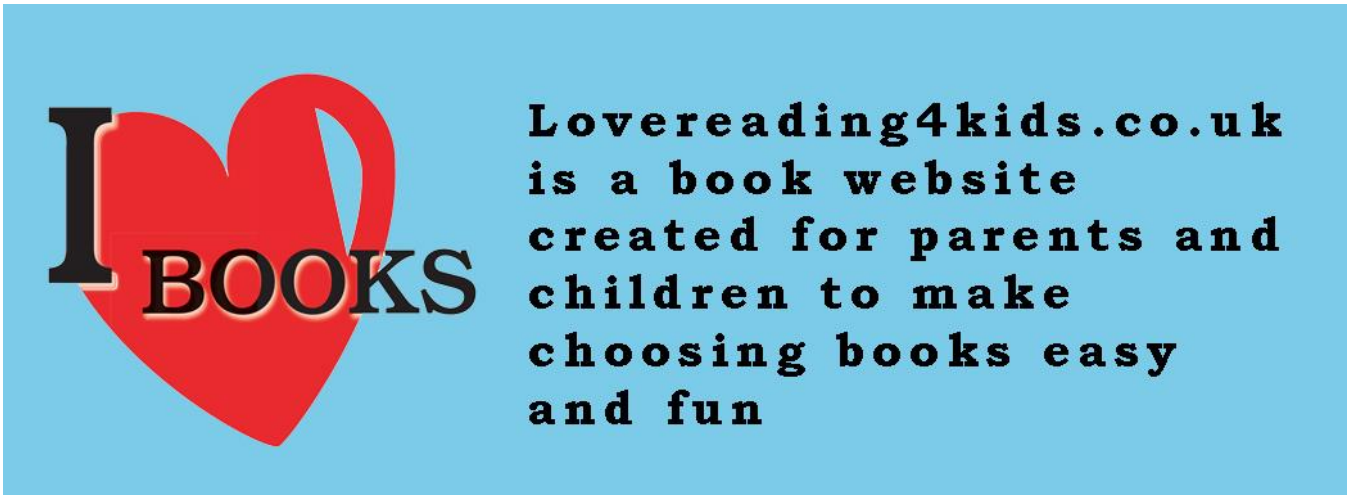


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Paul Dowswell

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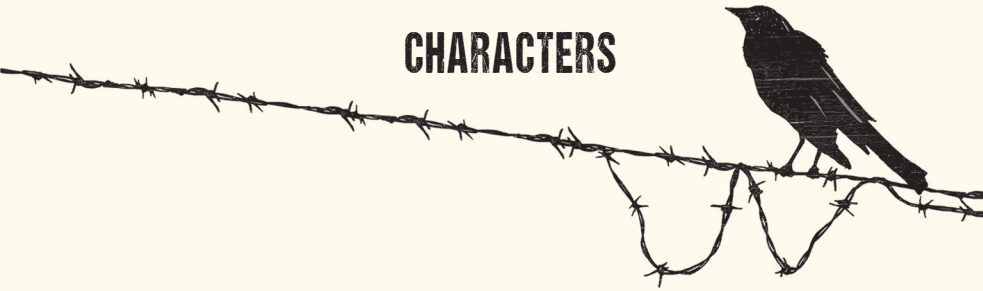
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CHARACTERS



Hastings – July 2016

Charlie and Eddie Taylor – two brothers

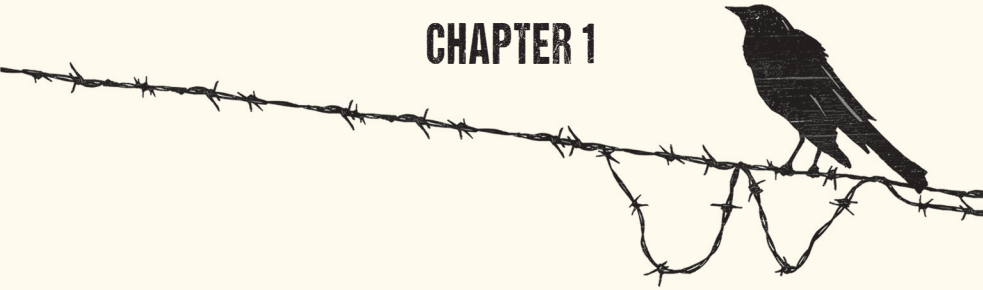
Rose Taylor – Grandma Rose.
Grandmother to Charlie and Eddie

