

THE  
*London*  
RESTORATION



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

## HISTORICAL NOTE

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When you wander Cloth Fair in pursuit of St. Bartholomew the Great in London, you pass through a gatehouse, which is one of the oldest buildings in the city—dating to the time of the Great Fire. As a voracious reader of historical fiction, I often approach books in a similar manner to this gatehouse. As a gateway to the past. Hopefully capturing the essence and sensibility of a time long gone, while promoting further exploration. My most memorable fictional experiences inspire me to read more about the periods, places, and events I have encountered. I am not a scholar, rather a nerdy bookworm and enthusiast who has long wanted to make the London churches—both blitzed and non—a muse.

As a Canadian author writing the history of a foreign city I love, I recognize that my creation of this novel was conceived with historical liberties, often to the advantage of the world I wanted to create while appropriating a history I cannot personally speak to. My limitations, however, should not be a reflection of my deep inspiration or passion for this remarkable city, its people, and its resiliency. I wrote this book with reverence and awe but mostly to inspire you to pursue the history of London (not a hardship, I assure you) on your own terms.

So, let me start with a verifiable fact. My opa, Private Thomas Bruce Cann of Exeter, Ontario, served with the Royal Canadian Army, 24th Field Ambulance, 5th Armoured Division. He volunteered for the role of stretcher bearer because he never wanted to fire a gun. To our knowledge, he never did. I imparted this proud family history onto Brent Somerville. While Brent's division and

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European tour during the war are entirely of my own creation, the intensity and horror of his experiences, his postwar PTSD, and his camaraderie are entirely authentic.

## THE CHURCHES

Photos of couples marrying amidst rubble and parsons officiating services during the war years are plentiful and captured brilliantly. The parish churches, whole or maimed, were still a mainstay of a community in the midst of the upheaval of war. To add, the determination to rebuild was rampant. If one church had a piece that another did not in the midst of the chaos and destruction, they swapped. The rebuilt churches in London are a complicated and beautiful puzzle piece.

The grading system determining the heritage and preservation of London's history was imparted in 1947; however, long before its implementation, committees were established to consider the atrocities of the Blitz as well as the subsequent plans of action. There was a motion to leave the wrecked churches as monuments to their horrible devastation, but I assure you I am happy that this motion was largely unpassed. While beautiful gardens overrun the ruins of Christ Church Greyfriars and the Priory Church of the Order of St. John, Clerkenwell, in memory of loss, I truly treasure the rebuilt London churches. To the contemporary eye, they may wield the look of a patchwork quilt, bearing the scars of war, but the dedication to the architect's vision centuries later is commendable.

If you spend enough time in London, you wonder how Christopher Wren existed without a Starbucks—for such was his indefatigable drive! He is a true Renaissance man. His influence stretches far beyond London (look to Washington, DC, if you want to see Wren's distinctive architectural influence stateside . . . ). After the Great Fire, he was given royal permission to rebuild fifty-one

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of the churches destroyed. Twenty-three of these churches (as well as St. Paul's Cathedral) remain in the heart of the city's financial center; while many were destroyed during the Blitz, several were demolished in the nineteenth century to make way for modern urban development.

The reconstruction of the churches lasted for decades with many reopening for services as late as the 1960s, but the indomitable work of historians and architects as well as religious leaders and committees to recreate and honor Wren's vision provides a lasting memorial that you will immediately see when you visit the beautiful city.

Though London is a city I have sought several times, I spent ten days last fall specifically exploring the Wren churches (and their friends) and learned closely of the spirit of these remarkable buildings in honoring the intent of their architect while still advancing into the modern era and thus to eternity. I am not, alas, an architecture historian, so all errors in my portrayal of these beautiful structures are mine.

The St. Paul's Watch included volunteers who pledged their lives to a structure under Churchill's orders, and on the Longest Night (often called the Second Great Fire of London in December 1940) Churchill ordered that the cathedral be protected at all costs as integral to the battered city's morale. As such, St. Paul's became an icon of indomitable spirit. Until the 1960s, its un-Blitzed dome was the highest point in the city.

## KING'S COLLEGE

I confess wholeheartedly to creating courses, departments, and structures of the Strand campus of this institution to geographically suit the world I was rebuilding. Theology was not a course taught there, but having Brent teach there made a lot of sense for my story. Ah! The malleable wonder of fiction.

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### THE SOVIET THREAT AND ETERNITY

I love that in the earliest instances of the Cold War (a term coined by George Orwell who, ironically, wrote the tome so central to dystopian fiction), it was a war of “nerds” (as I joked with my editor). Academics and scientists and philosophers. A quiet war, at first, rooted in ideology. While everything (including Simon’s very liberal MI6 involvement) is fictional, the Cold War, the discovery of a weapon as brutal and devastating as the atomic bomb, and the rise of Communist sympathy was rampant and often hidden just beneath the surface. The Secret Intelligence Service at 54 Broadway used numerous locations throughout London for the passing of encrypted and top-secret messages. Hotels, the Old Vic Theatre, private clubs as well as churches—such as the Holy Trinity Church, Knightsbridge—became essential for clandestine meetings and drop-offs.

One of the aspects of the Second World War that has always fascinated me is how ordinary people were forced into extraordinary roles: often unprepared. Diana’s “recruitment” by Simon Barre as well as his method of procuring her for his Eternity hunch are, of course, fictional, but civilians were certainly used to gather intelligence.

In a similar way to Diana and Brent navigating a world of amateur espionage, I thought it likely that men swayed by the threatening Communist ideology may also try to play an integral role, albeit without knowing a sure way of the ropes.

