would be well. If it didn't, well… Kathleen preferred not to think of that possibility. She had a fresh basin of water and fresh strips of cotton. With a sudden patience born of concern, she dipped a strip of cotton into the basin, soaking and ringing it out, and then placed it on the Soldier Boy's forehead.

She gauged the severity of his fever by the number of minutes it took for the cloth to heat up and dry out. For at least two hours it was alarmingly fast, and as fast as Kathleen placed it on his forehead, she was preparing another one.

After two hours the Soldier Boy suddenly woke up and Kathleen immediately proffered him a glass of water which he gulped down greedily. She wanted to feed him too, but he put his head down again and was out like a light. So she continued with the moist cotton strips on his forehead. She noted with relief that there was a longer lapse between each change of cotton. It gave her some time to relax.

She wondered what time it was. It couldn't yet be midnight,

but she had been on her feet since early that morning and felt quite spent. She longed to lie down. But then there would be the risk that she wouldn't get up again. There was no other cot in the tent, and once again she wondered why the Soldier Boy had been isolated from the others. There were a couple blankets and pillows however, and she brought these beside him, and placed them on the floor.

She changed the cotton strip for the Soldier Boy, and then moistened another strip – this time for her own use. She dabbed at her face that had started feeling uncommonly hot. She supposed it was due to the muggy weather, but hadn't had time to think about it till now. She wanted to give in to the idea of sleep, but something in her brain kept telling her no, that she had more important tasks at hand. So she got up and went outside.

It was still as anything. The world seemed to have disappeared and, but for the white tents looking ghostly in the moonlight, Kathleen would have attributed the whole day to a strange dream. She walked to the well, pulled up a bucketful of water, and drenched herself from head to toe. She was shivering horribly now, but at least she knew there was no danger of her falling asleep in this condition.

She returned to the tent fully awake. The sweltering humidity didn't make itself felt again for at least another half hour.

A sudden burst of energy had her tidying up the tent. With her hair tied up and her stockings and shoes off, she whipped around the tent with a broom and a cloth in hand. She swept the wooden floor, dusted the tables, arranged neat stacks of cotton strips, and in general saw to it that the place once again looked shipshape.

Then she thought she had better check on her patient and see how he was doing. He seemed to have fallen into a peaceful sleep. His forehead was cooling off at a rapid rate and didn't need nearly as many changes of cotton as it had a few hours ago. She took a cloth and, dipping it into the basin, ran it slowly along his upper chest and arms to get rid of the perspiration brought on by the fever.

The rush of adrenaline gone, the day's work finally started taking its toll on her body. A wave of exhaustion suddenly hit her, and she felt her knees shaking from being on her feet for so many hours. She clutched at the headboard. For about half a minute the room and its contents swam before her eyes. She shook her head to clear it, quickly arranged the blankets and pillow she had brought for herself on the floor, and collapsed in an exhausted heap.

The first she knew of the morning was an unbearable heat. It was suffocating. It clung to her skin with slimy tentacles and willed her to wake up. She awoke with a start and knew by the intensity of the sun's rays which snuck in through the doorway,

that the day was quite advanced and that it was nine, maybe even ten o'clock.

Her first thought was the Soldier Boy. He was hot and thrashing about, but he was fully conscious and the hot was from the heat and not the fever. Kathleen felt weak with relief.

"I need some water. Would someone get me some water?" he complained.

"I won't be but a minute," Kathleen promised.

The well called, but Nature called first. Kathleen glanced over towards the lunch tables. Empty. Darn. She always managed to miss meal times. She would have to throw out the food she had saved for the Soldier Boy the previous day. It had no doubt spoiled without refrigeration.

Ten minutes later she returned to the tent with her catch: bacon and eggs, and a pitcher of ice cold water. After breakfast the Soldier Boy dozed off again. Kathleen felt that more than anything she needed a bath. A change of clothing would be nice too but she didn't see it as lying within the realm of possibility. A few trips to the well provided the basin with enough water for a bath of sorts.

The basin was strategically placed in a corner of the tent, and Kathleen dragged a divider that was usually used to separate

beds for operations – useless in a tent with an isolated patient. So she arranged the divider around the basin. It stood on legs, so about six inches was visible from the floor, and it reached her neck. Hardly adequate, Kathleen thought, conscious that she was enclosed in a tent with a boy. She hoped that he would remain asleep.

How the town tongues would have loved to wag! The ones at the battlefield could wag now, but she didn't care because when she went back to Grandfather they would have ceased to be. They would be a relic of the past, long forgotten and dead.

Kathleen stopped in her thoughts, and the sponge fell into the basin. She picked it up and slowly kept scrubbing herself. What was she doing? Why was she slaving over someone who would be dead or Grandfather's age in the present? Why did she even bother? Why was she getting emotionally attached to someone she would eventually have to leave? Was she crazy, buying lipstick and perfume in the hopes of, in the hopes of what?

Mortality. She had never considered it seriously. There had never been a need to. When you're young you can live forever. Old age is barely considered. In the game of *us* and *them*, *old* was *them*. Just like barbarians. Barbarians were never *us*. They were always *them*. *Us* was the civilized segment of society. If *us* was barbarians, *us* would have to reconsider its sense of ethics. Chaos

would ensue in the lesser world, and *us* would have the conceit to hope that the greater world would be thrown into turmoil as well.

To Kathleen a clean body in sweaty clothes was a step above a sweaty body in the aforementioned clothes. With this in mind she stepped out from behind the screen, and when she dumped the basin of bathwater out, she dumped her preoccupations out with it.

She left the Soldier Boy and went in search of the Matron. The camp was bustling with activity. Kathleen smiled. The soldiers had been extracted from their tin box. A company was marching in step. Another was doing maneuvers. Another still was performing exercises preparatory to stepping forth onto the field for goodness knew what.

From all sides Kathleen heard excited gossip. The enemy had sustained a crushing defeat. To be sure it was temporary, but it had provided a lull in the activities on both sides, the one to recuperate as best they might, and the other to reinforce.

When Kathleen saw the Matron smiling, she knew the world had come to an end. Either that or else the victory really was as great as everyone said it was. She caught snatches of conversation: the other side had sustained most of the damage; it had been a result of their own bungling; it was supposed to have

been a surprise attack; one person on this side had been injured; he was lucky to be alive.

The Matron was bustling to and fro as busy as ever, but with a smile. Kathleen forgot to rebuke her for the previous night and the promise of sending someone to look in on the Soldier Boy.

"Here my dear, you can take this," and she thrust a pile of dirty linen into Kathleen's open arms.

The tents were almost empty. Yesterday's soldiers had been discharged. It was old wounds and sicknesses they had been recuperating from. And now they were all sewn up and ready to charge into battle to possibly get re-injured. But there was no hurry. The other side needed a few days yet. And this side could likewise use the rest.

The camp had an almost festive atmosphere to it. Everyone seemed to be out enjoying the sunlight, even the soldiers doing drills. Everyone except for the Soldier Boy. Kathleen's heart sank to her feet in an instant. Had he been the one? Had Death brushed by him and mercifully left him standing? Well, maybe not in the literal sense.

She deposited the linen in a giant bin at the other end of the tents where an assembly-line laundry service had magically

surfaced. Would she ever learn the ins and outs of this camp and the way it ran? She hurried back to her tent and her charge, only to stop short at the entrance.

The tent was teeming with soldiers singing the praises of David Stark. And now she knew for sure that he had been the soldier in question. She couldn't get near him until nightfall and then he was so exhausted he barely said a word.

As she sat and watched him sleeping that night, she idly wondered what Grandfather was doing, whether he was worried sick, whether he had informed the town authorities of her sudden disappearance, and other sundry thoughts. That world seemed so far removed from her. Reality had altered. The dreamy world of the past had become reality, and her former life had taken on a dream-like quality.

She supposed since she had gone missing, one more day wouldn't matter. She had no real wish to return anyway. It was only something at the back of her mind that kept reminding her it was important for her to return. No ready reason came to mind though, and so Kathleen thought there was no real hurry. With this in mind, she clutched the Soldier Boy's hand and fell asleep, he on the bed, and she on the floor.

A bucket of water the next morning was Kathleen's bath.

Her morning toiletries attended to, she turned her attention to the Soldier Boy.

"When am I getting out of this bed?"

Kathleen was startled. "Oh I don't know, I suppose in a few days. What's your hurry?"

"I can't stand it, lying here. I've got to get up and about. They need me."

"Don't worry," and Kathleen explained about the lull in activities.

"It's still awfully boring lying here like this," he complained.

A frown of consternation grew on Kathleen's forehead. "Can't you think of anything you'd like to do?"

"Not really," and then after a lengthy pause, "I suppose I could write a letter. Or rather you write and I dictate."

Kathleen was slightly taken aback by his bossy nature. Not a word of thank you for all she'd done for him. Well, she supposed him to be still sick, and for this reason forgave him.

"At your service, Sir," she said with a smile.

"Dear Jeremy," he began. "I've been laid up here for a few days. It's quite silly really. I've just got a scratch but they act as though I'm dying. I'll tell you all about it."

"Please slow down," Kathleen interrupted. "I'll…tell…you…all…about…it. Ok," she said looking up expectantly. "Carry on."

He looked slightly annoyed at having his thoughts interrupted. "We were lying in the trenches, ready to pull out, when I peeked out and saw one of our men out there. At least I saw someone in our uniform. That was the first strange thing. The second was that he didn't know our password. I knew something was amiss, and so I grabbed him and started dragging him back towards his side."

The Soldier Boy's voice droned on and on, describing his adventure. Kathleen's hand shook. She didn't need to ask him to slow down anymore. She could write this letter without him. What did this mean? Was this Grandfather sitting in front of her, her worst nightmare come true? Was she trying to impress Grandfather with lipstick and perfume? Kathleen felt sick at the thought.

But wait a minute, something was wrong with the picture. This was David Stark in front of her, not Jeremiah Preston. At least that's what his dog tags read. Perhaps she should ask him. For the

second time she interrupted him.

"What is your name?"

He seemed surprised. "David. David Stark. Why?"

"Nothing." She hesitated. "Do you know Grand… I mean Jeremiah Preston?"

"Jeremy? Sure, that's who I'm writing to. Do you know him?"

"No, yes." Kathleen was flustered. "Not very well. He's a friend of the family. Where is he?"

"He's in a town about fifty miles away. He lit out as soon as the feud began."

"Feud? What feud?"

The Soldier Boy seemed astonished. "Why, *the* feud. It's our reason for being, for fighting, for dying."

"But what is it about?"

"A trek of land. It belongs to our village of Middleford. Hampstead wants it, but they can't have it."

When Kathleen listened to Grandfather's stories they had sounded wonderful, heroic. Now they sounded foolish, childish, ludicrous even. "Do you mean to tell me you're fighting and dying for a piece of land? For a piece of stupid land?"

His eyes gleamed dangerously. "There's nothing stupid about it. What are the great wars of the world fought over? Land. It's all about land and power. Try to take over someone's land, and you can bet they're going to fight you for it. That's all we're doing," he countered.

Kathleen was at a loss. She tried to clear her thoughts. "But wait a minute, where's Jeremy? I thought he was in the thick of things."

He laughed unpleasantly. "Jeremiah Preston isn't a popular name around here. A coward's name never is."

Sparks blazed from Kathleen's eyes. "Are you calling Grand… Jeremy a coward?"

The Soldier Boy regarded her coolly. "What would you call someone who runs away with his tail between his legs at the first sign of battle? Don't get me wrong. I'm the only friend he's got left."

Kathleen's head swam. She needed to get away, to get

away and think, and sort her thoughts out, none of them pleasant. She thrust the unfinished letter into the Soldier Boy's hands. "I'm sorry, David. You finish the letter up. I've got to go."

"Where are you going? Are you coming back?"

"No. I don't know." And with that she ran out of the tent and towards the woods.

# Chapter 5

*December 20, 198-*

*I keep having dreams. Malcolm is concerned and wants me to see a doctor. But what can a doctor tell me? He's sure to pooh-pooh my ideas before I begin. How can I tell him I know the young woman in my dreams is Kathleen when she hasn't even been born yet? So I'm not going to tell Malcolm anymore. I'll just keep a record of them.*

*The second dream was a few nights after the 1st one. I saw Kathleen and I saw a battlefield. It scared me. She wasn't a soldier, she wasn't fighting, but I saw blood. Now why should she be part of a battle?*

*The third dream was about Jeremiah, Malcolm's father. In the dream he was dandling a little girl on his lap. It was Kathleen, the same blue-black hair and deep blue eyes I had seen in the first dream. He appeared only a little older in the dream than he does now. His beard was longer and Kathleen was playfully tugging at it. It must have hurt, but he didn't let on. They were laughing and playing.*

*Then Kathleen said, "Where are Mommy and Daddy?"*

*Jeremiah's face grew serious in an instant.*

*I wanted to walk into the room and announce my presence. "Why, Kathleen dear, Mommy's right here. I was just in the kitchen preparing lunch." But my legs were frozen. Now why couldn't I walk into my own dream?*

*In the fourth dream Kathleen looked to be about 6 years old. She was in her nightgown, kneeling by her bed, saying her prayers.*

*"And God bless Mommy and Daddy," she said. Then she got into bed and Jeremiah bent over to tuck her in.*

*I grew cold in an instant. And I woke up.*

*What is the meaning of these dreams and why are they plaguing me? Am I not to have the joy of holding my darling daughter when*

*she is born, of seeing her grow up? I am afraid to lay my head on a pillow at night, wondering what new nightmares I will be visited with. My days have become days of strain and anxiety.*

*I can feel the baby, Kathleen, kicking inside of me. I know she is all right. But why these dreams? Is this normal? Do all first-time mothers experience these anxieties? Do they all have dreams such as mine?*

*I want to talk it over with Winifred, but I am still deliberating. She is not a mother, after all. Would she understand what I am going through?*

***

Kathleen burst through the front door and started yelling at the top of her lungs, giving vent to her pent-up energy.

