

# Cocoa Beach

ALSO BY BEATRIZ WILLIAMS

*The Wicked City*

*A Certain Age*

*Along the Infinite Sea*

*Tiny Little Thing*

*The Secret Life of Violet Grant*

*A Hundred Summers*

*Overseas*

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BEATRIZ WILLIAMS

The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive lowercase 'wm'.

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*To the land of Florida—its dreamers, its builders, its  
mavericks, and its scoundrels. (Sometimes all four at once.)*

## CHAPTER 1

*Cocoa Beach, Florida, June 1922*

SOMEONE HAS CLEARED the ruins away, but you can still see that a house burned to the ground here, not long ago. The earth is black and charred, and the air smells faintly of soot.

In the center of what must once have been a courtyard, a modest stone fountain has toppled from its pedestal. Already the weeds have begun to sprout from the base, encouraged by the hot, damp sunshine and the fertile soil. Everything grows in Florida. Grows and grows, unchecked by any puny human efforts to control nature's destiny. I sink to the edge of the pedestal and call to my daughter, who's poking a stick through the long, sharp grasses that grow along the perimeter of the paving stones. She looks up in surprise, as if she's forgotten I exist, and runs to me on her stubby bare legs. On her mouth is the same startling smile that used to light her father's face, and there are moments—such as this one—when the resemblance strikes me so forcefully, I can't breathe.

“Mama! Mama! There *mouse!*”

“A mouse? In the grass? Are you sure?”

“Yes, Mama! *Mouse!* He run away.”

“Of course he did, darling, if you poked him with your stick.”

Without another word she burrows her hot, wriggling body into my chest, and I'm not one to waste such an opportunity. Not me. Not now. I clasp Evelyn between my arms and bury my face in her sweet-smelling hair, and I breathe her in, great lungfuls of Evelyn, as if I could actually

do that, if I inhaled with enough strength and will. Breathe my daughter's spirit into mine.

I haven't told her that her father died here four months ago, on this very patch of ground, or even that he built this house and lived in it while we—Evelyn and I—inhabited our comfortable brownstone on East Thirty-Second Street in New York City, together with Grandpapa and Aunt Sophie. For one thing, I don't want to frighten her with the idea that a person could burn to death at two o'clock in the morning in his own house, just like that. For another, she's not that curious about him, not yet. She's not yet three years old, after all, and she doesn't know any other little girls. Doesn't know that most of them have both mothers *and* fathers, living at home together, sometimes with brothers and sisters, too. One day, of course, she'll want to know more. She'll ask me questions, and I'll have to think of plausible answers.

And there is another reason, a final reason. The reason I'm here in Florida to begin with, examining this blackened ground with my jaded eyes. I suppose I'll tell Evelyn about that, too, when the time comes, but for now I'm holding this reason inside my own head and nowhere else. I've learned, over the years, to keep my private thoughts strictly to myself.

Behind us, Mr. Burnside clears his throat in that slight, unnecessary way that lawyers have. I imagine they think it conveys discretion. "Mrs. Fitzwilliam," he says.

"Yes, Mr. Burnside?"

"Have you seen enough? I hate to hurry you, but we do have a whole mess of appointments this morning."

Mr. Burnside, you understand, likes to keep to a tight schedule, especially in the face of this shimmering June sun, which forces all business around here to conclude by lunchtime. After which Mr. Burnside will spend the rest of his day inside a high-ceilinged, north-facing room, sipping a cool, strong drink while an electric fan rotates above him. If he can spare the energy, he might turn over a paper or two on his desk.

On the other hand, he's an extremely competent man of affairs, as I've

had plenty of occasion to discover in the past two months, and the sound of his voice—practical, confident, somewhat impatient—is enough to stiffen my resolve. To blow away the dust of regret, or nostalgia, or grief, or whatever it is that's stinging my eyes, that's clogging my chest as I hold Simon's daughter in my arms and try to imagine that Simon is dead. *Dead*. What a word. An impossible word, as unlike Simon as clay is to fire. I kiss the top of Evelyn's head, detach her from my arms, and rise to my feet. The early sun catches my back. Not far away, the ocean beats against the yellow sand, and the sound makes me want to take off my shoes and socks and wander, aimless, into the surf.

Instead, I say: "Are you certain the remains belonged to my husband?"

"Yes, ma'am. His brother identified the body."

"Samuel."

"That's the man. Big fella."

