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April 1916: Wiltshire

Isabella Jones, better known to her friends and fellow VADs as Bella, put on her best clothes ready to meet her fiancé's family for the first time. She had been working as an ambulance driver in the Voluntary Aid Detachment for the past year, attached to this convalescent hospital near Swindon, playing her part in the war effort.

Matron had given her the weekend off for such an important visit and was standing at the front door taking a breath of fresh air as Bella went out to wait for Philip.

'Enjoy yourself, Jones. You don't often ask for time off and you did an excellent job of cheering up Captain Cotterell while he was recovering here. Congratulations on your engagement.'

'Thank you, Matron.' She couldn't hold back a sigh.

'What's wrong?'

'It's the right thing to go and meet his family, but I don't think they will be at all pleased to meet me.'

'Toffee nosed, eh?'

'Yes.' Bella knew Matron understood how she felt because the older woman also came from a humble background, unlike most of the nurses in the VAD. Bella had only got

accepted into the organisation as a cleaner at first, but later she'd applied to train as a driver and had discovered how much she loved driving.

'What does your mother say about the engagement?'

'She's not best pleased either. She says no good ever comes of marrying outside your own class.' Her mother had grown very sour since she'd been widowed and nothing seemed to please her these days. And since her daughter had turned 25 without getting married, she'd begun to hint that since Isabella was turning into an old maid, it was her duty to care for her mother in her old age.

Bella missed her father dreadfully. She'd tried to get on with her life, which she knew he'd have wanted, but she could never go back to live with her mother again, not now she'd tasted independence.

'I think after the war that sort of class snobbery will change,' Matron said. 'I don't suppose we'll get rid of it entirely, but it won't matter as much, not after the men have fought together and the women worked together here on the home front. Anyway, enjoy yourself today. You've worked hard and earned your little holiday.' She turned and went back into the hospital.

Would it feel like a holiday? Bella wondered. It felt more like an ordeal to her.

Philip's car drew up in front of the convalescent hospital just then and she ran across to greet him. They'd known each other such a short time and yet, it felt as if she'd known him for ever.

He got out of the car to give her a hug and twirl her round, as he always did when they met. When he put her down he studied her face. 'Nervous?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'Me too. But I won't have them insulting you, so if necessary we'll leave.'

'We couldn't do that!'

‘Oh, yes, we could. But let’s hope it isn’t necessary.’

Two hours later he stopped for a moment outside the gateway of a country house. It wasn’t a stately home, but it was large and beautiful, like a picture in a magazine, which only made her feel worse.

‘Westcott,’ Philip said in fond tones, taking one hand off the steering wheel of his Model T Ford to gesture towards it.

‘It’s a lot bigger than I’d expected.’

‘Too big. It costs the earth to maintain. Never mind that. Remember what I said: it’s me you’re marrying not my family and certainly not the house. It’s not as if I’ll be inheriting it. My parents and my elder brother are snobs. They don’t approve of me, let alone you. When I became an engineer, they were horrified because it’s not a *gentleman’s* profession.’

He still didn’t set off again and she waited patiently.

‘My father won’t be there. He never is. But he left a message at the barracks to tell me he’d have to stay up in London today to attend a meeting but he wishes us well.’

‘But you sound to have plenty of other relatives.’

‘I doubt we’ll have much to do with any of them after the war, Bella my darling. But when a Cotterell gets engaged, there’s always a family gathering and I want to give them the chance to do the right thing by you—publicly, at least. If they don’t, well, I’ll know where we stand and I won’t be coming back here again. I have some wonderful friends, people I was at boarding school with like Tez, who’ll make you welcome into our circle.’

She couldn’t think what to say, so made a murmuring noise to show she was listening.

‘At least you’ll like my sister, I can guarantee that. Georgie and I have always been close. Well, we’re twins, aren’t we? Spencer is ten years older than us, so we two always

stuck together because he was a bit of a bully.’

The door opened and an elderly maid greeted Philip fondly, gave Bella a perfunctory smile and took her coat and hat before showing them into the drawing room.

‘Mother’s over by the fire,’ he whispered. ‘The one standing up talking to her is Spencer.’

Adeline Cotterell was seated in a huge armchair chatting to her older son and about a dozen people were clustered in pairs and trios round the edges of room, with two much older women sitting on a sofa. All of them looked stiff and unfriendly; no one smiled at the newcomer.

Philip’s usually smiling face had turned into a stone-like mask.

Mrs Cotterell made no effort to greet Bella with more than a brief nod accompanied by, ‘Miss, um, Jones’.

The older woman had spoken in terms of icy disdain. Bella had read the phrase in books but she’d never encountered such an attitude in real life before. She didn’t flinch but stared calmly back at Mrs Cotterell. She was as good as any of them!

Philip reminded his mother that he and Bella had got engaged and were there so that she could be introduced to his family, but Mrs Cotterell said only, ‘H’mmm’.

