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Opening extract from

Stars Shall be Bright

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For Isla Rose MacPhail – my new little star

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Chapter 1

A Mother for Her Children

James put his arm round his little sister Belle. She was crying, and James didn't want her to cry, but what could he say to comfort her? He couldn't tell her their mammy was going to get better – she wasn't. He couldn't tell her things were going to be fine – they weren't. Things would never be fine again.

"Why can't we go up and see Mammy, James?" William asked. He was only a year older than Belle. He didn't understand what was happening either.

"Mrs Carter told us to stay down here in her house," James told him.

"But I don't like her house," William said.

James didn't blame him. He didn't like Mrs Carter's house either. It was two floors below theirs and it was a cold, clean place, with no fire in the grate.

Their house was cosy. Mammy always had a fire lit.

"You must have money to burn," Mrs Carter would say to Mammy in her nippy voice.

Mrs Carter was always trying to boss Mammy about. She was never away from their door with her complaints.

"That Belle's making too much noise."

"They should be in bed at this time of night."

Today, James knew he should be grateful to Mrs Carter. She'd helped to look after Mammy

when Mammy took sick and had to go to her bed. But Mrs Carter never let them forget it.

"Your layabout father should be here," she would say.

"He's not a layabout," James would tell her. "He's a soldier."

But Mrs Carter was right. His father should be here. But Mammy refused to send for him.

"I'll soon be better," she kept saying.

But James knew from the look of her pale skin and dull eyes that she wasn't getting better.

It hadn't always been like this. James could remember better times, happier times. When his father was here. Those days seemed like a dream now, but it wasn't so long ago. Dad would come home from his work on the

railway and he'd run out to the street and play football with them. Sometimes he'd lift little Belle on his back and chase James and William, pretending to be a wild monster. James could still hear Belle giggling with joy.

Their mammy would stand at the front door and watch. She'd have just come from the wash house and she'd have a scarf tied round her hair and a big pile of washing in a basket. James could almost see her now, her cheeks red from the steam in the wash house, her face lit up with a big smile.

The image faded.

Everything changed when Dad lost his job, and he couldn't get another one. Then there was no more football, no more fun, no more monster games with Belle on Dad's back. The arguments started, and their dad would storm out of the house in a rage and James wouldn't hear him come back before he fell asleep.

James had heard the final argument, though.

Their angry voices had woken him.

His mammy didn't sound like herself at all. Her voice was always soft and warm, but that night it was harsh and cold as ice. "I'm fed up with this," she said. "All I do is scrimp and save to feed Belle and James and William."

His dad shouted back. "Well, you won't have to put up with me much longer!" Then James heard him take a deep breath. "I've joined up," he said. "I'm a soldier now."

James couldn't see his mammy's face, but he knew by the long time it took for her to answer that she was shocked. "So, you're just going to leave me here with the wee ones, are you?" he heard her ask.

"Och, you can manage," his dad said. "You don't need me. And at least I can send some money home."

And then he had gone. James knew the army wanted men to fight in the war. But he hadn't thought that his dad would be gone so fast. Just like that. James hadn't seen him since. He'd written, and he'd sent some money.

Mammy read the letter out to them almost every night.

Tell my James and William and Belle that I am proud of them all, and I miss them. Every night I look up at the stars and it comforts me to know you're all looking at those same stars. James, you're the man of the house now. You must look after your brother and sister, and help your mammy. I miss her too. And one day, I promise, we will all be together again.



James had seen how his mammy kept that letter on the shelf above the fire, behind the clock. He had seen how she took it out after they were in bed, when she thought they were all asleep, and read it over and over.

"Where's my daddy now?" he asked her one night, when Belle and William were asleep. He had crept out of bed to sit with her in front of the fire. She had a fit of coughing before she could answer him. The cough was getting worse and worse.

"Well, James," she said when she could speak again. "He's signed on at Maryhill Barracks. After he's done his training, he'll be away to the Front."

"The front of what?" James asked, and that had made Mammy smile. "When's he coming back?"

"When the war's over," she had told him.

But the war wasn't over yet and James had found out what the Front was. It was where the worst of the fighting happened. James didn't like the idea of his dad being there one bit. He'd heard boys in his school say some soldiers never came back from the Front, or if they did, they came back shells of men. It scared him to think that might happen to his daddy.