Grandfather appeared in alarm. "What's the matter? Where have you been? You look like Death warmed over."

"*You'll* look like Death warmed over when I get through with you!" came the bitter retort.

Kathleen was trembling and her mind was so jumbled with thoughts all tumbling over one another that she didn't know where to begin. "You were never in the war, were you? You were miles away, cozily tucked up in some village!"

Grandfather paled, but Kathleen continued relentlessly. "I don't know how you got that scratch on your calf, but it certainly wasn't in the thick of battle. Oh I'm sure you're very good at memorizing details from letters. You practiced and practiced until you were able to pass it off as your own heroism. Some kind of bravery that is, purloining someone else's royal robes."

Kathleen paused to catch her breath. She was heaving with emotion. "This is my ultimatum. I want you to tell those people down at Town Hall to tear that statue down, even before they put it up! You're a phony! You're a fake! You have to tell them the hero isn't you. It's David Stark, as I'm sure you well know. If you don't do this, I swear I'll never let you live this down."

Kathleen continued to breathe heavily with the exertion. She was seething with rage and her heart beat rapidly. Her black hair stood every which way, and her eyes blazed furiously. Her eyes bore into Grandfather, and for the first time in her life she thought she knew what hate felt like. It gave her an overpowering feeling.

Suddenly, she saw everything and everyone in her path as puny, worthless, destined to be crushed, stamped out. She recognized their pathos for what it was and scorned to offer them mercy. Had they challenged her, stood against her on her own ground, she would have felt some pleasure in the fight, would have backed off eventually, and regarded them with some sort of tolerance, if not respect.

She felt this of the couch, the table, the reading lamp, oddball Mrs. Geets, despicable Alfred, J.C., Mrs. Synacure, the rest of the people in the village. They were all a vague, hateful mass, and Grandfather along with them.

Part of her immediately felt ashamed for her outburst. Inwardly she screamed, “Grandfather, look at the way I’m talking to you! I deserve to be whipped soundly. Do something, say something!”

But he didn’t look up at all, only stood quite motionless. In exasperation and shame it was she who slunk away, wondering what it was she had done, and why she hadn’t done it in a more tactful manner. She didn’t know how long Grandfather stood there; at any rate when she descended the stairs for breakfast the next morning, he was nowhere to be seen.

Once in a while she would catch sight of him, and this is how things went on for a week. Sometimes he would be poking about the garden, at other times he'd be pottering away in his little carpentry shed. When he didn't have anything particular to do in the garden, he would walk up and down slowly, with his hand on his beard. Kathleen would watch him furtively from an upstairs window and pull back when he neared, but there was no need – he never looked up.

She wondered what it was he was thinking about, although she didn't need to, really. She knew of course. But what was he thinking about in particular, she wanted to know. She realized that she was positioned more favorably than he was. Before she had only had his stories to feed her hungry imagination – now she had first-hand knowledge. She had been there, seen, if not the actual battleground, the field leading to it, the tents, the soldiers, the routine and drudgery of leading a soldier's life – along with its attendant risks and pitfalls, and the fearsome Matron.

But what did Grandfather have to go on? Stacks of letters (she didn't know how many) David Stark had written to a youthful Jeremiah Preston? She supposed it had started off innocently enough. Jeremy might have recounted some of the exploits of his faithful friend. Where was David Stark now? He must be dead, or else Grandfather wouldn't be passing his friend's life off as his

own. When had the line between truth and fantasy blurred? When was the critical moment that Jeremiah Preston had stepped into David Stark's shoes? Hadn't his conscience gnawed at him? Didn't it wake him up in the middle of the night?

She knew that she had woken something up in Grandfather, something long dormant. He had probably never imagined in his wildest nightmares that his own granddaughter would grow up to be his nemesis. She knew that he had long ago ceased to be bothered by trifles, details such as who David Stark was and who Jeremiah Preston was, and what each had done in the war effort. She wondered what Grandfather would say if he knew the war had ceased to be glorious in her eyes, that it was simply a senseless bloodbath, and that she was stupid enough to care about the people involved, one in particular.

It came to her as a revelation that she had shocked him deeply. Perhaps he had usurped David Stark's shoes forty, fifty years ago. And after that much time, he wasn't going to get over it in a week. There was nothing she could do to speed up the process – part of her gloried in his suffering, not wishing to see it abated.

But another part of her felt quite remorseful. She had lost her only friend in the village. Of course he was more than a friend – they had a blood-tie. But he had been her life companion as well.

He had brought her up from a very young age, replaced the mother and father she didn't remember.

He had walked her to school each morning and back home in the afternoon, aided her with her homework when she was stumped and close to tears. It was he who had taught her to ride a bike, never to be afraid to hold an unpopular view in an argument, to stand up for her rights and those of anyone she perceived as being downtrodden.

He had never chided her for her ways, for choosing to be different than the masses, by often being the talk of the town. He must have heard some, if not all, of the colorful tales which were eagerly passed from gossiping mouth to curious ear. But not once did he challenge her on any of them, even the ones that held a drop of truth in them. He never upbraided her, never asked her to mend her ways.

Kathleen felt thoroughly repentant after this train of thought. But what could she do? She couldn't undo her words or the harm they had done. And she was still justly upset about her dear grandfather usurping her sweetheart's role.

So she decided since she wasn't being of much use in the present, to return to the past and see how her Soldier Boy was faring. She hadn't thought of him much this week, or if she had, it

had only been in relation to Grandfather. Now she wondered how he was getting on and whether he was back on the field yet. This last thought caused her some perturbation of mind. She didn't wish him to be re-injured. And she didn't let herself think of whether something worse than injury had happened to him. She didn't think she would be able to stand that just now.

One night she collected a few belongings – she had learned now that she needed more than one change of clothing – and the next morning she pushed her bicycle out of the shed and biked towards town, heading for the path that eventually led to the forest. She did not tell Grandfather she was leaving. She still had not reached the stage where she felt she could talk to him – she wasn't yet ready. And she didn't think he would be worried this second time. He would know by experience now, that she was bound to reappear.

She got about halfway through town when Alfred Dunhill stopped and waved to her. "Stop! Where're you going?"

She paid no heed to him, but he was on his delivery bike and caught up to her quickly.

"I say, what's the hurry?"

She scowled. "Nothing Alfie, go away."

A grin spread over his freckled face. He ran a hand through his sandy hair. “All right, I’m going. How about a soda tonight?”

“No, no can do,” she shot over her shoulder.

“You know, people have been talking.”

Kathleen stopped short and almost fell off her bike. “That should come as no surprise. They always do. It’s Middleford’s biggest pastime, didn’t you know? ‘Smear Kathleen’s name with mud,’” she said bitterly. “But I’m a bit surprised at you, Alfie, for listening to all that talk.”

“I thought you might be interested in what they have to say, that’s all. That’s why I was asking you out for a soda.”

“If it’s important, which I doubt, why don’t you just tell me now and let me get on? Can’t you see I’m busy?”

Alfie regarded her craftily. “If I told you now, that would be cheating me of a date.”

“So you want a date more than the imparting of information. The trouble is, you don’t know that I’m not interested in Middleford’s lying tales. I’ve starred in their stories for years, didn’t you know? Oh, probably not. You’re a newcomer, after all.”

She stopped and mused. “I did think you might turn out to be a bit different from them, but it seems I was wrong.”

She turned around and started pedaling again.

“I heard about you and Joe Smithers,” he taunted.

Kathleen stopped, deliberately letting her bike crash to the ground. It kicked up a swirl of dust. She slowly walked back to where Alfie was still leaning against his handlebars in the middle of the dusty road.

“Ah, thought you’d be interested,” he drawled.

“Oh, I am,” she said sweetly.

It worked. Alfie was disarmed in a moment.

“You heard the story of me and Joe, did you? You believed it, of course. So, what exactly were you expecting tonight? A soda and what else – huh?”

Before he had time to answer she drew her right hand back and slapped him soundly on his left cheek. Alfie was in shock. He put his hand up slowly and rubbed the tingling spot where a flush was starting to creep. Kathleen turned around and went back to her bike.

"I'm going to get you for that, Kathleen Preston," Alfie seethed through clenched teeth.

"Yeah, you do that, Alfie Dunhill. You get me. You and all the other boys in town," Kathleen muttered as she pedaled away.

She knew she didn't need to look back again, knew that Alfie wasn't following her. Tears stung her eyes. She really had thought Alfie, being new in town, might be a little different. But it hadn't taken him long to be infected by Middleford's tales of Kathleen Preston. They could probably fill a book with them if they tried.

And most of the time she liked to pretend that they couldn't get to her, that they couldn't affect her. She had built herself a thick armor, thicker than a turtle's shell, tougher than an armored car, more inscrutable than a poker player's face. But once in a while, something did get past her impenetrable shield. Something beat down her defense.

And then she wasn't the tough girl she liked to think of herself as at all. She was as vulnerable as a day-old kitten, and just as pitiable and weak.

Who knew that there wasn't an inkling of truth in the Joe Smithers story? Who cared? Joe Smithers himself had probably

started the story. Started the story that Kathleen Preston was an easy girl. And why had he done it? Because she hadn't been interested in him.

Joe Smithers couldn't see past his biceps. His highest aspiration was to take over his parents' farm when they were too old to work it anymore. And he wanted a village girl to be his wife, to help him tend it. Kathleen wanted none of that. And so because his pride had been hurt, Kathleen guessed, because she had mocked him in front of his buddies, he had taken his revenge on her.

Impatiently she wiped her tears away. "I don't care two hoots for you, Joe Smithers and your gang of dimwitted hoodlums. And you too, Alfie Dunhill. You can join their ranks."

Determined to forget Alfred and his taunt, Kathleen pressed on. As she swept past the Witch's house and got closer to the edge of the forest, her thoughts returned to Grandfather. Anger at his long-lived deceit welled up in her once more. She pedaled harder.

She did not know where she had acquired this peculiar mindset. She couldn't shake it. She wasn't sure she wanted to, not yet anyhow. It was too empowering to give up easily. If she only knew it, the same power it gave her also controlled her. But she

didn't realize it, and thought she was in the driver's seat, looking down on everyone else.

She felt as though she had been sitting in an orchestra all her life, playing very inconspicuously, on the clarinet maybe, sitting quietly in the wind section, picking up her instrument from time to time when the conductor favored her with a glance. Worst of all, she didn't know the song, but tried to follow everyone else, sometimes casting surreptitious glances at her companions.

And then somehow her feet had found wings, and her head the famed cap of invisibility, and she had floated over towards the conductor, hovering over his shoulder, reading ahead, until she found the perfect spot to jump in and replace him. Whereupon she removed the cap and wings, took the baton up in her hand, and altered the order of the day. It was a completely different view, standing at the head, in charge, commanding the ranks as it were. And they could stand or fall at her bidding.

Not really, if the truth be told, but this was what Kathleen fondly imagined and continued to imagine until she was rudely woken from her reverie. Armed with her newfound power, she did not want to settle for hiding and secrecy. That was for the lower orders – the master always walked without fear.

And so rather than squirrel away her bicycle as was her wont, she rashly rode beyond the confines of the forest, onto the plain, past the tents as everyone stared at this black-haired Visigoth in astonishment, and onto the field. She had finally determined to see this playing field, where men fell like ninepins, sometimes getting up, and sometimes not.

She wished to sneer at their pastime, to scorn their efforts, to let them know that in the grand scheme of things their piddling war might be a grain of sand on an endless beach, if that. With this thought in mind she pedaled hard across the field, panting because the uneven ground caused her extra exertion.

Her hair flapped wildly behind her and she was heedless to the cries of soldiers running towards her, vaguely shouting at her to stop. Foot soldiers ordering the general. What impudence! She would deal with them later, but now the open field beckoned. She heard, but did not see, the whizzing of a flying object that catapulted her from her bicycle and knocked her senseless.

Kathleen opened her eyes. She blinked. She knew they were open because she felt them opening and shutting. But she saw nothing. She willed her right hand to move up and remove the obstruction that impeded her sight, but her right hand would not move. Neither would her left. Her whole body felt heavy, and she could no more move it than an ant could budge a boulder. An ant

could probably make mountains cave in, and start a boulder rolling, but not in an instant, and in the same way Kathleen felt that she was up against a formidable opponent.