He seemed to be waiting for her to do something, but she stayed silent. ‘I’ll take her round to meet everyone, then.’

He introduced Bella first to his elder brother. Spencer was standing at the other side of the fireplace and he too stared at her scornfully. He looked like a haggard, much older version of Philip, but without the kindness and joie de vivre usually there in her fiancé’s eyes. She already knew that Spencer had failed his medical for the Army, though not why. He merely nodded at her before turning his head away.

Looking angrier by the minute Philip went on to introduce her to the two elderly

cousins on the sofa. Both women followed Mrs Cotterell's lead and greeted her as 'Miss, um, Jones'.

No member of his family addressed any remarks to her, other than repeating her name.

By now, Bella was just as angry as Philip, but she too kept control of her feelings. These people could be as uncivil as they liked but she had vowed to behave impeccably whatever happened. Her father would have been horrified by these people's bad manners. He'd always told her a pauper could be as courteous as a king and she would prove that today.

She'd hoped to win over Philip's family by good manners and pleasant behaviour, so that she would at least be tolerated by them, if not liked. It was already obvious that this wasn't going to happen. They had decided in advance to dislike her.

Philip gave her arm a quick squeeze of sympathy as he took her across to meet his sister, who said, 'I'm really happy to meet you,' in a low voice.

He left her there in the bay window in response to his mother's beckoning forefinger. 'Look after my Bella for a moment, Georgie, there's a dear.'

His sister looked suddenly terrified, which puzzled Bella. But Philip had already left them to return to his mother's side.

Georgie said in a low voice, 'I wish I could get to know you properly, Bella, because I can see how much you and Philip love one another.' She hesitated then added in a rush, 'I'm not trying to be nasty, but someone needs to warn you: they won't let him marry you, whatever he says or does. And Mother always gets her own way. That's how I came to be engaged to Francis Filmore, the one standing behind Mother. She threatened to throw me out without a penny if I didn't do as she told me and I don't come into my annuity till I'm thirty so I'd have nothing.'

She glanced quickly across the room at the tall, older man who had been introduced as Francis Filmore and it wasn't a loving look, then turned back to Bella. 'Stay away from this miserable place and keep Philip away too. He deserves a happy life after all he's been through during the war.'

There was silence for a few moments as Bella tried to take this in, then a voice said, 'Georgina, your aunt wishes to speak to you.'

Georgie froze, then took her fiancé's arm and walked across the room like a marionette, without offering a word of farewell. The man stared right past Bella as if she didn't exist.

Which left her standing on her own, surrounded by people who had either turned their backs on her or were staring at her as if she was some new species of wild animal.

After a few minutes' low-voiced argument with his mother and elder brother, Philip strode back across the room to Bella, looking furious. He took her arm and tugged her towards the door, saying loudly, 'You won't wish to stay with such ill-mannered people, my dear, any more than I do.'

In the hall he asked the maid for their coats and waited, foot tapping impatiently, until these were brought.

'Your sister said—' Bella began.

'Shh.' He waited till they were outside to say, 'I thought I could rely on Georgie to be polite.'

'She was. She even said she was sorry she couldn't get to know me. And she warned me that your family wouldn't allow us to marry.'

'Georgie meant that my mother will try to stop it. Mother made that very plain to me just now. She feels entitled to rule her children's lives, but I've told her I'll choose my own wife. They're all terrified of her, even poor Georgie, because she can be very nasty.'

Were you afraid?’

Bella considered this for a moment or two, then shook her head. ‘No. I was angry more than anything else, darling. Besides, I shall probably never speak to her again, and she has no say in what I do with my life.’

‘That’s what I’ve told her. Several times. So let’s plan to get married on my next leave, eh? To hell with the lot of them. I shall be proud to have you as my wife.’

‘Are you sure? I don’t want to come between you and your family.’

He helped her into his car. ‘You behaved perfectly. I was so proud of you and how dignified you looked. My family don’t matter any more to me, my darling. There’s only Georgie I really care about and once she marries that vicious brute, I won’t be allowed to see her. I know she doesn’t love him. She should break off the engagement and run away, and so I’ve told her several times.’

‘Maybe she can’t afford to.’

‘I haven’t mentioned it before but all three of us children have got a little money of our own from our grandmother. We have annuities of a few hundred pounds a year. So it’s not as if she’d starve.’ He grinned. ‘How my mother resents the independence it gives us! Georgie got our grandmother’s jewels as well. They must be worth a packet but won’t be given to her till she marries. They’re just sitting in the bank till then and she has to ask the lawyer if she wants to “borrow” them for a party.’

‘She said the money doesn’t come to her till she’s 30.’

He looked at her in surprise. ‘That’s not so. It’s like mine, came to her at 25.’

‘She seemed very sure it was thirty.’

‘I’ll have to have a word with her next time I come back on leave. If you see her before then, tell her to check that with the lawyer.’