Hastings/The Somme – 1916

Charlie and Eddie Taylor – two brothers

Rose – Charlie's girlfriend, and destined to be mother to Grandma Rose

CHAPTER 1



Friday 1st July, 2016

The view out to sea is unsettling. Blazing sunshine smothers the beach in a lazy haze, but dark clouds hang heavy on the horizon to the east. Lightning flashes amid those clouds and a low rumble of thunder rolls over the waves towards the few people on the beach. It's the first of July and too early in the season for crowds of tourists. Charlie and his brother Eddie sit on the shingle and share a bottle of Fanta and a big meaty pasty.

"I reckon it's going away from us, Eddie," Charlie says. He wipes his fingers on his jeans.

"The French can have it," Eddie says with a laugh. "We don't want a thunderstorm spoiling our summer day."

Charlie's mobile pipes up with some cheesy pop song. He answers after a few bars. "Yeah, Poppy," he says. "How's it going?"

Eddie doesn't want to intrude on his brother's conversation and so he stares out to sea. He doesn't like Poppy much, probably because he senses she doesn't really like him. But she's bright and pretty and Charlie is lucky to have her as a girlfriend. Eddie feels a stab of envy. He'd like a girl, especially one as fit as her.

He feels a stab of irritation too. He can hear Poppy's voice, loud and stroppy over the phone.

"That daft brother of yours isn't still thinking of joining the army, is he?" she says. "Tell him to stick it out in the real world. Don't want him getting blown to bits."

Eddie notices Charlie giving him an awkward sideways glance – hopeful perhaps that maybe he didn't hear that.

Eddie smiles to himself and thinks, 'OK, maybe she doesn't hate me after all.'

The conversation ends and a heavy silence hangs between the two brothers. Charlie breaks it. "Nice to be here though, ain't it," he says.

They've come down from London to help Grandma Rose clear out her elder sister's house. Great Aunt Lily lived to be 91 and died a good five years ago. The Taylor family have used the house as a holiday home ever since and no one could bear the thought of clearing it out and selling it.

Charlie has his eye on that old piano in the living room. The oak's a bit chipped, but they haven't got one at home and he likes to play when he gets the chance. But Eddie doesn't like that piano. He says it gives him the creeps. "Weirdo," Charlie calls him when he says that.

"Here look at this," Eddie says. He opens his sports bag and gets out a mottled photo held between two cardboard squares. "Found it in the attic. I wonder if it's worth anything?"

Charlie doesn't even look. "Stick it on eBay," he says.

"No, Charlie," Eddie says, "have a proper look. It's really interesting." Eddie is irritated by his brother's habit of not really listening to him. Charlie is only a year older – 18 to Eddie's 17 – but he treats Eddie like a child.

"You and your soldiers," Charlie says with a sigh. Eddie has been talking about joining the army for the last six months. It's always "army this army that" with him. He hasn't got a job, or a girlfriend, and their dad thinks the army will be the making of him.

But Charlie does look at the picture. Like the view out to sea, it's unsettling. British soldiers in a trench sit with their backs to a pile of sandbags. They all carry rifles with blades fixed to the

barrels. Bright sunshine glints on the bayonets and on their steel helmets. The soldiers all have wide, frightened eyes that stare out at the camera from pale, thin faces.

"First World War, I reckon," Eddie says.

"Jesus, they look worried," says Charlie. "Think they're about to go into action?"

"Why else would they look like that?" says Eddie. He sighs. "I'd guess most of them are about the same age as us."

"Look at him, Eddie. He's a cool one."

Charlie has spotted the odd one out. One of the soldiers stares at the camera with anger rather than fear written across his face. He's slouched down on the muddy floor of the trench, next to a younger boy. The younger boy's face is the same as his, only softer and more troubled.

"Reckon they might be related," Eddie says.

"Might even be related to us," says Charlie. "The one staring at the camera looks like Grandma Rose's dad. Our mum reckons I look like him, and you do too a bit. Let's take it back and ask her."

"Later," says Eddie. "Let's sit out here a while longer. Those thunder clouds aren't coming our way, at least not yet."

His brother nods and his head dips forward in the blazing hot sun. Lulled by the steady rhythm of the waves, Charlie and Eddie are both asleep within minutes.