"And this *was* Simon's house, of course. There's no mistake about that?"

"Oh, no, ma'am. No mistake about that. Had the pleasure of visiting here many times myself. Lovely place. Like one of those Italian villas. There were lemon trees in this courtyard, real pretty. A real shame, Mrs. Fitzwilliam. Terrible, terrible shame that you never saw how lovely it was."

I gaze at him coldly, and he coughs and turns away, as if to survey the empty, overgrown plot around us. The breeze touches the ends of his pale jacket. His straw hat glows in the sun. He inserts his fingers into his sweating collar and says, "Have you thought about what you'll do with the place? You can get a good price for the land, if you don't mind my saying so. Folks are paying top dollar these days for a plot of good Florida land, let alone one as nice and big as this, looking out on the ocean."

Across the road, at the edge of the yellow beach, an especially large wave rises to the sky, gathering strength and power, until it can't bear the strain any longer and dives for shore in a long, elegant undulation, from north to south. An instant later, the boom reaches us, like the firing of a seventy-five-millimeter artillery shell—a sound I know all too well. My nerves flinch obediently.



But I'm an old hand at disguising the flinch of my nerves. Instead of jumping at the sound of a crashing wave, I brush an imaginary patch of dirt from my dress and reach for Evelyn's sticky hand.

"I think we should visit the docks next, don't you think? So we don't run late on our schedule."

Mr. Burnside frowns, causing his bottlebrush mustache to twitch under his nose.

"Of course," he says. "It's your property, after all."

IN ADDITION TO A THOUSAND or so acres of mature citrus, a shipping company, the ruined house on Cocoa Beach, and a hotel in town (in which he kept a private apartment for his own use), Simon has also left me a beautiful sky-blue Twin Six Packard roadster, which Mr. Burnside now drives at thirty exuberant miles an hour toward the long, narrow bridge across the Indian River, where the little boomtown of Cocoa perches on the shore and makes itself a living.

On another day, I would have liked to drive myself. This is, after all, my car. But the estate is still in probate, and anyway Mr. Burnside knows the way, while Florida's still a mystery to me. Why, I don't even know the name for this thick, rampant vegetation that spreads around us, creeping along the edges of the road, but as the Packard plows along the raised bed, top down and windows lowered, I think—for the first time in years—of the hedgerows of Cornwall. The way they block everything else from view, everything ahead of you and everything to the side, so that you never know what's coming around the next curve. Those shrubs might be hiding anything.

"How much farther?" I call out above the roar of the engine and the heavy, warm draft blowing past our ears.

"Bridge is up ahead!"

"What are these shrubs and trees growing alongside?"

"That? Mangrove."

"Pardon me?"

“MANGROVE, Mrs. Fitzwilliam! That’s MANGROVE! Grows EVERYWHERE around here, where the ground’s LOW and SWAMPY, and it’s mostly LOW and SWAMPY in these PARTS!”

Mangrove. Of course. One of those things you hear about—a *mangrove swamp*, how exotic—but never actually see. And here it is, spreading everywhere, tangled and salty and very much at home.

“Darned STUFF!” Mr. Burnside continues. “Breeds MOSQUITOES! I’m sure you’ve noticed all the MOSQUITOES!”

“Yes!”

He turns his head closer. “They used to call this Mosquito County, until someone got smart and saw it was keeping the settlers away. Changed the name to Brevard. Now they’ve got big plans to drain these swamps, at least on the mainland side, some of the bigger islands.”

“What a shame!”

“Shame? About TIME, I say! You haven’t seen ’em SWARM yet! Here’s the bridge, now.”

The mangrove falls away, replaced by the tranquil navy blue of the Indian River and the bustling shore on the other side. Across the waterway stretches the wooden bridge, straight as an arrow, except for the drawbridge and its wheelhouse. We crossed it this morning, rattling the boards from their morning slumber, much to Evelyn’s delight. I nudge her now. “Look, darling! It’s the bridge!”

She scrambles up into my lap and puts her hands on the doorframe. “Bridge! Bridge!”

“She’s a PRETTY THING!” shouts Mr. Burnside.

“Thank you.”

“Looks like her FATHER, if you don’t MIND my SAYING so!”

I stroke Evelyn’s hair. “Tell me, Mr. Burnside. When was the bridge built? It looks rather new.”

Mr. Burnside flexes his fingers around the steering wheel and leans forward, as if to concentrate his attention on the progress of the Packard down the narrow roadway. He’s driving more slowly now, as we cross from solid

ground to fragile human construction, and the noise of the engine subsides, replaced by the rattle of wood.