‘Perhaps Georgie doesn’t want to break off relations with her family.’

‘Ha! Strange sort of family we are. I’m not sure Georgie and I have relations with our mother, really. She didn’t bring us up, but left that to Nanny. I always feel as if Mother is a stranger whose face I recognise. If Nanny were still alive, I’d take you to meet her and she’d give you a great big hug. You’d have liked her and she’d have liked you.’

He went to crank start the car and drove away, sending gravel scattering as he turned on to the main road.

It was a while before he spoke again, so Bella waited, giving him time to calm down.

Eventually he turned to her and smiled more normally. ‘I’m jolly glad I met you, my darling. Let’s find somewhere to buy luncheon then go back to your lodgings and make mad, passionate love.’

She smiled back at him. ‘Let’s.’ Thank goodness for an understanding landlady, and lodgings so close to the hospital.’ If she hadn’t found Mrs Sibley, Matron would have squeezed her into the crowded dormitory shared by the other VAD drivers. She’d been in a place like that before and didn’t enjoy being treated like a schoolgirl.

Things seemed so different in wartime. How could you deny the comfort of your body to a man who was not only your fiancé but who might be killed at any time once he went back to France? Let alone, she enjoyed making love and feeling close to him.

As she waved him goodbye, she forced herself to smile. Philip had survived more than two years of war, because he’d been one of the first wave of volunteers. A lot of those brave lads were dead now, or maimed.

How many more young men must give their lives for their country?

A few weeks later, Bella watched through the window for the postman and ran out to meet him when he stopped at the house where she had lodgings. Thank goodness she was on a late shift today.

‘Is there a letter for me?’

He smiled. ‘Yes, Miss Jones. He’s written to you again.’

She sighed in relief. Philip usually wrote every day, but occasionally had to miss a day or two when his regiment was in action. This time there hadn’t been any letters from him for three whole days. To make matter worse, she’d had a strong feeling that something was wrong, the sort of feeling you got sometimes when the man you loved was in danger.

But it was Philip’s own handwriting on the front of the usual Army envelope, not that of a stranger. Oh, thank goodness! Her heart gave a great lurch of relief and she plopped a quick kiss on the smudged address.

The minute she was back in the house she tore the envelope open and froze in sheer terror because the single sheet inside it wasn’t from Philip!

She knew then, oh yes, she knew what the feeling of doom had meant! She had to take a few deep breaths before she could face reading the letter.

Dear Miss Jones

I regret to inform you that your fiancé, Captain Philip Cotterell, was killed yesterday. He was shot in the head and died instantly, so he could have felt no pain.

Philip and I were at school together and have served in the same regiment ever since we enlisted. He asked me to let you know personally if anything happened to him, because of course, the official letter will go to his family, as next of kin.

Philip was buried with comrades who fell and I’m sure he will lie at peace here in France.

My sincerest condolences

Aaron Tesworth, Captain

Bella let out a wail of anguish and burst into sobs so loud her landlady came running. It was a few moments before she could weep more quietly and try to explain what was wrong.

In the end Mrs Sibley took the piece of paper from her hand and read it, then put her arms round Bella, rocking her to and from and letting her sob into the flour-stained pinafore, murmuring, 'There, there' as if she was a little child in need of comforting.

But there was no comfort to be found.

After that Bella waited in vain to hear from Phillip's family. Why hadn't they written to her about his death? There might not be a funeral, because the new regulations followed those of Marshall Joffre of 1915 forbidding repatriation of bodies. The soldiers had fought together, often becoming as close as brothers, and they were to lie together in death, no longer separated into officers and other ranks.

Given the lack of body, many families held some sort of memorial service and even placed a marker in their family cemetery plot to remember the dead person.

Surely the Cotterells would know that she'd want—no, *need* to attend anything of that sort? How far were they prepared to carry their rudeness and hostility?

In the end she booked a phone call at the local post office and rang them. 'May I please speak to Mrs Cotterell?'

'May I have your name, please?'

'Miss Jones.'

'Ah. Sorry, miss. I'm afraid madam is not accepting calls at this sad time. May I take a message?'

'Perhaps I could speak to Mr Cotterell, then?'

‘I’m afraid the master is in London.’

‘Miss Georgina, then.’

‘Miss Cotterell is not taking any phone calls either.’

‘Is there to be a memorial service?’

After a hesitation the maid said yes.

‘Could *you* tell me when it is to be held, then?’

‘I’m sorry. I couldn’t take it on myself to do that, miss. Invitations have already been sent out to those who are involved.’ She put the phone down.

Bella stared at the earpiece in shock, then hung it back on the ‘candlestick’. It had been four days since the letter from Captain Tesworth arrived and she hadn’t received an invitation. Surely they wouldn’t—they *couldn’t* be so cruel as to exclude her?

When she sat down and thought about it, she grew angry. Which was better than weeping.

But only just.