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Opening extract from

Poppy in the Field

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Chapter One

'Pearson!'

Poppy, freezing cold, miserable and intent on getting to bed, heard her name called and paused on the stairs. Turning, she saw that her friend Essie Matthews had just come through the swing doors of the nurses' hostel.

Matthews ran up the stairs towards her. 'So how was your Christmas Day?' she asked, pink-cheeked and puffing after a brisk walk from the station. 'Did the boys in your ward love their Christmas stockings? Did you have a good time?'

Poppy, with some effort, just about managed to smile. *Good*, she thought, wasn't quite the word for it.

Catching up with her, Matthews linked arms. 'Did Father Christmas bring you any surprises?'

'Nothing special,' Poppy said. There would be time enough the next day to tell Matthews about the surprise – the rather terrible surprise – she'd had. She

didn't want to talk about it right then, though. She wanted to get into bed, pull the blanket over her head and sleep until the new year. 'What about you?' she asked. 'I expect your ma was really pleased to see you.'

'She was – but, to be honest, it was all a bit bleak at home. My sister couldn't get leave from her hospital and my brother's train from Lancashire was cancelled at the last moment, so it was just Ma and me.' She looked at Poppy enquiringly. 'But what was it like at Netley? I missed being there, you know. Did your boys enjoy themselves?'

Poppy nodded. 'They did.' She and Matthews were VADs, members of the Voluntary Aid Detachment affiliated to the Red Cross. One of Poppy's nicest duties as a volunteer nurse had been to make sure all the men in her ward had Christmas stockings and presents. 'They squabbled over the toy cars as if they were five-year-olds,' she said, 'but, you know, just the fact that they're back in Blighty is enough to keep them happy.'

Matthews nodded, understanding at once what she meant, for Netley Hut Hospital in Southampton, where Poppy and Matthews worked, was the main receiving hospital for casualties from France and Belgium. Every Tommy there, however badly injured in the war, was happy to be back in England to have his wounds treated.

'But you look a bit . . . peaky, if you don't mind me saying,' Matthews said, looking at her curiously. 'Did anything else happen? Did you get a convoy of injured men in or something?'

'Not a bit of it!' Poppy said, falsely bright. 'We lit the Christmas lanterns, the boys smoked their Christmas cigarettes, ate their chocolate and wrote letters on their new notepaper.' She paused and added, 'At least, those who had use of their arms wrote letters. I wrote two or three for them, and then . . .' her eyes suddenly filled with tears and she couldn't help but blurt out, 'then I wrote a letter of my own!'

'What d'you mean?' Matthews asked. 'Did one of the boys die today?' Both girls, trained in the basics of nursing, had witnessed tragedy: patients they had thought were ready to go home having unexpected complications and dying suddenly. When this happened, the ward sister or one of the nurses would write straight away to the man's next of kin.

Poppy shook her head. 'No, it wasn't that. I'd best wait and tell you about it tomorrow.'

'Gosh, you've got me really intrigued now.'

'It's not anything to do with a patient – and it's little enough compared to what any of them have gone through, but . . .' She brushed a tear from her cheek. 'Oh, I wasn't going to say anything. Not tonight.'

Matthews looked at her, concerned. 'Tell me now or you'll never get to sleep,' she said.

Knowing this was true, Poppy allowed herself to be led back down the stairs and into the deserted hostel canteen.

The building had once been a Young Women's Christian Association centre, but had been taken over

entirely by the Red Cross for its VADs, most of whom were working at the same hospital as Poppy. Usually the canteen was smoky and busy, the pungent aroma of frying bacon in the air, but that evening the big square room was bare and cold and all the chairs were up on the tables. This was because most of the girls had decided to go home for Christmas, or stay at the hospital and have their meals with the patients. There were a few paper chains trailed about, and a rather forlorn-looking fir tree, but apart from these, little to indicate it was Christmas. There was a war on, of course, and any seasonal extras had gone to the front line in the hopes of making the men's lives in the trenches – and being away from their loved ones – a little more bearable.

Matthews got down two chairs from the nearest table and gently pushed her friend into one. 'Tell me everything,' she said, sitting down in the other. 'I know something rotten must have happened by the look on your face. You're as white as a bleached sheet.'

A moment went by, then a tear rolled down Poppy's cheek and splashed on to the tin table. 'It's Freddie,' she said, meaning Freddie de Vere, the handsome, rather dashing son of the family she used to work for as a parlourmaid.

'Not . . . not dead?' Matthews asked in horror, for Freddie had recently taken a commission in the army and his regiment had been fighting in France, close to the front line.

Poppy shook her head. 'Not that.'

Matthews stared at her. 'Is he injured . . . disabled . . . blinded?'

'No,' Poppy said. 'None of those.' She heaved a sigh. 'I know it's pathetic of me to be such a drip what with everything else that's going on, but I found out that he's become engaged. He's due to get married while he's on his Christmas leave.'

Matthews stared at her, looking outraged. 'Married? Never! He's been leading you on for months, then!'