“Oh, not that new, I guess. They finished it just about the time we got into the war—1917, it was. Seems like ages, though I guess that’s only five years, by the calendar.”

“Yes.”

He spares a sideways glance. “You must have gone over there, isn’t that right? The war, I mean. Over to France.”

Evelyn’s trying to stand on my lap, to get a better view over the edge of the car. With difficulty, not wanting to spoil her fun entirely, I brace my hands around her flapping upper arms. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, just curious, I guess. What it was like. Pretty awful, I bet. I figured you must have met Mr. Fitzwilliam there, you know. Since he was fighting.”

“He wasn’t fighting,” I say. “He was in the medical corps.”

“Oh, that’s right. Used to be a doctor, I think he said.”

“Yes. He was a surgeon in the British Army.”

“Yep, that’s right. That was good luck for him, I guess. Do your bit without getting killed.”

“I suppose so.”

The Packard rattles on, toward the middle of the bridge. The sun’s higher now, and without the shade of the mangroves, the interior of the car has grown intolerably hot, even in the draft. The perspiration trickles down the hollow of my spine, dampening my dress against the back of the seat.

Mr. Burnside, however, is persistent. “You must’ve been a nurse, then. Red Cross?”

“Yes.” And then, reluctantly: “I wasn’t really a nurse. I drove ambulances.”

“Did you! Well, I’ll be. Can’t say I would have guessed. You’re such an elegant thing. And that’s man’s work. Real man’s work, driving those tin cans through the guns and the slop.”

“There were a great many women driving, actually. So the men could go fight.”

“Were there, now? I guess that’s war for you. Where’d you learn to drive? In the service?”

“No. My father taught me.”

“Well, well. And so you met Mr. Fitzwilliam in France, somewhere?”

We’re approaching the drawbridge, and the stop signal appears. The Packard slows and slows. I point through the windshield. “Look, Evelyn. The bridge is going to go up so the boats can sail through.”

Evelyn, squealing, throws herself toward the glass, fingers outstretched for the topmost edge, and I catch her by the chest just in time.

“You’ve got your hands full with that one,” observes Mr. Burnside.

“She’s a good girl, really. Just impulsive when she’s excited. As most children are, at this age.”

My voice is crisp, but he doesn’t seem to notice. His hand reaches for the gear lever. “She doesn’t get *that* from her daddy, that’s for sure. Never saw a man with a more even temper than Mr. Fitzwilliam. Nothing troubled him. Cool as January. I always figured it was the war, see. You survive something like that, and . . . Oh, look at that. It’s one of his ships. *Your* ships, I mean.”

I turn my head to the cluster of vessels awaiting the lifting of the drawbridge. “Which one?”

“The steamer, there at the end. Loaded up with fruit, I’ll bet, and headed for Europe. Though I’d have to check the schedule in the office to be sure.”

“Yes, I’d like that.”

“Oh, I don’t mean *you*, ma’am. There’s no need for you to trouble yourself with the business side of things.”

The wooden deck draws slowly upward before us, foot by foot, and Evelyn gasps for joy. Claps her palms together, leans trustfully into my hands. The creaking of the gear reaches a breaking point, above the rumble of the Packard’s idling engine, and the ships begin to bob forward.

“But that’s why I’m here, Mr. Burnside. To learn about Simon’s business. Since it now belongs to me.”

“Now, Mrs. Fitzwilliam. Why bother yourself like that? That’s what

we're here for, to keep your affairs running all nice and smooth, so you don't need to dirty yourself. The dirt of commerce, I mean. Just you live in comfort and raise your daughter and maybe find yourself another husband. A nice, ladylike thing like you. It's hard work, you know, running a business like this."

"I'm not afraid of hard work."

"Well, now. Have you ever run a business before, Mrs. Fitzwilliam?"

"No. But that doesn't mean—"

"Then I think you'd best just leave everything to us, ma'am. Those of us who know the business, inside out." He leans back contentedly against the seat and crosses his arms over his broad, damp chest. "Trust me."

Well! At the sound of those words—*Trust me*—I'm nearly overcome by an urge to laugh. High and hysterical, a little mad, the kind of laugh that will make this kind, round-bellied lawyer shake his head and think, *Women*.

*Trust me*. My goodness. Trust me, indeed. I've heard that one before.