She opened her mouth. “Help,” she screamed, but her dry mouth mocked her by whispering. She persevered however, and after a few tries she managed to emit an audible croak. Something was whisked off her face and she found herself blinking. The light wasn’t that bright; it was only that she was unused to it. She saw a face staring down at her, but it didn’t register.

Her attention wandered along with her eyes, and she recognized the same tent where she had tended the Soldier Boy. When her roving eyes returned to the starting point she discovered with some surprise that it was the Soldier Boy who was bending over her solicitously. Did she detect a careworn look on his face?

She tried to speak again. Her voice sounded like a frog to her ears.

“Why can’t I move my arms?” she asked impatiently.

“They’re bandaged up,” came the calm reply.

“Bandaged up? What’s wrong with them?” In her alarm she tried to sit up, but without the use of her arms, her efforts proved futile.

"It's okay, stop struggling," he said in a soothing, and what she thought was a particularly irritating, voice. "There's nothing the matter with you that a few days' rest won't cure."

"A few days! What happened to me?"

"It wasn't exactly the wisest thing to do, crossing a battlefield like that. You got hit by enemy shrapnel. You're lucky it didn't cut you up more than it did."

"Yes, but why can't I move?" she exclaimed impatiently.

"You have plaster covering most of your body."

"Plaster?! Is most of my body broken up?"

He didn't say anything more after that, and there was nothing Kathleen could do to get him to talk. In exasperation she turned her head to one side, away from him, and closed her eyes. Her days were mostly taken up in sleeping and eating. The very monotony was a killer. She was ready to climb walls.

One day, she didn't know how much later, every day being much the same, they came to remove the plaster and she learned the meaning of pain. The Matron came in sporting a diabolical grin, and the elusive house surgeon arrived with a morose face. Kathleen longed to scream, but she stifled her instinct. With shame

she recalled the Soldier Boy and his stoic heroism. He came to hold her hand during the procedure, and there were tears in his eyes as he watched her.

Kathleen breathed a sigh of relief when she found she was able to move her arms and legs. They looked like sticks though, and terribly pale. The Soldier Boy would come and go. He would tell her about the battles he had fought and how the war in general was going. Kathleen protested, saying that a battle, a feud really, between two neighboring villages could hardly be called a war, but he insisted, saying that it was. The other village had declared war on theirs, and that's all there was to say about it.

One day he took her bicycle apart and re-made it as a makeshift wheelchair. He would take her out for hours at a time, sometimes to sit at the lunch tables with the other soldiers, at other times to wander the fields, away from the battle scene.

The glorious day finally arrived when she was able to take a few wobbly steps. But she was very feeble and collapsed almost immediately. David carried her back, and she sobbed at her weak state. By the end of the week though, she was able to go short distances. She wore pants or long skirts; she couldn't bear to look at her legs, all scratched up with ugly scars. Her arms hadn't suffered as much damage, but they were scraggly-looking from long disuse.

Once in a while her thoughts would wander to Grandfather, and she would wonder what he was up to, whether he thought her dead or missing, whether he had noticed, or whether he even cared. She still wasn't able to think of him kindly. Whenever David tried to speak of his friend Jeremy, Kathleen would abruptly change the subject.

Sometimes it seemed to her as though she had been there forever, and her past life had been a long dream from which she had woken. Once in a while though, for a reason she couldn't explain, she longed to be back in that dream.

Her days were spent with the Soldier Boy. She missed him every time he went away, and her heart thumped madly at his approach. Sometimes she thought about their life together, once this nonsensical war was over. They would have a snug cottage on the outskirts of the village – she never could bear to live amid the gossip and humdrum of town life.

She would water the flowerbeds outside the windows, and bake bread and make jam. At least she supposed she would. And he would go off and work in town. Maybe he would own a store. Maybe she would help him. She wondered what he would say if she were to suggest that he stay home and she go and work. She smiled at the thought. Everything comes gradually. Equality of

rights thrust on the unthinking after generations of tradition would come as a shock, to say the least. There might even be a rebellion.

The women, of course, would warm to the idea. It was the men who would feel as though they were on shaky ground. Their security was being taken away from them. They didn't know where they stood. So she decided to let it go. She would instill the idea into her children's minds, boys *or* girls, and when they grew up it would be a part of their lives.

Kathleen decided it was pleasant dreaming on in this vein, and so she continued, adding to her store of dreams. She kept them stashed away in an ephemeral hope chest. It was no secret now. She loved him and the whole camp knew it. Mothers would cast less-than-kind glances her way. It appeared that the Matron had no daughters though, because she beamed at Kathleen. Soldiers would wink and motion with their heads whenever they saw them together, but it was all very good-natured and there was nothing to fear in the way of malicious gossip.

One evening they put on a dance. Even soldiers have to pause their fighting once in a while and have a bit of fun. A couple fiddles and a guitar were pulled out of the woodworks. As far as Kathleen was concerned, the whole place was half-magical. She never asked how the whole camp was set up or how the supplies arrived.

The young girls spent all afternoon in a fever, borrowing dresses and skirts off each other. Kathleen joined them and enjoyed a bit of camaraderie – something that had always been denied her in her present life. Or her previous life. Sometimes she got confused and didn't know which was real and which wasn't.

"Ooh, Kathleen," breathed one of the girls. "You're so lucky. David Stark is an absolute dreamboat."

Kathleen stifled the urge to laugh. Dreamboat? "Yeah, he's cool."

"Cool?" questioned another one, confused.

Kathleen corrected herself. "I mean, yes, quite right. Dreamboat."

"That's a lovely shade of lipstick you've got. Can I try it on?"

"Sure," replied Kathleen graciously.

"Here, you can borrow one of my dresses if you'd like."

And so it went, the pleasant banter of four or five nervous and excited young girls. Kathleen wore stockings to cover up the

scars on her legs. She wondered if they would disappear when she went back to the present. Or was it the future?

Kathleen was glad for all the war movies she'd ever watched and the sort of dancing that went on. But she soon found that watching and doing were two rather different things. She danced awkwardly at first, nervously.

"Put your hand here," David instructed. He took her hand and placed it on his chest. "Never mind about anyone else. No one's looking at you except for me."

She smiled bashfully and looked down at her shoes.

"Everyone's just as nervous and self-conscious as you, you know. Wondering if they look all right, if they're dancing all right. Never you mind about any of that. Just listen to the music and you'll be fine. Promise." He smiled.

Kathleen melted.

As she gained in confidence, she found that she danced surprisingly well. She and David moved well together. Someone cut in at one point, and Kathleen felt put out, but David obliged gallantly. When she realized that's the way things went, she relaxed a bit more and found she didn't mind dancing with five or six strange men of varying ages. It didn't really mean anything. It

was just dancing. Goodness knew they needed their bit of fun too, after all the crazy fighting during the day.

Back in David's arms, she suddenly said, "Hey, do you swing?"

"Do I what?"

"Swing. Look, I'll teach you. Follow me."

They started off inconspicuously in one corner of the dance floor, but Kathleen at one point noticed that the couples closest to them were trying to emulate their moves. The music changed to catch their rhythm. And before Kathleen knew it, she and David had taken centre stage.

They danced feverishly, passionately. When the music stopped Kathleen fell into David's arms, panting with the exertion. The dancers burst into thunderous applause. Kathleen smiled half-shyly, half-proudly.

When the music started up again, David pulled her by the hand. "Come on, let's get out of here."

They ran out like children. Kathleen was in ecstasy. Her heart still beat fast.

David smiled down at her. “You’re quite the little dancer, you know.”

Kathleen twisted her mouth in embarrassment.

“Come on you,” and he wrapped her in his arms.

For the second time that evening, Kathleen melted.

She thought that if the gossiping village tongues saw her now, they would be fully justified in their rumors. Thankfully they were still 60-odd years down the road.

What would have happened just then, Kathleen wasn’t quite sure. But she never got to find out.

“Stark!” a voice called sharply.

In a moment David Stark stood at attention – the perfect soldier.

A commanding officer appeared and beckoned to David. They stood at a distance, conferring in low voices. Kathleen waited alone, feeling a little foolish. In a moment David was back. Of course, how do you go and re-create a mood like that? They couldn’t just jump into each other’s arms again. But David’s mind was already far away.

"I have to go. It's important. Catch up to you later." And he turned on his heel and was gone.

No apology, nothing. Now what? She could go back to the dance, or she could wander in the moonlight on her own. Talk about a ruined evening. The dance was all right, but this last move qualified for desertion. Kathleen went back to the women's quarters and turned in early, in a foul mood.

Kathleen hadn't yet forgiven the Soldier Boy the next morning, but things got busy again with fighting and the wounded that had to be tended to, and she forgot about being mad. She lived for those few minutes in the evenings when she could appropriate some of David's time, whether it was at the mess table with everyone else or walking around or what-have-you. Once again, Kathleen was content with her busy life in the past and a sense of usefulness.

In fact, the only thing wrong in this perfect picture was Grandfather. Kathleen couldn't shake off the feeling that she had left things unresolved with him, and that she needed to go back to at least try and patch things up. She made her mind up quickly, as she always did, and didn't let anyone know when she slipped away one morning at the crack of dawn. The soldiers were away in their trenches, for the fighting had picked up again.

Kathleen didn't have her bicycle anymore, only remnants of it which were not much good without the tires, so she marched off purposefully towards the woods, lugging her sack of clothes. She had assumed her rightful position among the wind instruments, and no longer felt master of the world.

So it was with trepidation that she passed the Witch's house, and waved at her uncertainly with something not unlike fear clutching at her throat. The Witch didn't seem to want to talk, and Kathleen was grateful. She wondered whether she noticed her traveling back and forth through the woods like this, and whether she ever wondered where it was that she went and why she stayed so long.

# Chapter 6

*January 21, 198-*

*I thought the dreams were gone and I could rest easy. I was ready to put them down to an overwrought imagination. But they have been coming for a week now, fast and furious. I fear I shall go mad.*

*My belly is rounding nicely and Malcolm wonders why I am not more excited or why I have stopped flipping through wallpaper catalogs. How can I tell him? If I talk about the dreams again, he'll only suggest that I go see a doctor. Maybe take a trip to New York, even. He might even force me to go.*

*So I've decided to keep the peace on the home front, at least on the surface. I will go through the motions. I will choose pastel colors because it is the thing to do. I will exclaim over the crib that Jeremiah has almost finished building, although he won't show it to us just yet. I will go to the shower next month the Ladies' Club is planning behind my back. Winifred let it slip, and then pretended it was accidental. I just laughed. I couldn't help it. Trust Winifred to rail against any convention.*

*I have had one happy dream in all of this, and this is of Kathleen and Winifred as friends. I see them as friends. I felt their joy. Winifred was much older than she is now. Her hair was rather unkempt. But she had befriended Kathleen and Kathleen had accepted the friendship.*

*I am nowhere in these dreams and neither is Malcolm. It is either because we have nothing to do with the dreams, or else – but I don't want to say it. To say it is to write it is to think about it is to bring it to the forefront is to make it reality.*

***

Kathleen marched up the hill towards town. She was deep in thought. What would she say to Grandfather? What would he say to her? She no longer felt high and mighty. She had regained her rightful place in the orchestra. Would he forgive her for speaking to him like that? Would things be ok once again? Deep in thought, Kathleen did not notice Alfred standing in the middle of the path.

"Kathleen," he called, and she had to stop suddenly in her tracks to avoid careening into him.

"What was that for?" she demanded angrily.

"Where've you been, Kathleen?" he asked in what she considered to be a particularly irritating voice.

"None of your business!" she shot back with blazing eyes.

"Wouldn't have been visiting the Witch, would you now?"

"Course not!"

"Then what were you up to?"

"Nothing."

"You've been gone a long time for nothing."

She ignored him and started up the hill again. He ran to catch up. “It’s not only me. Everyone’s been wondering where you’ve been!” Kathleen pursed her lips, and with a spurt of speed left Alfred biting the dust.

Things were not much better in town. Everyone wanted to know where she’d been. A lame patch quilt of a story emerged. A friend in another town. A visit. Picnics, luncheons, an illness. She idly wondered how many movies and television stories had gone into creating her composite story. She wondered how long it would hold up and go unquestioned, and told herself she didn’t care. She noticed with bitter derision that the statue project had been put on hold. Had Grandfather “’fessed up”? She rather doubted it. It was with relief that she collapsed in her front yard.

Grandfather was morose and did not seem particularly happy to see her. For all he knew or cared, she had been gone a few hours or a few days rather than weeks and weeks. He went moping about the house, starting a task and leaving it half-done, only to go and start another task. Kathleen saw a trail of unfinished projects wending its way through the house. Seeing that it was futile to try and talk to him, she went about her own business.

It came to her as a revelation one day that she didn’t actually know that much about the battle. That is, she knew about it, but she didn’t really *know* about it. She knew that her town of

Middleford had won, and that Hampstead had lost. She knew that it had been terribly important for the economy of the town. Not in terms of farming the fields – they had been fallow for years – but the sheer size of them coupled with the area occupied by the town ensured that the town would be allocated more funds by the government. So in the end it amounted to prestige – prestige won through power and money.