'I know.' Poppy's head drooped. She and Freddie had exchanged several letters, he'd taken her for afternoon tea in Southampton, and from the things he'd said, she'd rather allowed herself to think that there was a future in their relationship.

'Who on earth is he marrying?'

'The lovely Miss Philippa Cardew,' Poppy said bitterly, picturing the girl in question: Freddie's childhood sweetheart, all Parisian fashion, elfin face and glossy bobbed hair. As a parlourmaid, Poppy had seen (and served tea to) Miss Cardew on several occasions when she'd been working at Airey House, the ancestral home of the de Veres.

'What a beast!' Matthews said fiercely. 'How could he do that? How could he treat you so?'

'Quite easily, it seems.'

'But however did you find out?'

'It was in one of Jameson's society magazines,' Poppy said. 'There was a photograph of Miss Cardew and a few lines saying that she and Second Lieutenant Frederick

de Vere had become engaged and would marry quietly during the Christmas period.' She sighed. 'I know it's pathetic of me but I keep picturing her in white velvet with an ermine stole, looking very beautiful.'

Matthews smiled sympathetically and patted her hand.

'I expect they're getting the de Vere family jewels out of store for the occasion,' Poppy said.

'Oh, what a rotten thing for him to do – after allowing you to think he cared for you. I've a good mind to go and disrupt the wedding!'

'I thought about doing that, too,' Poppy said, managing to smile. 'I could run down the aisle of the chapel and stop the show.'

'Write to his commanding officer.'

'Or his mother!' Poppy said, thinking about the letter she'd received several months ago from Freddie's mother, warning her not to see Freddie again. A mere parlourmaid was never going to be good enough for her darling boy.

'I'd do better than that,' Matthews said. 'I'd turn up at the wedding with a cushion stuffed up my frock and say I was in the family way!'

Poppy began laughing, which led in turn to tears and then, after a while, to her feeling a little less desperate. She dried her cheeks, took off her nurse's cap and blew her nose on a clean handkerchief. 'But there's something else to tell you.'

'One shock at a time, please.'

'I told you that I wrote a letter . . .'

'You wrote to him. Good! I hope you jolly well told him what an utter cad he is! I hope you –'

'It wasn't a letter to Freddie,' Poppy interrupted. 'It was . . . Well, this afternoon, after I realised I'd lost Freddie, I had a good long think about things and I decided I wanted to do something more.'

'For the war?'

Poppy nodded. 'So I spoke to Sister about it and then wrote to the Recruitment Office at Devonshire House, requesting a posting abroad.'

Matthews looked at her with something between admiration and horror. 'Not really?!'

'I want to get right into the middle of it. I want to go to France or Belgium.'

'Are you sure? It's horrifically dangerous. My sister told me that it's much worse out there than anyone's saying.'

Poppy shrugged. 'I know.'

'You're not going just because of him, are you? Because you're thinking that life's not worth living or some such rot?'

'Of course not!' she protested. 'I thought a while back that I'd like to be closer to the action – perhaps look after the troops straight off the front line – but I didn't apply because I thought that staying here in Southampton would make it easier to see Freddie whenever he came through. And now . . . well, that's obviously not going to happen, is it, so why should I

stay? What is there to keep me here? And they're really desperate for more nurses out there.'

'I know, but personally I don't know if I'd be up to it. I mean, the injuries, the blood and gore . . .'

'My friend at Netley – you know, the doctor?'

'Michael Archer,' Matthews said, naming the newly qualified young doctor who'd struck up a friendship with Poppy.

'Yes, him. He said that medics have realised that the sooner a casualty is attended to – examined, operated on, rested and cared for – the better his chances of pulling through.'

Matthews nodded sombrely. 'The golden hour, they call it. It sounds sensible.'

'I'd really like to be part of that.'

'But I thought you have to be older than we are to nurse in Flanders?'

'You're supposed to be, but the truth is, they're so desperate for competent nurses that they hardly ask now. The main thing is that you've proved you're a good worker. Sister Kay put the idea in my head – she's leaving Netley for a casualty clearing station and she's promised to sponsor me.'

'Oh.' For a moment, Matthews looked forlorn. 'I shall miss you awfully.'

'You won't have time to miss me! We're all going to be horrendously busy. 1916 is going to be the year of the Big Push, isn't it? When the outcome of the war gets decided.'

'So they say,' said Matthews.

'Why don't you come with me?'

'Hmm,' Matthews said. 'I'll think about it.' She looked at Poppy closely. 'I'm not trying to make you feel worse, but you look done in. Why don't we get our hot-water bottles filled and then go to bed. We can plot revenge against Freddie de Vere in the morning.'

Poppy yawned. 'I don't care about a hot-water bottle,' she said. 'I just want to get between those sheets and close my eyes . . .'

The girls had got halfway up the stairs when they heard a screech of brakes in the roadway outside. A moment after that, the swing doors were given a shove so hard that they slammed into the walls on each side, and a khaki-clad soldier ran in. Matthews and Poppy stared at him in alarm.

'Beg yer pardon,' he called, spotting them on the stairs, 'but are you Netley VADs?'

'We are,' Matthews said.