But I don't laugh. Poor fellow. Why disturb his satisfaction? Instead, I watch the progress of the ships through the gap in the bridge, paying particular attention to the nimble white steamship at the end, which—I now see—bears the name of its company in black block letters near the stern.

PHANTOM SHIPPING LINES

AS IT HAPPENS, SIMON'S DOCK is empty of ships, except for a small boat that Mr. Burnside informs me is a tender. "The others are out to sea," he says, chewing on the end of a long and unlit cigar, "which is a good thing, mind you. Good for profits. Our aim is always to turn the ships around as smart as we can."

We're standing at the end of the Phantom Shipping dock, and the Indian River swirls around the pilings at our feet while a hazy white sun cooks us inside our clothes. Evelyn, restless, swings from my hand to look for fish in the oily water. Thirty yards away, a tugboat steams slowly upstream, trailing gray smoke from its single stack. The air is almost too hot to breathe.

“What about the warehouse?” I ask.

“Warehouse?”

I turn and nod to the rectangular wooden building at the base of the dock. Like the ship at the drawbridge, the building identifies its ownership in confident, no-nonsense black letters above the massive double door: PHANTOM SHIPPING LINES. The paint is fresh, on both the signboard and the white walls of the warehouse itself. There are no windows. I understand this keeps the fruit fresh and cool in its crates, waiting for a ship to transport it across the ocean. Citrus, mostly, but some avocado as well. There’s a growing taste for more exotic fare in the London drawing rooms, apparently, after so many years of restriction and rationing and self-denial. A growing taste for adventure.

“Oh, there won’t be anything to see in there,” says Mr. Burnside. “The ship’s already loaded and left, and we’re not due to receive any goods this morning.”

“I’d like to have a look, all the same.”

He nudges aside his sleeve to check his watch. “Well, I can’t object to that. But it *is* nearly lunchtime, and we’ve still got the offices to visit, haven’t we? And your poor daughter looks like she might stand in need of a rest and a cool drink, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

“If you don’t mind *my* saying so, you do seem pleased to offer up your opinion on a variety of matters, Mr. Burnside.” I strike off down the dock, holding Evelyn’s hand. “Even without being asked for it.”

“That’s what I’m paid to do, Mrs. Fitzwilliam. Give you my opinion. Your husband, in his will, made very clear that—”

I turn so quickly, Mr. Burnside nearly stumbles into my chest. He’s an inch shorter than I am, and his eyes are forced to turn up to meet mine. I can tell he doesn’t necessarily welcome the mismatch.

“Let *me* make very clear, Mr. Burnside, that my late husband’s wishes are really no longer the point. *My* wishes are your business now, and if you find that task impossible, I’m afraid I’ll simply have to find myself a new lawyer.”

He steps backward. Snatches the cigar from the corner of his mouth. Widens his eyes to regard the cast of my expression, which—after two and a half years of motherhood—is formed of iron.

“Of course, ma’am.” He inclines his head. “I didn’t mean to overstep.”

“I’m sure you didn’t. I presume the warehouse is locked?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And you have the key?”

“I do.”

“Then let’s proceed, shall we?”

I swing Evelyn onto my hip and cut through the sweating atmosphere in long, masculine strides to the white double doors at the base of the dock.

As it turns out, Mr. Burnside is correct. The warehouse doors swing open to reveal nothing at all: no cargo, at any rate. No waiting crates of citrus and avocado. Along the walls, ropes and tools hang at neat intervals, and the air—unexpectedly cool—smells of the usual dockside perfume, hemp and tar and salt and warm wood.

And something else.

I tilt my chin and sniff carefully. There it is again, sweet and spicy and tonic.

“Is something the matter, Mrs. Fitzwilliam?” asks Mr. Burnside, lighting his cigar.

“Nothing at all.”

“What *smell*, Mama?”

Evelyn’s wrinkling her tiny nose. Her face has grown pink from the heat, and I consider the possibility that Mr. Burnside’s correct about this, as well: she needs a rest and a cool drink.

“Smell, darling? What do you smell?”

“It’s my cigar, I expect,” Mr. Burnside says quickly.

“No, it’s not that. I smelled it, too.”

“Just the fruit, then.”

“Possibly.” I try the air again, but the flavor has disappeared in the over-

powering fog of the lawyer's cigar. "Though it didn't smell like fruit to me. If anything, it smelled like brandy."