Had it been worth it all? Had they been in the right? She knew one thing they were definitely wrong about – the desire to laud Grandfather as a hero. At this point, if the whole town wanted to stand and jeer at him, she wouldn't object. She wasn't sure she would go as far as taking part in the finger-pointing, but she sure as heck wouldn't stand in their way.

She had a strong urge to find out more about the battle. Maybe she could unearth a good enough reason to warrant the kerfuffle. So one day she marched off to the library with this purpose in mind. She didn't want anyone to know what she was up to, and so she didn't ask the librarian for help.

She leafed through the card catalog to no avail. She was on the verge of surrendering and asking for help, when she remembered that there were probably no books written on the subject, and so nothing would appear on the shelves. But there

might be newspaper clippings and such things in a vertical file, maybe even something on microfile.

Kathleen's hunch was correct – there was a thick juicy file bursting at the seams. So as not to appear conspicuous, she would pull out a few sheaves of paper at a time, go to a table and pore over them, before returning to the file and retrieving a few more leaflets of information. And so it went. Kathleen spent days in the library.

Sometimes, in order to alleviate suspicion from the librarian or any other frequenters of the library, she would randomly pull books off the shelf, on any subject, and have them piled up around her. Topics ranged from cooking to geology. Kathleen didn't care, as long as they warded off potential busybodies. Of course Alfred had to come and poke his nose in.

"Whatcha doin' Kathleen?"

"Nothing. Go away," she snapped.

"I don't recall this library sporting your name. I guess I'm as free as anyone else to be here," he drawled.

She looked at him narrowly. "All right, fair enough, but I wish to be left alone. This may be a public library, but that doesn't

give you the right to make a nuisance of yourself. There are QUIET signs posted all over the place."

And with that she buried her nose in a book on paleontology, looking for all the world as absorbed as a fly in a honey bucket. Seeing that it was futile to try and talk to her, Alfred reluctantly left, and went and busied himself with anatomy books in preparation for an entrance exam to a nearby medical college, not looking the least bit interested in what he was reading.

Left to her own devices, Kathleen would prop up a big book, and hide her reading material inside it. She sifted through endless pages. Some of it was newspaper articles, mostly personal accounts. There were memos, bits and pieces of people's journal entries, and a booklet here and there. She found a particularly moving piece entitled *To My Son*. It read:

*I nursed you as a child*

*I watched you grow*

*For hours you would sit on the carpet*

*And play your make-believe games*

*All about Cowboys and Indians*

*Battles, always battles*

*But I would sit and knit*

*And beam on you*

*Not thinking*

*That one day*

*You would trade your toys*

*For weapons*

*And would go off to battle*

*Full of glorious ideals*

*You were proud, full of disdain*

*You scoffed at the idea*

*That it wasn't worth it*

*You wished to make me proud*

*And so you went off to fight*

*But all you did was make me sad*

*Because wait though I would*

*You would never*

*Come marching home again*

*And if I had known*

*What I know now*

*I would have taken your toys away*

*I would have set you to making jams and preserves*

*Growing up you may have got burnt*

*But you would never have been killed*

*Your Mother*

Kathleen nodded. So she wasn't the only one who saw neither rhyme nor reason to this wager with Death people called glory. Many accounts referred to conditions on the battlefield. Most of them were by soldiers, but one article was written by an intrepid reporter who had tried to get some first-hand knowledge and been thrown out on his ear by the Matron. Kathleen laughed.

The reporter had made a comical sketch of a scowling Matron with frying pan in hand, in the process of booting him out. Kathleen had to acknowledge that it wasn't a bad likeness.

It was a Friday evening. The library was open late, and Kathleen sat with the last stack of papers from the file. She had yet to find a reason justifying the battle that had cost so many lives, and she had a feeling her search would end unsatisfactorily. Nevertheless, an inner strength pushed her on, the feeling that once she had finished with this business of research she could uphold her own view with conviction. Her head was drooping forward and her eyes were half-shut when she came across a booklet entitled *In Memoriam*. This, of course, jerked her awake like nothing else had had the power to.

Fear gripped her heart, although she tried to tell herself it was a senseless fear. Hadn't Adonis been a god, or at the very least a demigod? And David had been a hero. Nevertheless, her trembling finger led an unsteady eye down one page after another. The M's, now the P's. How many of them *were* there? Hundreds, perhaps up to a thousand casualties ─ no small loss for a village of not above four thousand souls.

And then she was there. Too soon her eyes had jumped to the S's, but there was no pulling them back. *Philip Stanton*, *David Stark*, *Jake Sutton*. There he was, among a sea of names, as

unassuming as the next one. Kathleen did not know who Jake Sutton was, neither did she care. Someone else might have grieved for him some sixty-odd years ago, but their grief had long ago been lain to rest. It was Kathleen's grief which was fresh and raw, that tore at her, made her want to "flee into the wilderness and weep with a great weeping." It was there, it was written, a *fait accompli* long ago. And Kathleen was dull-eyed.

She stood up uncertainly, allowing the booklet to fall from her hand. She left the papers scattered on the table among books on botany and physics. She walked out of the library lifelessly, dragging her feet as she went. Greetings from passing villagers remained unheard and unanswered.

Alfred, sitting outside the grocer's store opened his mouth to say something jovial, then thought better of it. If he had read more novels than anatomy books he would have said she looked as though she'd just seen a ghost. But instead he thought she must be coming down with something – possibly the chills. He stood up, stretched, and casually sauntered off in the direction of the public library.

An idea crept timidly into Kathleen's mind undetected, began to strut around and finally to dance and shout. This last action caught her attention. She quickened her steps towards home.

"That's what I'll do," she said determinedly between clenched teeth. "I'll go and save my Soldier Boy."

# Chapter 7

*January 28, 198-*

*I have told Winifred. I couldn't keep the dreams to myself any longer. Even on the written page, they seemed to taunt me. She did not laugh like I thought she might. She didn't pat my shoulder and comfort me like I hoped she might. She was rather quiet.*

*All she said was, "Enjoy the moment."*

*Cryptic Winifred.*

*But I understand.*

***

Kathleen pulled out a large suitcase from her closet. She stared for a minute at her clothes hanging up, selected a few, and started folding them up. She was deep in thought. It was all for the best. She knew that. She loved the Soldier Boy, enough to return and save him, enough to want to live with him and give up her life in the present. They would get married in the town church, find a snug cottage to live in, and spend the rest of their lives in a state of bliss.

Kathleen felt a momentary pang at the thought of leaving the life she had known. It wasn't like moving to another city or country – you could always move back – it was moving to another time. It was a commitment she was making. There would be no turning back. She would have to resist the temptation to step over the line between past and present any time she missed her current life. She had to die to the present and be born to the past.

She felt rather like an orphan with no history and no roots. To her knowledge there was no precedent. She was stepping into uncharted territory. The feeling that she was a brave explorer made

her perk up. Things wouldn't be so bad. She closed her eyes and imagined the possible.

*Kathleen was decked out in 19th century safari clothes. The funny pants that bulged at the hips and thinned at the knees, the spherical helmet, the mustache… well, maybe not the mustache. Kathleen settled for a bun that protruded awkwardly from beneath her helmet. With staff in hand she trudged through a dense jungle, swiping at snakes, snarling at tigers, and in general being the model of a brave young explorer.*

*After narrowly escaping innumerable grapples with Death, she emerged unscathed from the jungle, and not even pausing to catch her breath, proceeded to scale a tall mountain.*

*At the summit was a castle in which the Soldier Boy was imprisoned by an evil sorceress who had taken a liking to him and meant to keep him for her own. The castle gate was accessible through a cave, the mouth of which was lighted by the flames of a fire-breathing dragon nesting inside. With lightning-like swiftness, the wooden staff turned into a sword of incredible sharpness. It was the work of a moment to behead the dragon.*

*As an afterthought Kathleen pierced some dragon meat with her sword and turned it slowly over the dying embers. It made*

*for a glorious barbecue. With a contented stomach Kathleen proceeded to storm the castle gate.*

*With a ruse too lengthy to describe, she trapped the sorceress in a web of her own spells. She hurried to the Soldier Boy who had fallen senseless (momentarily shorn of his bravery) and picking him up, carried him out of the castle and over the drawbridge. When he came to, he thanked her profusely.*

Kathleen smiled and shook her head, emptying it of her romantic notions. The task at hand was to get ready for a rather big trip. She noticed she hadn't packed a thing while her imagination had taken flight. She sternly told herself that this wouldn't do at all, and that she had better consecrate herself to the task at hand if she was going to get anywhere at all.

What was she supposed to take anyways? She guessed the things she'd miss most. A sudden thought came to her. Wouldn't she be incredibly bored? It was almost as though someone had read her hand, providing her with a very detailed future. Life would hold no surprises for her. She would know the news inside out: all the wars, famines, economic crises.

Would she be able to avert any of it? She'd become a nervous wreck, running around trying to stop all the deaths, all the disasters. No peace would remain for her. Or else she could go to

the other extreme of not lifting a finger, acting as though she didn't know. And what then? Would she constantly be wracked by a guilty conscience?

Kathleen was liking the whole thing less and less. Dark clouds had appeared on the horizon of what had at first seemed a sunny picture. She stopped for a moment and reflected. She realized she had been forgetting the big picture in all this. She was doing all this for one reason and one reason only.

She loved her Soldier Boy; it was as simple as that. For him she would endure misery and hardship. It didn't matter whether she was unhappy for the rest of her life because of not stopping or attempting to stop earth-shattering events. One happiness would exist in her life and that was enough.

With this thought foremost in her mind, all misgivings were pushed aside. And if she sighed once in a while over things she had to leave behind, she inevitably perked up at the one sustaining factor that kept her going.

She placed all her music wistfully aside; the technology required to play it had not even been conceived of yet. She packed very conservative clothes – nothing that would raise an eyebrow. She placed some books between the layers of clothing – surely books could do no harm, even if they hadn't been written yet.

She wavered over a picture of Grandfather, then decided stuck in the past forever, she just might decide to forgive him. But oh, horrors! What if they met? Would he be her grandfather? Who would she be? Would he recognize her? Oh, but he couldn't, surely. She was getting muddled.

Maybe she and the Soldier Boy could move to another town, further afield. This much she knew ─ Grandfather had stayed in this town his whole life. Except for the war, that is, but no one alive knew that.

No one alive. She stopped in her tracks. She had better get a move on if she wanted to go back and save him. She hurriedly placed a frame with Grandfather's picture into the suitcase.

The phone rang. Kathleen counted the rings and waited for Grandfather to pick it up. When he didn't, she reluctantly left her suitcase and went to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Oh, finally caught hold of you."

"Would you leave me alone once and for all, Alfie Boy?"

"Is that your pet name for me? I think I like it."

"Yeah, you wish."

"You've got a sharp tongue, young lady."

"What do you want, Alfie? I haven't got time for meaningless flirting over the phone. I'm busy."

"Yes, you always are. Always running around, going to the forest. I know something."

Kathleen's heart jumped into her throat. "Know what?"

"Your little secret."

"What secret? I haven't got any secrets." She swallowed nervously. "My life is an open book, you know that, Alfie," she said, trying to throw suspicion away from herself.

"You left the library in an awful hurry that day. Papers strewn all over the place."

"Umm, I didn't have time to pick them up." How could she have been so stupid? She'd left a clear trail of her movements.

"You seem to be very interested in the village battle: Middleford vs. Hampstead."

Kathleen thought fast. “Umm, yeah. They’re unveiling the statue soon. I… I have to make a speech. I’m doing some research, you know.”

“Oh, is that it? I thought…” Alfred’s voice trailed off.

Kathleen sensed his disappointment. She breathed a sigh of relief.

“I still have to get you back, you know.”

“What? For what? What are you talking about?”

“The big slap, remember? No one slaps the men around in my family.”

Kathleen had forgotten about it, as well as his threat to take revenge on her. “Oh. Well… um… sorry. It’s because of what you were talking about. Joe Smithers. No one smears my name with mud and gets away with it either.”

“Oh, sorry.”

There was a pregnant pause. What now, thought Kathleen. She had mounds of stuff to wade through yet, and a boy who wouldn’t leave her alone.

“So… umm… I’ve got some things…”

"Oh, yeah. Me too. So how about a soda?"

Kathleen smirked, but he couldn't see her face over the phone.

"It's not a marriage proposal, for crying out loud. Just a drink."

"Well, if you put it that way. Ok then. Meet you at McAllister's. Sevenish. Alfie Dunghill."

"What did you call me?"

"All's fair in love and war."

As soon as Kathleen hung up, she chided herself for having agreed to go. She didn't have time for this. She had more important things to do. Maybe she felt a bit bad about the slap. If it had been the other way round, she would have made a little visit to the police station and filed a complaint.