'But it must be nearly eleven o'clock,' Poppy said. 'What is it, an invasion?'

'Sorry about that, but there's an emergency.'

'There must be! What sort of –'

'We've got a convoy coming into the hospital,' he panted. 'Forty or fifty badly injured men, I've been told. Anyone not on leave is requested to get back to Netley as soon as possible.'

'On Christmas night!?' said Matthews. 'Don't the Germans have Christmas?'

'I don't suppose it was Christmas when they were injured,' Poppy said. She yawned again and then shrugged. Her bed was calling to her, but her bed would just have to wait – fifty injured Tommies couldn't.

'I'll run upstairs and wake whoever's around,' Matthews said. 'Though I don't suppose I'll be terribly popular.'

Poppy straightened her nurse's cap and retied the strings under her hair at the back of her neck. She forced a smile at the young soldier. 'Would you be able to give us a lift back to Netley?'

'Of course,' he said. He gave an elaborate bow. 'Especially if all the girls are like you two.'

But Poppy, nursing her broken heart, wasn't in the mood for flirting.

In Hut 59, Sister Kay, still on duty despite the hour, had been doing what she called 'playing shops': shuffling beds containing sleeping patients around the ward to fit in the newcomers, wheeling bedsteads into other wards – even temporarily moving them into the spacious corridors of the main hospital building. Fresh bedding had been brought in, ten new beds for the men who were coming to Ward 59 had been made up, and the ward glowed in the light from the red paper lanterns that the boys had made for Christmas. Poppy knew that for those coming in, after the terrors of the front line

and a difficult and pain-filled journey across the Channel, the ward would look like heaven.

The little chiming clock on Sister Kay's desk struck midnight. Sister herself was at the desk doing paperwork, the night staff had gone to find something to eat and Nurse Gallagher had gone to see if she could conjure up an urn of hot water to make cocoa for the new boys when they arrived. The other VAD on the ward, Moffat, was staring out of the window looking for the first signs of them. The nurses had already worked a full day and were quietly willing the casualties to come soon so that they could put them to bed and then take some rest themselves. Poppy hoped that there wouldn't be any who were near death – it would be too awful to inform a family that their son had died on Christmas Day.

She glanced around the ward, looking for a task to keep her occupied, but the ward was perfectly still, perfectly tidy. The only sound was from the men, some of whom were snoring, groaning or coughing in their sleep. It was much too early to start laying up the trays for breakfast, but Poppy, for want of a job, went into the little kitchen and began doing them anyway.

'Salt, pepper, sugar, butter, marmalade, spoon, knife . . .' she murmured to herself, doling them out while trying to stop yawning.

Such a routine job didn't stop her from thinking about Freddie de Vere. About the kisses they'd shared (not exactly passionate, she had to admit – there had

never been time for that), the things he'd said. The way he'd always looked at her so intently that, when he'd taken her out to tea, she hadn't been able to eat more than a mouse's portion of anything – all she'd wanted to do was gaze at him. She especially remembered what he'd written in reply to her plea to know where she stood with him; the words he'd used to assure her that Philippa Cardew was nothing more than a childhood friend his mother was very fond of. *I have no intention of marrying Miss Cardew*, he'd said.

'*No intention . . .*' she murmured. Leaning against the little sink in the kitchen, her eyelids fluttered shut and she felt herself swaying.

'Gosh, I've heard the expression "asleep on your feet . . ." ' a voice said.

Poppy jumped, suddenly alert, and turned to see Michael Archer standing in the doorway with his arms outstretched.

'I thought I was going to have to catch you!'

'Sorry,' Poppy said. How unprofessional! 'The only excuse I have is that it's well past my bedtime.'

'Just think – if I'd caught you, Sister Kay would probably have come in and discovered us in a compromising position, and we'd both have been disciplined.' His silver-grey eyes flickered and caught hers. 'And I don't suppose your chap would have been very pleased about it, either.'

Poppy, not commenting on any of this banter, turned on the tap in the sink and splashed her face with cold

water. 'There! I'm wide awake now,' she said. 'It won't happen again, Doctor Archer.'

'Michael,' he corrected her – as he usually did.

As usual, she pretended not to hear him. Sister Kay was easy-going, kind and fair, but she'd be down like a ton of bricks on a nurse who had the temerity to call a doctor by his first name.

'But why are you still here?' he asked.

'We got a call to come back to the hospital – a convoy's expected.'

'*Was* expected,' he said. 'We've just heard that owing to weather conditions the ship's dropped anchor further down the coast at Dover.'

'Oh! But the beds are ready.'

'I dare say they'll be filled tomorrow – I've heard there are two more hospital ships ready to set off from Calais. Look, I'll go in and tell Sister Kay the latest. She'll confirm it with the commander, then you can go home to bed.'

'That's really decent of you,' Poppy said. 'By the way,' she added as he turned to go, 'I've applied for VAD work in France.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'Good for you. I suppose that's because I'm going to be out there?'

Poppy felt herself blushing. 'Certainly not, Doctor Archer.'

'Michael,' he said.

But Poppy, already reaching for her outdoor coat and anticipating her bed, didn't hear him.