Mr. Burnside turns for the door and laughs. "Ha-ha. *Brandy?* Your nose is playing tricks on you, Mrs. Fitzwilliam. Though I guess, if some of last night's shipment had gone off in the heat . . . happens sometimes . . . sitting in the sun like that . . ."

I wave away a delicate blue plume of smoke and cast a final gaze along the clean, well-organized walls of my late husband's warehouse, and as I do I'm reminded, against my will, of the neat canvas walls of a casualty clearing station in northern France, everything in its place, equipment and instruments and creature comforts, while the rain drummed outside. Of a pair of hazel eyes, turned toward me in supplication.

"Perhaps," I say.

Evelyn's squirming weight pulls at my arms. I allow my daughter to slide to the scrubbed wooden floor. I take her hand, and together we follow Mr. Burnside through the doorway, into the suffocating Florida noon.

WE'RE LATE FOR OUR VISIT to the offices of the Phantom Shipping Lines, on the second floor of a large, businesslike brick building set across from the Phantom Hotel, which now belongs to me, according to the terms of Simon's will. My husband, you see, articulated his last wishes in clear, simple terms: in the event of his death, everything—every single article he possessed—should pass to his wife, Virginia Fitzwilliam of New York City.

A dressmaker and a coffee shop occupy the storefronts on the ground floor, and the stairs for the upper floors lie behind a plain wooden door around the corner. Mr. Burnside reaches for the knob and unlocks it with a small Yale key from the chain in his jacket pocket.

The stairs are wide and bare, and Mr. Burnside tells me to watch my step as I climb, holding Evelyn by the hand. The wood creaks softly beneath our feet. Simon climbed these steps, I think. Simon's feet caused the same soft creak.



“If you’ll allow me,” Mr. Burnside says, stepping around my body as we reach the top of the staircase and a square, high-ceilinged foyer made white by the glare of the sun through the window at the opposite end. He strides for a door halfway down the wall on the right side, the one facing the river, and unlocks that, too. The top half is made of frosted glass and also bears the name PHANTOM SHIPPING LINES in the same uniform black letters.

“After you,” says Mr. Burnside, stepping back, and Evelyn and I walk through the doorway into a beautiful, spacious room, lined on the east and south walls by large sash windows, shaded from the ferocity of the Florida sun by a series of green-and-white striped awnings. Above our heads, four electric fans rotate quickly. The walls are white, the furniture simple: a pair of desks, a sofa, armchairs, table, cabinets. Everything necessary, I suppose, to run a small, legitimate shipping company, sending fresh, nutritious Florida citrus and avocados to the kitchens and dining rooms of Great Britain.

The room is occupied, of course. After all, business goes on, though the owner of Phantom Shipping Lines has died shockingly in a house fire four months earlier, leaving his company and all the rest of his worldly goods to a wife who, I suspect, most people here in Cocoa never knew existed. A young woman in a navy suit sits erect before a curving black typing machine, the clattering of which has abruptly ceased, and a middle-aged man looks up from the desk on the other side of the room and gazes at us from beneath the green shade covering his brow.

More. There’s another man, stepping just now from a doorway along the north wall, closing the portal behind him and turning to face me. But he’s not the man that—at some hidden depth of consciousness, unknown to logic—I suppose I’m expecting to find before me. Whole and alive.

No. This man is burly and straight-shouldered, grim-faced and dark-haired, bearing a jaw and a pair of hazel eyes so resembling those of my husband, my heart jolts in my chest and my legs turn to sand, and I squeeze Evelyn’s tiny hand in order to remain upright.

Samuel Fitzwilliam.

## CHAPTER 2

*France, February 1917*

### HUNKA TIN

. . . But when the night is black,  
And there's *blésés* to take back,  
And they hardly give you time to take a smoke;  
It's mighty good to feel,  
When you're sitting at the wheel,  
She'll be running when the bigger cars are broke.

Yes, Tin, Tin, Tin!  
You exasperating puzzle, Hunka Tin!  
I've abused you and I've flayed you  
But by Henry Ford who made you,  
You are better than a Packard, Hunka Tin!

—FROM THE *AMERICAN FIELD SERVICE BULLETIN*, 1917

(IN THE SPIRIT OF KIPLING'S "GUNGA DIN")

I MET MY husband in the least romantic setting possible: a casualty clearing station in northern France in the middle of February. A cold drizzle fell and the air stank of human rot. I suppose this constituted a warning from Providence, though Providence needn't have bothered. I had always known better than to fall in love. I had always known love was something you would later regret.