Kathleen washed her face and changed into a clean pair of jeans and a t-shirt. She combed her hair and looked at her reflection in the mirror critically. No, she was not going to put any makeup on. She didn't want to give Alfred any false messages. She was not interested in him. She wanted to discourage his interest in

her. Maybe she would be a real cat that evening and he would be completely repulsed by her.

McAllister's was where everyone who was anyone hung out. There was no other place to go. At least not for the young people. It struck the balance between trendy and laidback in a way that no other place had managed to match.

Kathleen approached the doors of McAllister's hesitantly. There was sure to be at least half a dozen people she knew. J.C.'s story of the ill-fated tea party had done the rounds ages ago. Kathleen drew herself up to her full height and threw her shoulders back. She marched in with a confidence she didn't quite feel. A quick survey showed her that Alfie had not yet put in an appearance.

She chose a booth and studied the menu. She kept glancing at her watch nervously. She had said 'sevenish' but what did it mean? Around seven, right? Five minutes passed and then ten. The waitress came over.

"What can I get for you?"

Kathleen chose an ice cream float. When it came, she sipped as slowly as she could, feeling foolish, alone, and

vulnerable. She would fix Alfie Dunghill's wagon for this. She could hear a table nearby laughing. She was sure it was about her.

Did everyone know of Alfie's plan to have her sit alone in a soda shop – the usual lair of couples and the "in-crowd"? She should have brought a book to read. She should have brought a notebook along – anything to make it look like she had something to do besides sitting alone staring stupidly at an ice cream float.

"Sorry I'm late."

Kathleen looked up into Alfie's face. She was so relieved, she actually smiled.

"I had to help my dad at the drugstore. His regular help got sick and went home early, so there was only me. I tried calling your place but you'd already left. If you've got a mobile, I'm not aware of it, otherwise I would have called you on that."

"Actually, I don't. I don't want people getting hold of me at any given minute. I need my space."

Alfie slid into the seat opposite Kathleen. "So you forgive me?"

"Almost. Look, my drink's almost finished. That's how long I've been waiting."

"I'll order you another one. And…" he hesitated, "you might not like this, but…"

Kathleen looked alarmed. "But what? Let me guess, you forgot your wallet."

He laughed, relieved. "No, nothing like that. My mom's dropping in in a while. Couldn't shake her."

Kathleen smiled. He was definitely different. Anyone who would bring their mother, deliberately or not, out on a date, was all right. "Shall I call my grandfather to join us?"

Alfie sputtered. "Wha-what?"

"Just kidding."

They sat in companionable silence, waiting for Alfie's order to arrive. Kathleen wasn't quite sure what the purpose of this outing was, but she decided to go with the flow. She could be relaxed. She still had her Soldier Boy back… back then. She looked around at pictures on the wall, pictures of what McAllister's looked like 30 years ago. She looked at the other tables. There was J.C. and her crew, nudging and winking. Well, let them.

Alfie's mother breezed in twenty minutes later and remained for five. She was friendly, a female version of Alfie with long sandy hair, and she invited Kathleen to drop in for a cup of herbal tea one afternoon. Then away she went, like the wind.

Alfie was looking down into his drink. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"Don't apologize for your mother. She's great. You ought to learn from her."

Alfie looked up, surprised. Then he grinned.

"So, what do you with your time, umm… besides running off for weeks at a time to goodness knows where, and madly doing speech research at the library?"

"Besides that? Nothing!" And Kathleen started laughing and laughing.

"What's so funny? Was it something I said?" Alfred looked confused.

"Never mind. So, what do *you* do with *your* time?" she countered.

"Thought you knew. Helping Dad out at his drugstore. Helping Mom out at her herbal teashop. Studying for Medical College."

"You want to be a doctor, do you?"

"Yeah. Humans fascinate me. Inside and out. I like E.R. you know. All the wounded. Stitching them up. Wondering if you can save them in time."

Wounded? Stitch them up? Save them in time?

Each word struck Kathleen to the core. The Soldier Boy was calling her. What was she doing wasting time over drinks with Alfie Alfred Alfie Dunghill Alfie Boy?

"I have to go." She got up.

"So soon?"

"You forget that I was here a good half hour before you."

"Right. Umm… all right." Alfie suddenly looked very forlorn.

Kathleen took pity on him. "All right. Five more minutes them. Hurry up with your drink. I'll let you walk me home."

Alfie saluted. “Yes, Ma’am. At your service.”

The salute reminded her too much of her Soldier Boy. “Don’t… don’t do that.”

Alfie looked bewildered. “Do what?”

“Nothing, look, just finish up, ok? I’ve really got things to do.”

She let him walk her home.

# Chapter 8

*February 14, 198-*

*I see Kathleen, older again. She is full of hatred. Again I am saddened. Why all these strong emotions? First sorrow, now hatred. And she is angry. Angry at Jeremiah. Oh, what will the future hold?*

*The dreams have been too frequent to suppose them the product of an overactive imagination. Are they a message? Am I meant to do something about them? Or simply to know?*

***

It was during a break in the packing that Grandfather found her. And somehow she was glad. She would have been hard put to explain the open suitcase and the paraphernalia lying about. He would have probably thought she was running away.

So in a way it was good that he found her where he did. She was in the garden, lying in the hammock. Now that she was leaving her whole life behind, she found to her chagrin that she was in no hurry to go. When he found her, she was listlessly looking up at the clouds. She was in a very tranquil mood, but Grandfather took it for moroseness. Since he was already feeling bad, this was no help.

"Look, Kathleen," he began awkwardly. He paused, waiting for her to say something, and when she didn't, he shrugged his shoulders and carried on haltingly. "I know what you must think of me. God only knows how you found out. But find out you did." He laughed bitterly, a laugh that sent chills up and down Kathleen's spine. "Maybe it's my nemesis catching up to me.

"Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. And now it looks like I'm going to have to pay for something I did a long time ago, so long ago that it was buried deep in my memory. At first I wanted to forget, because I didn't like what I did. I liked

even less what happened afterwards. Do you think I wanted to be touted as a hero? Not on your life." He looked down to see a half-questioning look on Kathleen's face.

"Guess I'm beginning at the wrong end of my tale. Or rather, somewhere in the middle." He pulled a garden chair close to the hammock, and sat down heavily. "Who started this crazy battle, I can't tell you. While the rest of the world was fighting it out, our two villages thought they could use some excitement of their own. Leastways, that's how I figure it." He snorted in contempt. "Excitement. You can say that again. Our villages never knew what hit them. What initially started off as a kind of contest to see who would land more property, became a full-fledged battle with upwards of a thousand casualties. For two small villages, that's a lot. Too much.

"When it first started, everyone thought it was some kind of joke. But boy did they take it seriously for a joke. There was a buddy of mine, David Stark." Kathleen jerked her head around suddenly, but Grandfather didn't seem to notice. He was too encroached in his story.

"Yup, David and I were best buddies. Somehow he'd gotten this foolhardy notion into his head that our village would lose face if it didn't send men to fight, and if it didn't win. Our village became gripped by a fever, and this crazy, nervous energy carried

it into battle. This was where I drew the line. No way was I going to risk being killed over a plot of land nobody had ever cared two pins about before.

"Unfortunately, our village didn't think twice about shaming anyone who wasn't eager to go fight. Why, you'd lose your manhood. I saw it ─ the ones who adamantly refused to go because they recognized the folly of it all. They were shunned in the streets, shopkeepers refused to serve them – it was terrible. Eventually they up and left, 'cause who wants to live in a town like that?

"Well, I wasn't going to have that happening to me, so I let on that I was going to join the fight. I delayed the process as much as was humanly possible. I sent back the uniform for alterations 'cause it didn't fit, but I sent it out of town. My mother fell ill and I let on that I was just biding my time, waiting for her to get better, 'cause I wasn't going to be a negligent son. The neighbors nodded their heads wisely. You see, I had won their approval.

"The time finally came when I couldn't hold back any longer. My uniform fit to a T, all my equipment was ready, and my mother couldn't have been fitter. I left with David. You see, we were months late joining our regiment. I still don't know how I held David back for so long. I guess I just couldn't bear to lose my best buddy. Why, we were lifelong pals. We'd grown up together.

I wanted us to grow old together too. Apparently, it wasn't meant to be."

Kathleen's heart sickened. She'd been absorbed in the tale, forgetting that time was of the essence. All of a sudden she wanted the story to be finished quickly.

"Cut to the chase, Grandfather," she said rudely.

He looked up, surprised and hurt. She could have bitten her tongue then, because she still loved him and she didn't want to injure his feelings in any way. She would have done anything to take the words away, but the damage had been done. Why was it the tongue was quicker than the mind, blurting out unwanted words before you could catch them and shove them back in your mouth?

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I didn't mean it like that. Go on, please."

He studied her face intently for about a minute, then continued. "David and I walked down the hill and out of view of the village and its inhabitants. As soon as I was sure we couldn't be seen by anyone, I stopped in my tracks, forcing David to stop too. He looked at me uneasily, sensing what lay ahead.

"'Look David,' I began. 'You know my heart isn't in this. It never was. I just don't get it. The reasoning, whatever you want to call it. Now you have a vision that I don't. I probably never *will* have it. All I know is, I'm not gonna risk my neck over some fool battle two villages decided to set up. So I'm off. I'm going. I'm out of this. I don't wanna have anything to do with this crazy game.'

"I handed him a slip of paper with an address in a neighboring town written on it. I told him that's where I'd be, if he ever felt inclined to write. He regarded me intently, took the slip of paper without a word, placed it in one of his pockets, and started marching down the hill without so much as a backward glance. He was whistling 'Oh, When the Saints' and I could tell that he was doing it just to keep his spirits up.

"I felt like a deserter. Not about the army. I didn't care two hoots about that. No, I'd gone and deserted my best friend in his hour of need. No matter how brave you think you are, when you find yourself staring down the barrel of a gun, you curse your buddy for being out of danger's way.

"I didn't think I'd hear from him again. I sure was surprised when I received his first letter. And glad. Mighty glad. I guess he was man enough to forgive me. After that the letters came regularly enough. And not always in his handwriting."

Kathleen's heartbeat quickened.

"He was laid up once, and he got a nurse or someone to write for him. There was something about that nurse – Kathleen held her breath ; could he have known? – it'll come to me. That was one of the last letters I got from him.

"The last battle was an atrocity. By all accounts there were few or no survivors. I heard about it one day, that it was over and our village had won. Fat lot of good that piece of land did them. It was used to bury the soldiers from both sides and everyone still avoids it – like it was haunted or had a big curse on it, or something like that.

"I decided it was time to head home. I don't know what you want to call it: luck, Providence, or stupidity. I crossed the field to head home. And out of all the things I could have found in the world, I found David's dog tags. What I did then shames me more than deserting David. I took his dog tags only half-thinking, and placed them around my neck. A crazy plan was hatching in my head. I still don't know how it got there, but I decided to be the town hero. I must have been really out of my mind. I knew I couldn't pass myself off as David, but somehow his tags made me feel like I'd been part of it all.

"Going through the forest I climbed a tree and jumped from a great height, hoping to get some scratches and bruises. I did more than that; there was a half-hidden stick on the ground pointing up. It gave me the scar I still have today."

Kathleen looked at him quickly.

"Yeah that's right. The scar I was supposed to have gotten in battle, the one I always attributed to the tale of the spy from the other side.

"Well I got home all bruised up. I didn't have to say anything. People made much of me. I started telling stories. People wanted to know about the war, so I told them. It was straight from David's letters. Pretty soon I started believing them. And there was no one around to contradict me. The more people died, the braver I got. After a while I was the only old fogey left, the only one who could claim to have lived through the war. Everyone else heard it through me. Their version of the war was colored by me.

"When the town decided to erect a sculpture in my memory, you could say I was truly proud. Story telling had changed to half-believing to fully believing. I was as shocked as all get out when you suggested I hadn't participated in the war. I guess you could say I've been in shock for the last little while. I'd been trying to get at the real memories, not the second hand ones."

He paused. “So there you have it.” Grandfather looked expectantly at Kathleen.

“What are you going to do now?”

“Do? What do you mean do? I’ve made a clean breast of it, haven’t I?”

“They’re still building a sculpture for a war hero that never was.”

“What? You want me to go and ’fess up to people who are half my age? Why, I’d be shamed. I’d never live this down.”

She looked at him quietly, a little sadly. There was none of that “mightier than thou” in her gaze.

He sighed heavily. “I guess I’ll draft a letter and send it to town council. I’ll ask them to cast the statue in David’s image instead.”

He looked like he was going to say something, but thought better of it. There was a hopeless look in his eyes, as though he thought all would be lost. Kathleen got up from the hammock and slowly wrapped her arms around Grandfather. Then without a word she straightened up and walked back into the house.

# Chapter 9

*February 28, 198-*

*I am very heavy now and very round. I move slowly and clumsily. The life within me has grown so big, I suppose there is no room to stir. She will come soon, I think. Spring, I think. Spring is a good time for a birth. New life is in the air. Expectancy and hope, all things renewed.*

*I have not been visited by disturbing dreams since the last time I wrote, and I hope against hope that there will be no more. Pregnancy is supposed to be a happy time – the happiest of times. Instead of which, I have taken it in turn to be nervous, irritable, worried, and perturbed. How can this bode well for my cherub?*

***

So at last she knew – completely. There was no mystery left, no guessing, no anger. She felt as though a great weight had been lifted off her. It was as though she had been sharing Grandfather's burden. And in a way, she had been. It didn't matter now what he did. At least it mattered a little, but not a great deal. Kathleen felt now that she knew, it was enough. It didn't really matter if the rest of the world remained ignorant. Her question to Grandfather about what he was going to do had been more of a rhetorical question than anything else.

And now it remained for Kathleen to determine her future. She realized that time was of the essence. Now that she had made up with Grandfather, she no longer felt like leaving without a word. But what could she say? How could she explain?

*Grandfather, I'm going back into the past because I'm in love with my Soldier Boy and I want to save him.*

Even to her own ears it sounded crazy.

She was in a quandary. She was pressed for time, she didn't want to leave without a word of explanation, and yet she didn't know what to say. She finally decided on a letter. When you talk

face to face with someone you have to be prepared to defend yourself, to refute the other's arguments, and she wasn't sure she knew how. In her heart she knew, but what if words failed her? She would appear insane, liable to be locked up. No, a letter was much better. She could say everything she wanted to say and have time to think it out properly, and finally, not have to stand by and watch her reasoning be whittled down, shattered, knocked to the ground.

*Dear Grandfather,* she wrote. *When you read this letter, I will no longer be around – I will have gone. Please understand that I am not leaving in anger, nor in hatred. Thank you for coming to me with the truth, unasked and unbidden. What you decide to do now is immaterial. I know you will make the right choice, whatever that is, and I respect you for it.*

*The reason for my departure has nothing to do with you. The reason I am leaving is crystal clear to me, as clear as though it were written up in the sky with huge, bold letters. Finding words to explain it is another matter altogether. At least words that make sense. I can only say that what I go to do is my duty, my privilege, my honor, my wish. I go because I want to. I go to do the noblest of all deeds – to save a man's life. Thus do I hope to redeem your past actions.*

*I will not be returning any time soon. Time! That is another story. Time is of the essence, times moves inexorably forward, and I do not know how much time I have left. I cannot explain – you will simply have to trust me. I cannot return. I cannot come back and I cannot tell you why.*

*And finally I wish to say that if we do not meet again on this earthly plain, we will meet in another world – one that shows more kindness to men. 'Therein weariness shall not touch you. Neither shalt thou toil or spin'."*

She thought that was the best she could do without going into specifics, so she signed her name, folded the letter up, stuffed it into an envelope, ready for delivery.

She was tired now – simply tired, and she wanted to do what she had enjoined upon herself, with as much dispatch as possible, wasting no time on vain regrets. She finished packing, closed her suitcase, and went to bed, knowing that this would be her last night sleeping in that bed.

She had an uneasy sleep, tossing to and fro. She woke up at dawn, quietly made her way downstairs with suitcase in hand, placed the letter inconspicuously behind a vase half-hoping Grandfather wouldn't find it, and made her way out the door.

She tried to ignore the lump in her throat that made swallowing difficult. She took one long wistful gaze back at the house, willing herself to memorize every trivial detail about it, then forced herself to turn around and keep going.

But she still had a whole town to walk through. She hoped the town was sleeping. She felt like some kind of criminal – a fugitive. She looked up furtively at windows, scanning for drawn curtains and peering faces. She didn't see any, but she imagined them, and that was a hundred times worse.

*Look! Look at the girl! She's running away. Someone quick, tell her grandfather. Tell him Kathleen is running away. Running away. Running away. Look, look – she's running away.*

The words drummed in her ears, and despite herself she quickened her pace, sometimes breaking into a run.

She passed McAllister's, and somehow unbidden, the abominable freckle-faced Alfred popped into her head. She saw him sitting, sipping at an ice cream float, only this time he was sitting next to her, and his arm was casually wound around her waist. And strangest of all she felt no aversion for him.

She walked past the movie theater and thought of all the good movies she'd seen and all the ones there were left to see. This

put her into a despondent mood, and so she broke into a run again, leaving ice cream floats and movies behind.

But the worst was yet to come. Among the principal landmarks there remained the church to walk past. ‘Let me dream, oh let me dream,’ she beseeched quietly. So she deliberately slackened her pace in order to give herself time to think, to dream. And so she dreamt.

*She was in a beautiful silky white gown that hugged her body and fell to the ground. Around her neck was a string of pearls. Her hair was done up with a circlet of tiny white flowers, and a veil fell over her face. And gloves. Had she neglected to mention gloves? They were satiny white and reached her elbows.*

*The usual flower girls surrounded her, and her maid of honor was unobtrusively dressed, letting her have the glory of the moment. She walked up the aisle and tears filled her eyes when she saw Grandfather standing there, ready to give her away. The Soldier Boy was standing, decked out in his best. It seemed Grandfather was playing a dual role, that of father and of best man. Then things got a little confusing. The Soldier Boy’s face faded and was replaced by Alfred’s.*

Kathleen shook her head impatiently. Why was that horrid boy ruining all her daydreams today?

Daydreams gave way to reality as she found herself at the entrance of the forest. Her slow steady steps had finally brought her out of the town. She supposed it was just as well because the sun had risen considerably and people were bound to be up and about.

She tried to console herself. She would definitely be marrying the Soldier Boy, but not here, not in this church, not like this. Their children and grandchildren would be able to enjoy McAllister's ice cream floats. Detachment was surely the key to it all.

Even the Witch she wouldn't see anymore. At least she supposed she wouldn't. As she walked past the Witch's house, she idly wondered how old she was and whether she had been around during Grandfather's time. She was inclined to think not, since Grandfather had increased his tale-telling with the confidence that no one was around to contradict him. The only thing he hadn't done was to take the Soldier Boy's name as his own.

She wondered if the Witch had a secret tale of woe. Had she become an outcast of her own volition, or had she been shunned by the village folk? Kathleen wouldn't put it past them. Stray a hair's breadth from what was considered to be the norm, and you were branded a heretic and cast out of society.

And what was society to begin with? Was it a gathering of the foolish, the unimaginative? How did it become the norm? Because surely if one looked close enough, individuals differed. But there was a safety net placed in a calculated position, designed to catch them before they fell and strayed any further. Parameters were set up, and within these you were free to move, to be your own limited individual self, but the unspoken law called for first the criticism, and then the shunning, of anyone who had purposely stepped beyond the bounds of the allowable and refused to step back in after much cajoling and reprimanding.

Kathleen supposed the Witch had been the product of such a society. Grandfather was accepted because of his supposed heroism during the war, and it lent a protection of sorts to Kathleen – protection by association, but she didn't know how long it would have lasted had she stayed. Already there had been raised eyebrows at some of her doings.

Well, she wouldn't have to worry about them anymore. She would be living in a different society, one that would honor her Soldier Boy, and she would be good. She would forget her previous life (or was it future?) and consign herself to living within the norms of the past. Somehow with someone she loved it seemed to be a much easier task.

Her thoughts had carried her way beyond the Witch's house. She had reached the other end of the forest. And now came the final hurdle. Kathleen took a deep breath and said good-bye to everything she had ever known.

# Chapter 10

*March 10, 198-*

*Last night I had a very different sort of dream. For once, it didn't concern Kathleen at all. I saw Jeremiah in his youth; he looked like Malcolm does now. He was full of rage against someone – friend or foe I am hardly in a position to ascertain. They had some heated words, and then Jeremiah turned his back on the other lad and walked away. He walked and walked for what seemed to be a long time. When he finally turned around, the lad was nowhere in sight. Jeremiah started sobbing quietly to himself, and then louder and louder. It woke me up.*

*Now what can be the meaning of this? I am half inclined to ask Jeremiah about my dream, but whatever would he say? On second*

*thought, I think I'll just keep it to myself. If the dream recurs, then I shall approach him. I won't even tell Malcolm. He'll likely suggest a doctor again.*

***

How do you explain to someone that you've come from the future to save him? Some things are best left unsaid.

When Kathleen had first gotten back to the past, she had been afraid that she was too late. So it was with a sense of relief that she found the Soldier Boy seated at a table, playing cards with a bunch of his buddies. Her heart leapt with joy because as soon as he saw her, he got up to greet her. He didn't display much emotion then, in front of everybody, but later on when they were alone, he smiled down quietly at her.

"I'm so glad to see you," he said. "Where do you keep running off to? It seems every time I turn around you disappear."

"Well, I'm here now," she smiled, "and this time I'll be staying. I won't be going anywhere."

"That's good to hear. I was afraid I wouldn't be seeing you again."

She regarded him demurely, but inside, her heart flipped for joy. He had missed her. She wasn't sure what to say next. She didn't want to appear too forward, because she had a feeling this sort of thing was frowned upon 60 years ago. On the other hand, it wasn't like she had all the time in the world to convince him of what she wanted.

What was it she wanted? To take him away, of course. But how? After Grandfather's tale, she wasn't so sure it would be easy. The Soldier Boy was fighting for a cause that he felt very strongly for.

"Kathleen?" He woke her from her reverie.

"Yes? I'm sorry. I was just thinking about something."

He looked at her questioningly.

"It's nothing. Listen, can we go for a walk or something? Sit down somewhere and talk?" She looked up at him anxiously.

"Sure. Where do you want to go? There's *one* direction that's off limits," he said, grinning ruefully and pointing towards the battlefield.

"Well I was thinking…" but she never got to divulge just what it was that she was thinking because a corporal walked up just then and took the Soldier Boy away.

He turned his head around as he walked off. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'll catch up with you later."

She nodded helplessly. After all, what could she do? Funny, whenever she read history books, she wondered why no one ever went out and stopped any of the nonsense that was going on. She had wondered that about the holocaust during World War II, about the atrocities perpetrated during the Vietnam war, about the horrific deaths in Cambodia during the reign of the Khmer Rouge, and a dozen other testimonies of man's depravity in modern history.

She had always been so certain that had she been alive at that time, she would have rushed into the fray, ready to stop the madness. And here she was, caught in the middle of an insane battle between two neighboring villages (it was almost laughable except that it was deadly serious), incapable of dragging one hapless soldier out of the maw of death.

In the meantime, the Soldier Boy was gone to attend to some business or other, and here she was, abandoned. She supposed she could amuse herself by looking around. It was, after

all, the last time she would be witness to the battlegrounds. Once she and the Soldier Boy left the area, there would be no turning back.

She thought of the Biblical story about the wicked city of Sodom, and how God decided to destroy it. How did the story go? One family was to be saved, or one group of families. But the condition was to not turn around and watch the city being destroyed. And of course temptation was too much for whoever's it was wife, Lot or someone, and she turned around and was transformed into a pillar of salt.

Why did she have to turn around anyways? Couldn't she accept the fact that the city was being destroyed? Did she have to see it with her own eyes?

And in the same way Kathleen had decided to save the Soldier Boy. The destruction of the immediate area was certainly imminent, although Kathleen couldn't say just when. The only difference was that the Soldier Boy wouldn't be turned into a pillar of salt if he turned around. Instead, and in a way much worse, he would want to rush back into battle. Kathleen knew that this latter action could only result in death.

Her thoughts had brought her to Sick Bay. In spite of herself, she smiled as she heard the domineering voice of the

Matron, discharging orders like a firing squad. The Matron was at least someone she could depend on. Kathleen knew that no matter when she crossed the line between the present and the past, she would inevitably find the Matron barking orders, and her underlings scurrying around like frightened rats.

Kathleen was in no mood to be running around, attending to the infirm, so she quickly sidestepped the tent in question. She passed the eating area where everyone was busy eating, talking and playing card games. They could have been actors in a movie. 'Don't you get it?' She wanted to scream. 'Your lives will be over in a matter of days. And for what? Wake up. Go home to your families.'

She knew it would be futile and would only serve to make her a laughing stock. That's all she needed, to be laughed at all throughout history – present *and* past. So she kept quiet. She found herself on the path that led to the well, sight of the second infamous encounter with the Soldier Boy. And it was here that he found her after he had finished his business with the corporal.

He smiled. "What are you doing, wandering about by yourself?"

She looked flustered. "Oh, nothing. Just waiting for you. Marking time." She smiled uncertainly.

"I have to go. I'm sorry, it's very important. They need me. What was it you wanted to tell me? It can wait for later, can't it? I should be back in the evening, although you never can tell."

Her head was swimming. What was going on? It wasn't supposed to happen this way. She needed time. It wasn't fair. "No. I mean, can't you go later? Can't you wait a bit?" Her breath was coming fast, and in spurts. Her eyes started to close, and she thought for the first time in her life that she might faint.

"Are you all right? What's the matter?" he said, peering anxiously into her face.

"It's nothing. I'm ok. Only, I wish you wouldn't go. Can't you stay?"

"This is very important to me. I hope you understand," he replied doggedly. And in that moment she knew that she was up against a brick wall. There was a light in his eyes, a light that Grandfather had certainly seen as well. It was born out of a passion for a cause ─ a cause neither she nor Grandfather pretended to understand.