The CCS occupied the barn of an ancient farm, and by the time I reached it, late in the afternoon, the sky was dark and the ambulance wheels had choked with thawed mud. For weeks the winter had frozen the saturated ground; today, on the first day of a new offensive, the roads had turned to sludge. That was the war for you.

I brought the motor to a grinding halt in what had once been a stable yard and yanked back the brake. No other vehicles inhabited the swamp around me, and for a moment I thought I'd got the directions wrong. It was all just a hunch, after all: Hazel bursting back from the village, rushing down the empty ward, calling out that there was a battle on! A new attack into some salient or another, and if we wanted patients we should take the ambulance down to the nearest CCS, they'd be lousy with casualties! We were all rolling bandages at the time, there was nothing else to do. No patients to care for. Everyone turned to me. And what could I say? *Take the ambulance*, Hazel had said: the ambulance just brought down from Paris, our precious Hunka Tin, a bastard born of much wheedling and carrying-on with the American Red Cross Ambulance Service. A tattered, battered Model T that, in our entire sisterhood of accomplished Manhattan ladies, only I could drive.

*Take the ambulance, Virginia, do! It's not as if you have anything better to do.*

She was right, of course. The rain was crackling on the great windows overlooking the courtyard. An infinite roll of lint lay in my lap like a death sentence. What else could I have said? *Yes*. I dumped that damned lint back into the basket and said *yes*.

A reckless act. *Impetuous*, my father would have said, shaking his head, and an hour later I'd regretted it passionately, but now that I'd arrived at my destination, the regret was gone. I rubbed my sleeve against the windshield fog—my breath kept clouding the glass—and spied the grim, erratic movements of a stretcher party lurching through the field beyond, half-obscured by mist. Above my head, a delicate whine pierced the air, high and gliding, ending in a percussive *crump* that rattled my bones. I reached for the door handle and forced myself out.

Four hours ago, as I left the hospital, Hazel suggested I borrow her rubber boots—*The mud's just awful, Virginia*—but I hadn't listened. I had my leather shoes, and from there I'd wrapped army-style puttees around my trousers, all the way to the knee, like a pair of gaiters, and I thought that was enough. Smart and efficient. That was all the soldiers wore, wasn't it? In those days, newly freed from my father's house, I thought I didn't have to follow anyone's advice if I didn't want to. I thought I was free. From the moment of departure, from the instant the gray-sided ocean liner cast off into the Hudson River, I had soaked up the knowledge of my independence. I had reveled in reliance on my own common sense.

And that was all very well, except that the mud of northern France didn't give a damn for my independence and my common sense. The mud didn't give a damn for anything. I stuck my left leg out of the cab of the ambulance and into the wet French earth, and the muck swallowed up my neat leather shoe right past the ankle. You can't imagine the greedy, sucking noises it made as I staggered across that stable yard, foot by foot, while the drizzle struck my helmet in metallic pings and the shells screamed and popped at some worryingly unknown distance. The front-line trenches were supposed to be miles away, but you couldn't tell that to your ears, or to your heart that crashed every time those screaming whistles pierced the air in twos and threes, inhuman and relentless, followed by those acoustic *crumps* that meant someone had just gotten hell. Shellfire had a way of sounding as if it was going to drop directly on the crown of your head, every time.

I was making for the stretcher party, not the barn. I don't know why. I think I just wanted to help, right that second, after so many weeks and months of preparation. Like the rest of us American volunteers, I was simply dying for a real live patient. Two men carried the wounded soldier, who was covered by a blanket and nothing else, and my God, how I wondered that he hadn't fallen off the canvas altogether as the stretcher-bearers staggered through the mud, drunken and exhausted. The rain dripped from their helmets. "Need a hand?" I called out, and their heads jerked hopefully upward at the sound of my voice.

“Jesus,” the first one swore, “who the devil are you?”

“I’m from the American Red Cross,” I said. “I was sent out to bring patients to a hospital nearby. They said you were overloaded.”

“You’re a *driver*?”

Of the two, the second man looked the worst, whey-faced and vertiginous, as if the next step might kill him. I leapt across a puddle and reached for the handles of the stretcher. “Yes,” I said. “What have we got?”

The man was too tired—or else too astonished—to dispute the stretcher with me. He fell away, rubbing his blistered palms against his trousers, and I took the load in my own hands. It was lighter than I expected, a strange living weight, like a child instead of a man. The wounded soldier’s face was pale and wet; I couldn’t tell where he was hit, beneath the blanket.