"It's not like I'm not coming back," he smiled. If you only knew, she thought bitterly. Oh sure, he might come back from this

particular battle, but what about the next one? And the next? His days were numbered, this she was sure of.

"Look, I'll come back and we'll go for that walk you were so keen on, and you can tell me everything you have on your mind, all right?"

She nodded dumbly. He bent down and slowly pressed his lips to hers. A thousand firecrackers went off inside her head. He straightened up, and started walking away. He whistled a tune as he went, and she watched him through eyes blurred with tears. Her heart was heavy, and swallowing was made difficult by the lump in her throat.

She wanted to run after him, throw herself into his arms, and exclaim, 'I love you!' but her feet refused to cooperate. He'll come back, she kept telling herself. And then we can leave. We'll go. I'll make him. I'll tell him the truth. He won't be able to handle the truth. Ok, I won't then. But I'll take him anyhow. We'll go on a long walk, a really long walk that will take us miles away to the next village. I'll spirit him away, I'll, I'll…

She knew she wasn't thinking straight, but she had to keep feeding herself short bits of information to keep herself calm. Busy. She had to keep busy. Busy was a good thing. Keep her from thinking too much. Thinking could be dangerous. Thinking could

lead her down unpleasant avenues. Where was the Matron? Kathleen was sure she could depend on her for busy-work. Not much thinking required when you're constantly occupied.

She entered one of the tents in Sick Bay. Sure enough, there was the Matron, a row of beds, and a corresponding row of frightened-looking nurses. She moved to join them. Before she knew it, she was scurrying around, busy as a beaver. She cared for patients, fed them, dressed their wounds, talked to them, ran innumerable errands for the Matron – in short, she had more work than she knew what to do with.

"Miss! Miss!" came the urgent voice of a bedridden patient. "Can you tell me what day it is today?"

"I don't know," she answered shortly. Of all the idle questions in the world, this surely took the cake. "I'll go find out."

She stopped a nurse. "One of the patients wants to know what day it is today."

The nurse gave Kathleen a surprised look. "So tell him. Don't tell me you've forgotten?"

Kathleen mumbled an excuse.

"It's June 15th of course. All day, actually," she answered, smiling at her own witticism.

June 15th. Why did that date ring a bell? And then it hit her. The last battle. Her hands started trembling, and she dropped the tray she was carrying. A cold sweat started to form, and she began shivering. Her breath came unevenly. Her face was ashen, and her mouth felt like paste. She tried to make it to the tent opening, but midway fell to the floor in a cold faint.

# Chapter 11

*March 15, 198-*

*The Ides of March.*

*I feel the time is nearing. What is it but instinct that drives a woman to prepare her nest, to find a place to squat or crouch, and bring forth a new life?*

*Malcolm has told the village doctor. Now God only knows whether I will live through the birth. Was that the meaning of my dreams, to tell me I would die in childbirth?*

*Kathleen, I do long to see you, you know. I want to hold you, if only for an instant. You can say then that your mother's loving touch was upon you, that she held you in her arms.*

***

"He's going to die. Oh my gosh he's going to die!" Kathleen was hysterical.

"Someone quick, give her a tranquilizer!" This was the Matron.

Kathleen struggled against the incompetent nurses who tried to hold her down. "Let me go! I have to save him. He's going to die!" She broke loose, but in the next instant careened into the Matron. She knew it was all futile now.

"Now, now. We'll have none of that. We don't need your hysterics in here. There are injured soldiers in this tent who might die. They've seen many of their companions die. They're fighting a losing battle because they're too stubborn to admit defeat. They don't need you talking about death when it's breathing down their very necks."

While she had been talking, the Matron had dexterously maneuvered Kathleen into an unoccupied bed and pinned her down. A nurse came up, carrying what to Kathleen seemed like an alarmingly large needle. Kathleen shook her head violently. “No, I don’t need that. I’m ok, really I am.”

“You will be after this,” answered the Matron, and that was the last thing Kathleen heard.

When she came to, it was pitch black and oddly quiet. Patients dozed in neighboring cots, but there were no nurses bustling to and fro, no Matron, no sound whatsoever. Kathleen felt groggy, but she was determined to get up and go in search of the Soldier Boy. She crept stealthily to the entrance of the tent, but there was no need, because there was no one outside either.

She could see the horizon getting lighter, ever so slowly. Had she slept that long? There was a gnawing hunger in her stomach. She must find food. She must find the Soldier Boy. The latter took precedence, so she walked in the direction of the battlefield. As she topped the first hill, she saw silhouetted against the rays of the rising sun, two soldiers carrying a stretcher. With a sinking feeling she ran towards it. “Is he ok? Who is it?”

They gave her a strange look. “Ok? He’s dead.”

"Why don't you use the stretchers for the injured?" she questioned impatiently. She could see other stretchers being carried up the hill.

"The injured?" one of them returned bitterly. "There aren't any."

Kathleen stumbled as she ran past them in a panic. No injured? There must be. They must have overlooked some. How could they tell? It was dark. It had only just started getting light. Surely they couldn't have spotted all the dead so quickly.

She ran in a zigzag formation, going from stretcher to stretcher. She would cast a quick glance to make sure it wasn't the Soldier Boy, and then keep running. She was relieved each time she passed a stretcher. 'It's not him,' she'd tell herself. 'He's alive somewhere. Maybe he's helping to carry a stretcher.' But the line of stretchers thinned, and she still hadn't spotted him.

Then another thought came to her. Maybe he was so badly injured that he couldn't move. Maybe he was lying somewhere waiting for help. This thought cheered her slightly. She started to survey the corpses on the ground. She recognized some of the faces. They had been sitting at the table yesterday, talking and playing cards with the Soldier Boy. Yesterday! It seemed like so long ago. If she could only turn time back.

Time! She had already traveled sixty years back in time. And the difference she needed was sixty years and a day. But it wasn't as though she had been late in arriving. She *had* been here yesterday. But she had been powerless to do anything.

The soldiers were dead ─ that was certainly true. Not a groan or moan could be heard from any of them. Corpses were strewn pell-mell. Their uniforms were bloody, limbs were severed, dusty faces told of the agony of war. And the worst thing was that they were so young. They were boys. Any number of them actually looked younger than the Soldier Boy. And there didn't look to be a soul over thirty. What a waste. A waste of youth. A waste of life.

Somewhere, mothers, sisters, and sweethearts would be anxiously waiting for news. And what would their reaction be? Would they immediately break down crying, or would they feel a dull ache in their heart? And what of shattered dreams? No more hope of family, of love, of children. They would never grow old, never feel the joy of another passing day.

Mothers would feel a void, surely. And siblings would feel it stronger, because they would no doubt have had a closer relationship. And fathers too. It didn't seem as though many fathers had come to do battle. They would be waiting at home for a son that would never come back again, never come whistling in through the front gate, banging too loudly on the kitchen door.

They would be missed, more than could be explained – their annoying habits, their little quirks, their laughter, their funny ways, their voices, their faces. And most of all, just *them*. Just to have them nearby, to know that they were there, that you could look up in an instant and see them, hold them, talk to them.

And even worse than not having them was being reminded of them. You would hear laughter, and look up quickly, desperately hoping it was them. Or in a crowd you would see the back of someone's head, or see a certain shirt or gait, or catch a snippet of a conversation where for that one instant it sounded like them – this was infinitely worse.

Kathleen was still searching for the Soldier Boy. She hadn't seen a sign of movement on the battlefield in over an hour. She knew it was foolish to keep hoping. She saw the enemy picking up *their* dead and carrying them back to their side. She felt no fear of them. It was finished. It was over.

She finally found him, looking insignificant, lying a few meters away from another dead soldier. He was dead – she was certain of that. Even though she was expecting to find him like this, it still came as a shock. She hoped the end hadn't been painful. To go instantaneously was surely much better. She threw herself beside him and started wailing violently, until she coughed

herself hoarse. She looked up with a tear-streaked face, and tentatively stretched her hand towards one of his cheeks.

It was stained with the dust and blood of battle. “I hope you didn’t suffer,” she whispered. “I hope you felt neither pain nor fear.”

*Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall feel no fear, for Thou art with me, Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.*

*Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

Kathleen wanted to die. She had nothing to live for, she felt, whether in the past or the present. She wanted to lay on that field forever, until someone came and carried her away on a stretcher, dead of a broken heart. Or if they didn’t, she would wait for the worms and maggots to come and do their work, and she would then be wedded to the field – inseparable. The Soldier Boy would stay as well, and in this way they would have their marriage after all. Kathleen smirked. It was far from the ideal that she had imagined. A marriage in death.

She had no will to move. She wished to stay there forever. She looked up at the sky. The sun had made its way up to a vantage point from where it shone down on her. She idly watched

clouds floating by. What a day! What a beautiful day. A good day for a wedding, for a picnic, for laughter and frolicking, not for death. Looking up, it was hard to imagine that there was anything the matter with the world around her, that two villages had just finished slitting each others' throats.

She lay there, thinking thoughts. She thought of Keats, dying so young.

*For many a time I have been half in love with easeful Death, call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme.*

And so she stayed where she was, with the sky above, the earth below, and the Soldier Boy at her side.

# Chapter 12

*March 25, 198-*

*Kathleen Winifred Preston was ushered into this world in the early morning hours of March 22, 198- in the Year of Our Lord. She is beautiful and perfect in every way. The birth was not an easy one. I labored long into the night. I thought I would see dawn before I would see my little angel. There was a point where I thought I would give up, give in to my dreams and die before I got to see her, got to hold her. But a second strength came to me. When one looks down at one's cherub, all pain is forgotten. All pain is worthwhile.*

*Her eyes are an indeterminate grey, but I know they will turn into an intense blue, like Malcolm's eyes, like the dream eyes. Her hair too, what little there is of it, is golden. That too I know will give*

*way to midnight black. Why do I know this? Because the dreams have told me. The dreams have told me much. Will I believe the rest? Will I live into them? Only time will tell.*

***

Kathleen woke up after what seemed like a long time. It was still light, but it seemed to her that the sun was going down. She sat up and looked around. She was on a vast field, and there was nothing but earth and grass and sky, as far as the eye could see. Where was the Soldier Boy? And the rest of the wounded? Surely they couldn't all have been gathered while she was asleep. And why would they leave her?

The grass looked fresh and new, not at all as though a great battle had just been fought on it. It wasn't trampled; it wasn't bloodstained.

Kathleen got up and started to search. Perhaps, for some unfathomable reason, someone had moved her in her sleep. Perhaps she was still under the effect of the sedative she had been given that morning. But where were the soldiers? Where had they gone?

She walked one way, and then another. Every time she approached a hill, she was sure she would come across the battle scene when she reached the top. But it was nowhere to be found. She started walking around in circles with rising panic. Then she stopped and surveyed her surroundings. She wasn't one of those people who had a built-in compass, but she thought she had a pretty good sense of direction.

"Right," she mused. "The tents must be over *there*," and she pointed with a finger. Perhaps they were too far to see, although she had never been troubled with eyesight problems before. She strode in that direction with determination. The tents *had* to be there. Everything couldn't simply *disappear*.

The sun was going down, and it became harder to see. "Just a few more steps," she kept telling herself, "and the tents will be in sight." But those steps never came. She halted in her tracks when she recognized the woods. They were just below where the tents used to be. She saw an object half-hidden in the darkness. On approaching, she recognized it as the suitcase she had packed.

Kathleen bit her lip and her eyes closed in despair. What had happened? Surely it hadn't been a dream? No, it was too real for a dream. What had it been then? A waking dream? They didn't exist. She had never heard of them. But come to think of it, she had never heard of what had happened to her either.

One thing was certain. The Soldier Boy was no longer there. Neither were the tents or the other soldiers, for that matter. Could she have dreamt up a character like the Matron? She highly doubted it. Had she fallen in love with a dream? A figment of her imagination?

She walked towards the woods because there was nothing else left for her to do. She went past the Witch's house without realizing it, and left the woods. As she ascended the hill going to town, the familiar church steeple heralded her approach. And then she knew. She was back in the present. So that's what had happened.

But why had she been thrust back into the present? What had happened to the dividing line? Even eerie things like moving between the present and the past must be subject to laws. Who was in charge of time-travel anyways? They couldn't just make up their own rules as they went along. It wasn't fair.

Kathleen had a feeling now, that if she ran back through the woods and to the field, it would be bare. She wouldn't find the tents or the Soldier Boy. She felt very morose. She walked back through the town with her eyes heavy-lidded, unsure of herself and of her feelings.

She felt old, much older than her seventeen years. She felt as though she had lived a whole lifetime, and was at least on a par with Grandfather as far as experience went. Did time-travel do that to you? Perhaps in reality she was seventy-one years old. She felt old and decrepit. And through her mind kept drumming the words, "The Soldier Boy is gone. Forever."

There is only so much one can cry, and after that one seems devoid of feelings, as though one's emotions were all spent. Kathleen felt this way now. She stared woodenly at objects and people in town, not caring that they returned odd stares in her direction. Her eyelids felt like lead. And then she saw Alfred. Alfred was the last person she wanted to see at the moment, and so she was greatly surprised and immensely gratified that he looked at her without saying a word and continued on his way.

At home Grandfather didn't express any surprise at her return, as though he were used to people appearing and disappearing. She barely spoke, preferring to be moody and despondent. He didn't seem to take it personally, but just sort of accepted it and remained in the background.

He told her one day that he had written a letter to the town council and asked them to erect the statue in honor of David Stark, the real war hero. He went further and told them they had been

mistaken in their view that he, Grandfather, had played a significant – or any part – in the war.

Kathleen momentarily forgot her sadness. “Really, Grandfather? You did that? That took a lot of guts.”

Grandfather simply glowed under the admiring looks that she cast him, much more admiring than when he had told his make-believe war stories.

She hugged him and whispered, “Grandfather, you’re *my* hero.” And after that, it was as though a dam had broken, and no barriers remained between the two of them.

She wasn’t quite ready to talk to him yet, though. It was nothing personal; she didn’t feel like talking to anyone just yet. And for some unfathomable reason, he understood. So she went about her own things, and he went about his.

She thought a lot. Sometimes sitting in the garden, scenes from the past would come unbidden. Their first encounter, and how annoyed the Soldier Boy had been at seeing her. And later the same day they had met at the well, and that’s where they had first begun to talk.

She wondered what would have happened, had he not been injured and forced to stay in Sick Bay. Would she still have had the

chance to get to know him? She remembered tending to him, and his fever that took so long to abate. He had asked her to write a letter for him, and with the shock of recognizing Grandfather's name, past and present had become interwoven in a way that hurt.

She thought also of the great plans she had hatched, plans that were never destined to reach their fruition. She smiled to herself, but bitterness was couched in that smile. Had she been naïve in thinking that she could control destiny? That she could save the Soldier Boy from his own past, and keep him safe in a thatch-roofed cottage somewhere? She would make jams and preserves, and he would do – whatever it was that men did in those days, she supposed. Be the man of the house, earn their daily bread, bring the bacon home, and if he could, make sure their bread was buttered on both sides.

And how would she have felt, living under a system like that? She and her modern ideas. In her daydreams she wouldn't bat an eyelid about it, but she knew in reality there would be a battle every single day. She was headstrong, possessed a temper she was not reluctant to show, and had certain notions about equality.

But rationalizing didn't help much. Memories still ached. Sometimes, walking through a crowd too fast, she thought she caught a glimpse of him – his hair or shirt or gait. Whatever it was, *something* made her backtrack. Feverishly, she would start

searching for him. She wouldn't stop or rest until she had found the impersonator and been satisfied that it really *wasn't* him. And then she would be on her way, with eyes half-closed, dreaming once again.

# Chapter 13

*June 22nd, 198-*

*Kathleen is 3 months old today, still too young to do much. We went out of town a bit, found a farmer's field in which to have a picnic. The company consisted of Winifred, Jeremiah, Malcolm, Kathleen and I. Kathleen lay on a blanket, sleeping and waking as we wiled the time away, ate, drank, and made merry.*

*I have not had a recurrence of the dreams that plagued me during the pregnancy. Perhaps they were due to stress. That is my hope, at least.*

*I will make a packet of all my letters when I am done with them, and entrust them to Winifred.*

*Winifred told me she was preparing a potion and looking up some proper words for a prayer or a spell to ward off the evil from my dreams. I laughed and told her to have a care, that people would find good cause to call her a witch.*

*But she simply tossed her hair, and with a stubborn look in her eyes, answered, "Let them."*

*I hope the future will bode well for us all, for Malcolm and I, for Jeremiah, for Winifred, for Kathleen.*

***

One day Kathleen set out for a stroll, and she was deep in thought by the time she realized where her feet were taking her. She had left the town, gone down the path, and was in the forest. She momentarily considered re-tracing her steps, but decided against it. Her intuition must have brought her here for some reason. It was either that or folly.

But this time, rather than passing the Witch's house and continuing on to the field, Kathleen stopped and turned in at the gate. Was it idleness that bred fear? She didn't know, but sunk in

her own somber thoughts, she had no room for fear. The Witch was out in her garden. She didn't bark at Kathleen to go away. There was no black cat. True, there was a broomstick, but it looked like the ordinary variety that could be found at the General Store, not one that could fly.

She looked up at Kathleen expectantly. "Can I help you?" she inquired, not unpleasantly.

"Did you know my mother?" Kathleen blurted out. She was surprised by her own question. She had never intended to ask that, she was sure.

The Witch pushed away a strand of gray hair that had fallen across her face. She looked a little taken aback by the question. "Please tell me who you are."

"I thought you knew. You called me by my mother's name once. Remember? Joan."

The Witch appeared a bit surprised. "Ah, yes. I had forgotten. You looked up once and I thought I was seeing a ghost – I suddenly saw your mother's face. She always said she would come and visit me here.

"Why yes. Yes, I knew your mother. We were good friends." She smiled. "And you're her spitting image with your

black hair. Mind you, it seems to me you've got your father's sea-blue eyes. Wouldn't be surprised if you had a temper to match. Your mother's temper, that is."

"Why is it you live out here in the woods? Surely it can't be because it's convenient."

"My dear, town life is great if you're willing to tow the line. I'm a little different. I always was. I guess you could say petty town gossip drove me out into the woods."

"I think I would like to join you," Kathleen said. "Do you have any extra space?"

A look of mild surprise crossed the Witch's face. "Come in," she invited. "I think we could both do with some tea." Seeing Kathleen hesitate, she said quickly, "Oh, don't worry. The tea is only mildly poisoned. We can also have eye-of-newt soup, and after that, you can have your pick of frog-princes out in the pond."

Kathleen laughed. It started as a smirk, turned into a giggle, grew to a chuckle, and pretty soon became a full-throated belly laugh. She had to sit down. The Witch watched her with quiet amusement. When Kathleen had composed herself enough, she wiped away her tears, and followed the Witch meekly into the

house. She realized she hadn't laughed like that for what seemed like a donkey's age. Somehow she felt refreshed and revitalized.

Sitting across from the Witch at a little table in a surprisingly clean and cozy kitchen, Kathleen found herself pouring her heart out to the Witch. She told her everything. She didn't spare a detail (at least as far as bare facts were concerned. Who needed to know just what she felt for the Soldier Boy, although given the Witch's insightfulness, she would probably guess anyways.).

When Kathleen finished, she looked expectantly at the Witch. The Witch didn't say anything at first, and Kathleen felt vaguely disappointed. When the Witch finally spoke, she didn't dismiss Kathleen's story as fantasy or a tall tale. Instead, she likened what had happened to a movie.

"Think of it as an event in time that was re-playing, kind of like a movie. You happened to walk in partway through it. You became part of the movie. But then it finished. The movie, so to speak, was over. That's why you can't get back in."

"Well, will the movie ever play again then?"

"My dear, reality is reality, whether of the past or of the present. Sometimes, certain select people are enabled to see a part of this reality. Some people would call it time-travel."

The thought of a never-ending movie threw Kathleen into a tizzy. She had a wild desire to run to the field and try and enter the movie again. Maybe *this* time she could stop the Soldier Boy's death.

The Witch must have sensed what Kathleen was thinking because she immediately intervened. "Do you know what the repercussions of trying to change history are?"

Kathleen smiled forlornly. "It was just a passing thought."

The Witch escorted her to the gate. Kathleen suddenly realized that she didn't know her name. It wouldn't do to keep calling her the Witch, even if only to herself. "I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

"Winifred."

"Winifred," Kathleen repeated. "That's my middle name."

Winifred smiled. "You can call me Queen Winifred if you like." She suddenly stopped short and struck her forehead with the

back of her hand. “Of course! But what an idiot I’ve been. A complete idiot!”

Kathleen looked alarmed. She didn’t think she was scared of Winifred Witch or whoever she was, but she still didn’t know her all that well, did she? “Umm, Wi – Winifred? Is everything all right?”

“Yes, no, I don’t know. I suppose I’ve gone and ruined everything as usual. It’s probably too late. But then, she didn’t give me specific instructions, did she?” she finished, more to herself than to Kathleen.

Kathleen felt awkward, out of place. “Is there anything…?” She let the question hang unfinished in the air between them.

Winifred cheered up as suddenly as she had appeared despondent only a short moment before. “Oh, I’ve probably gone and muddled everything up as usual. It was your mother. Joan. She gave me some letters and she asked me to give them to you. Only she didn’t say when.”

Kathleen smiled brightly. “Well, I guess now’s a good time as any.”

“Oh, I only wish it were,” Winifred replied worriedly. “You see, your mother had a number of disturbing dreams during

the pregnancy. She felt she was not to live to see you grow up. And as you see, she was quite right in her surmise."

Kathleen bit her lip. What was there to say to that?

"Now I haven't read the letters myself," Winifred carried on. "I suppose I know the gist of them insofar as some of your mom's dreams were concerned. But that's only because she described them to me."

She looked up at Kathleen's face and noticed that her eyebrows had formed a bewildered arch. "Oh dear, I suppose I'm rambling on as usual and stirring up mud where things were clear a minute before. You'll have to forgive me, dear. This is what comes of living alone for so long. I've become rather forgetful. The letters. Did I mention some letters to you?"

Kathleen nodded slowly. "Yes, you said my mother had written some letters."

"Yes, that's right. Or maybe it was a journal. Like I said, I never saw them, although she did entrust them to me."

"Well, can I look at them now?"

"If I can just remember where I've put them. I'll have to rummage around, you know. It might take me some time."

"I can help you," offered Kathleen eagerly.

"Yes, but not now. I need more daylight than this. You'll come back, won't you?"

"Of course."

"And I'm truly sorry, dear, if I've gone and unwittingly messed everything up. You know, your story that you told me just now. It sounded like the end of everything. I think your mother wanted to somehow protect you. Or at least warn you."

Kathleen smiled wistfully. "What – about getting my heart broken? Look, Winifred. I appreciate that it was an honest mistake. Maybe it was meant to happen this way anyway. Maybe this was the only way I could learn. After all, you can't shield someone forever, can you?" Her thoughts involuntarily jumped to Grandfather.

Winifred appeared greatly relieved. "That's mighty chivalrous of you. I will find those letters, so don't you fret. They're in a tin box somewhere – I remember that now. So come back soon, all right?"

Kathleen nodded in agreement. She smiled as she waved. "I'll be back for one of those frog-princes too one day," she assured Winifred.

"I'll pick out the comeliest one for you."

Kathleen was still a little sad when she returned home, but no longer despondent. Dusk had fallen on her way back home. She found Grandfather reading by a lamp in the living room. She bent down and kissed him softly on his wrinkled cheek. He looked up from his reading. It was then that she noticed he was reading through a box of letters. The one he was holding looked surprisingly like her handwriting, but the paper was worn and yellowed with age.

She guessed what it was, but it both frightened and fascinated her to think too much about things like that, so all she said was, "I think I'll turn in early tonight, Grandfather."

He stood up. "I knew there was something I'd forgotten about David."

Kathleen's heart raced. Her breathing became labored.

"That nurse I was telling you about? He wrote in his last letter that once the war and all the trouble was over, he intended to marry her."

Kathleen wanted to swoon. She clutched at the side table.

"Are you all right, Kathleen?"

"Yes, yes," she murmured faintly. "A little tired, that's all." She steadied herself. "I think I'll turn in now, if you don't mind."

He had gone back to perusing the letter. "What's that?" he said looking up. "Oh yes, yes, of course. Oh, almost forgot. Thought you might like to have this."

He slipped a tiny object into her hand. Her face flushed and she couldn't look at it right then. It felt like a small oval frame. She thanked Grandfather and stuffed it into her pocket.

She forgot about it until she was getting ready for bed. It fell out of her pocket and clinked as it hit the floor. Then of course she remembered what it was. She picked it up slowly and peered deeply into his face, her Soldier Boy. It was one of those formal affairs where you stood up straight and tall (even though it was only a picture of his face), and didn't smile.

It was sepia and the details were a little blurred. He looked so serious, her Soldier Boy! As though… as though he knew what was going to happen. She smiled wistfully. Her heart had one of those horrible aches that made breathing difficult. And even though the drugstore was able to dispense wonderful medication for headaches and earaches and toothaches, it had yet to provide a cure for heartache.

And she knew that every time she walked past the town square, she would see her Soldier Boy, molded in bronze. He was handsomer in real life, but how were the sculptors to know?

Who knew but that some day she would meet a modern-day Soldier Boy – one that would not go off to fight? But until that day, she would keep the memory of her original Soldier Boy in her mind. Grandfather had stopped his stories. Maybe she could compile them and present them to the town library as a historical asset. She smiled.

What would she call her booklet? *The Brave Fighter*? *From Soldier to Statue*? *Our Town Hero*? And then suddenly she knew. She would keep it simple – her pet name for him – *Soldier Boy*. She looked down at the oval frame once more. She kissed it softly, then put it into the bottom drawer of her dresser, underneath some clothes. She turned off the light and got into bed. “Good night, Soldier Boy,” she whispered. And then she snuggled under the covers and fell asleep dreaming of him.