“Right leg,” said the second man. “Sent back straightaway for amputation.”

“Can they amputate here?”

“Got no choice, have they?”

The soldier moved his head and groaned. Still wore his helmet, slipped to one side, covering his ear and part of his jaw while his face and young brow remained exposed to the drizzle. His pack lay next to him on the stretcher, shielded by the gray blanket.

“Almost there,” I told him, and his startled eyelids swooped open and his eyes met mine, very briefly, before a patch of mud sent me wallowing for balance.

“Blimey,” he said, blinking, “am I dead already?”

“You ain’t dead, mate,” the second man said. “It’s the American Red Cross, innit.”

“Blimey.” The soldier closed his eyes. “God bless America.”

Ahead of us a door swung open on the face of the barn, and a man’s shoulders appeared in silhouette against the electric light within. “God-damn it!” he shouted. “I told the last party we haven’t got room!”

“Well, they ain’t told us back up the line, sir,” the first man said.

“We can’t bloody well take him!”

“He needs the leg off, sir, on the double.”

The other man pounded his fist against the side of the doorway. He took a step toward us, into the soggy remains of the daylight. Stopped, frowned. He wore a dilapidated khaki tunic, officer’s stripes. The rain struck his bare head. “Who the devil’s this?”

“The American Red Cross, sir,” said the first man.

“How in the hell did she get here?”

I nodded toward the Model T. “I drove, sir.”

“You drove *that*? From where?”

“From Marieux, sir. We’ve set up a private hospital there, only we weren’t getting any patients, so I went back to Paris and found a Model T from the American Ambulance—” The stretcher handle slipped in my wet right hand.

“Never mind.” The doctor stepped forward and yanked the stretcher handles from my fingers. “Carry on, for God’s sake. Get the poor sod out of the rain. Now!”

He had the kind of manner you couldn’t refuse, the kind of resolve you couldn’t just turn. I think I admired him right then, whether or not I realized it. I couldn’t help it. After all, I was used to a strong masculine will. His authority seemed natural and just, derived from the consent of those governed. I scampered like a damned puppy at his heels. Followed him into the barn, refusing to be shunted. “We’ve got plenty of beds at the hospital,” I said. “I can take three stretchers or six sitting in the ambulance.”

“I don’t know this hospital of yours.”

“We’re fully staffed, sir. Eight nurses, two doctors. Both experienced surgeons. You said you’re full.”

“All Americans, I suppose.”

“Yes.”

We ducked through the doorway of the barn, into a shower of electric light that stung my eyes. Around us stretched a ward of perhaps fifty beds, all of them occupied; a number of cots seemed to have been put up along the walls, staffed by a thin swarm of orderlies and a few nursing sisters in gray

dresses and white pinafores. The smell of disinfectant saturated the damp air, swirling with the primeval odors of blood and earth. And not just any earth: this was the mud of France, battlefield mud, in which living things had died and decayed, and even now—years later—the stench still rots in the cavities of my nose like the memory of death. There is not enough disinfectant in the world to cleanse that smell.

The doctor didn't pause. I don't think he even heard me, any more than he would have heard an actual puppy scampering at his heels. He called out commands to a series of orderlies—*Prepare the theater, Pass the word for Captain Winston*—and only when he handed off the stretcher to the men assisting in the operating theater did he turn and fix his full attention upon me, like the next item on a long list of daily tasks, to be checked off and disposed of.

But the funny thing was—the really *momentous* thing, when I look back on the entire episode, trying to pinpoint this or that instant that might have constituted a turning point, a point of flexion at which my life might have taken an entirely different course—the funny thing was that his expression then changed. Transformed, like a man engaged in an obsessive quest, who had just parted a final pair of jungle branches and made the discovery for which he'd longed all his life.

His face, as I later learned, had that natural capability for transformation.

Where I had expected sternness, and frowns, and orders crossly delivered, I received something else. A smile, quite gentle. A movement of eyebrows that suggested understanding, and a little wonder. A bit of crinkling around a pair of eyes that had to be called hazel, though they tended, in certain light, toward green; surely that signified admiration?

My face turned warm.

“Miss—?”

“Fortescue.”

“Miss Fortescue. You're the only evacuation ambulance to get through the roads today, did you know that? Either from the dressing station or the railway depot. How the devil did you do it?”

“I—I just drove, sir. Pushed her out when she got stuck.”

He drove a hand through his hair, which was sparkling with gray and cropped short, so that the bones of his face thrust out with additional clout. I thought he looked as if he came from the countryside, from some sort of vast outdoors; there was something a little rough-hewn about his cheeks and jaw, blunt, like a gamekeeper or else a poacher, although his creased skin was pale and sunless. His fingers, by contrast, contained all the delicate, tensile strength of a surgeon. I thought he must be exotically old, thirty-five at least. “Well, well. I’ll be damned,” he said. “You’re a heroine.”

“Not at all, sir. Just doing my best.”

“As are we all, Miss Fortescue, but you’re the only driver who actually made it through. *That’s* heroism.”

My cheeks burned. Of course. My chest, too, I think, while everything else went a little cold. At that point in my life—aged only twenty, sheltered for most of those years by a few square miles of tough Manhattan Island and a grim, reclusive father—I’d never received a compliment like that. Certainly not from a grown man, a man of mating age. I didn’t even *know* that kind of man, other than that he existed, a separate and untamed species, kept in another cage from mine on the opposite end of the zoo. And that was well enough with me. I had no interest in mating. Having survived such a childhood, I thought myself practical and resourceful—and I was, by God!—but not tender. Not susceptible to blandishment, and not susceptible to that particular kind of charm, the kind of charm you’re warned about in all the magazines: hazel eyes and a huntsman’s bones and an angel’s smile.

But now, at this instant, it turned out that I wasn’t immune at all. I was only innocent. Like a child who had never been exposed to measles, I thought I couldn’t catch them. That I was somehow stronger than all those weak, febrile children who had gotten sick.

I didn’t know how to answer him. I mumbled something. I forget what.

His smile, if possible, grew warmer. *Incandescent*, if I had to choose a



word for it, which I did only at a much later hour, when I had the time and the composure to think rationally about him. He said, looking fearlessly into my eyes, "All right, then, Miss Fortescue. Heroine of the hour. If you want patients so badly."

"Yes, we do," I said, but he had already turned and barked out something to someone, and down we went along the rows of cots, selecting patients for transport. He gave me six, along with their paperwork, and asked me again for the name of the hospital.

"It's a château, really," I said. "Near Marieux. It belongs to the de Créouville family. Mrs. DeForest arranged to lease it—"

"Who the devil's Mrs. DeForest?"

"Our chapter president."

"Your chapter president," he said, mock wearily, shaking his head. He was filling out the transfer papers with a beaten enamel fountain pen, using a medical dictionary as a desk. A small, sharp widow's peak marked the exact center of his forehead. "What would we do without ladies' committees?"

"A great deal less, I think."

He looked up and handed me the papers. "You're right, of course. God bless them all. I don't suppose you have an orderly with you?"

"No."

"Nurse?"

"There's just me."

"Just you. Of course." He turned and called out to the nearest man, who straightened away from a bandage and looked afraid. "Miss Fortescue . . . is that right?"

"Yes. Fortescue."

"Miss Fortescue from the American Red Cross has driven an ambulance all the way here from Marieux without an orderly, hell for leather, through mud and shellfire, in order to relieve us of some of our patients. Is Pritchard on duty?"

"No, sir. He's on rest."

"Fetch him up on the double and tell him we've got to escort six wounded

men to the Château de Créouville, in Marieux.” Then, to me: “You’ll bring us back in the morning, won’t you?”

“Of course.”

Back to the orderly. “And find Miss Fortescue a cup of coffee and a sandwich, while you’re passing the mess. She looks like death. Perfectly charming death, but death nonetheless. We shall have no further harm come to her, do you hear me? She is absolutely essential.”

“Yes, sir.”

I tucked the papers under my arm. “If I may say so, sir, *you* should get some rest. You look like death yourself.”

“It’s Captain Fitzwilliam, Miss Fortescue. As well I should. But I’m afraid I shall have to make do with a ride in an American ambulance instead. You’ll be ready to shove off in twenty minutes?”

“Of course.”

That was all. A final smile, and he turned away and headed off into the maze of rubber curtains that partitioned the far end of the barn, while I stood there, dripping and bewildered, scintillating, waiting for my coffee and sandwich, for Corporal Pritchard. For my six wounded British soldiers.

For Captain Fitzwilliam, in his greatcoat and gum boots, who wanted to inspect us personally.