### BLETCHLEY PARK

When I wandered Bletchley Park for research, I attempted to recreate the everyday life of the men and women for whom it became home. While the Government Code and Cipher School was mostly populated by women (a three-to-one ratio), there were men there—

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often of academic renown—who were assigned on account of their proficiency in mathematics and chess. The women, too, were often selected based on their educational background and proficiency in languages. It is quite likely that a woman of Diana’s talent in languages would have been assigned to Hut 3 in the capacity she was.

Both Gordon Welchman (in *The Hut Six Story*) and the BMP reports developed by the German Air Section at Bletchley speak to signal interceptions and the Y Sections or “ears” of Bletchley Park. While the three-man RAF Y Stations for the listening, decoding, and interception of German radio signals were based at Cheadle, Chicksands, and Kingsdown, I very much needed to keep Diana where she was, though it could be possible for Diana and Fisher to be stationed at the park listening for possible signals, intercepts, and communications over the airwaves. Once I decided that some of these could be interrupted by classical music, I was over the moon.

While I made up the Bletchley traitor that Simon Barre was assigned to find, there was actual traitorous activity within Bletchley Manor. The most famous being John Cairncross: a double agent, late of Cambridge, whose cryptonym was Liszt (after the classical composer). As of 1944, he worked for MI6.

## OLEUM MEDICINA

The wonderful thing about fiction is you can create a relic out of thin air. Prior Rahere is very much a real person whose fateful pilgrimage to Rome inspired him to consider the plight of impoverished Londoners and to found a priory and hospital near the Smithfield Market. Yet, I created that artifact and the rumor of his bringing it back to St. Bart’s. What is not fictional is the artifacts unintentionally exhumed when Luftwaffe bombs fell. So many priceless treasures from the churches surrounding the oldest gates and areas of Roman-discovered Londinium survive. A visit to London

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affords this glimpse into the past. I heartily recommend visiting the rebuilt church of All Hallows-by-the-Tower and St. Bride's, Fleet Street, which host some fascinating Roman relics from ancient London.

*The London Restoration* hopefully reflects my sheer passion for some of the world's most beautiful churches and my awe at the resilience of a nation to ensure that the powers of hell never prevailed against them. Yet, it is not an authoritative text. I encourage readers to visit my Goodreads page (my bibliography was far too extensive to include here) and pursue some of the themes, places, events . . . and churches.



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

## CHAPTER 1

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September 1945  
*Allied-Occupied Vienna*

While some adjusted to air-raid sirens and others to the lost light of blackouts, Diana Somerville never recovered from the absence of church bells. The war had taken the bells in London, the home she was impatient to return to, and certainly in Vienna, where she had been for the past five weeks. She'd never hear the resonant peal of the Pummerin, the booming bell cast in the eighteenth century and ruined several months previously at St. Stephen's Cathedral.

En route to a meeting with a man named Gabriel Langer, she looked up at the interrupted cathedral. While the structure was still recognizable, its famed crisscrossed roof had been incinerated. Diana imagined it as it might have been before the war.

As she passed one of the cream Baroque buildings unfelled by Luftwaffe bombs, *Wieder Frei!*—"Free Again!"—was plastered in colorful attribution to the new and mostly Soviet regime in a city quartered by Allied dominance between the British, French, Americans, and Russians. The city was still beautiful despite the propaganda, scars, and craters from the bombs.

How had the Soviets gone from a needed ally into MI6's most imminent threat?

Simon Barre had told her that the loudest voice in a time of devastation could blast through a war-torn city like cannon fire. Or the mournful toll of a church bell. She had been so preoccupied during her time at Bletchley Park and thereafter in this temporary city home that she hadn't paid as much attention to politics. Certainly

not with the depth Simon did in his clandestine world. He felt that allowing Communists to assume any power was as large a threat as the war they had just survived. If in a different way.

Diana strode down the sunny streets, occasionally squinting to blur the faces of the buildings so at least for a second her vantage was spared the damage caused by bombs dropped by the Allies, who now promised the city's free and bright future and reconstruction.

Vienna was not quite the city she once had imagined exploring, with cranes modernizing the otherwise historic skyline and the pedestrian thoroughfares of the Graben and Kärtnerstrasse marred by blockades that kept the rubble from tumbling onto the pedestrians. She'd imagined looping arms with her husband, Brent, and peering up at steeples, not waiting for the next directive from her friend and wartime colleague MI6 agent Simon Barre.

Simon said a new war was building: one that would require intelligence and the decryption skills she had honed during her work at Bletchley Park and the Government Code and Cipher School. But mostly he required her intuition and ability to read hidden messages: from the position of a column in a Christopher Wren church to the subtle interruption of a Mozart piece when her ears were attuned to unusual activity in a Luftwaffe flight plan intercepted by radio waves.

His pursuit of a Soviet agent named Eternity led Simon to believe an association existed between churches in Vienna and in London and the spread of the man's Communist influence. Simon needed to find Eternity. The man was rumored to possess a file containing information that could prolong the war. Or catapult the new war he spoke of into a certainty.

A file that men would kill for.

When Diana had protested that the war was over, Simon merely gave her a look she recognized from dozens of times when she asked a question about chess he was surprised she didn't know.

No one, of course, was better suited to search for the concealed

clues a church might hold than Diana Somerville, née Foyle. She *loved* churches. Especially those designed by Sir Christopher Wren. And as to recognizing the pattern of Eternity, the man used a signature: the mathematic symbol for infinity. Simon chose the code name when the foreign agent's activity seemed to involve churches. The eternal house of God on earth.

She had seen armed British soldiers overtake their portion of the divided city, had seen a non-Communist foreign minister appointed even as the collars of the Soviet officers bristled.

She had wandered age-old cobblestones in a dark waltz of silenced bells and deserted palaces, wondering what was shadow and what was her imagination. She'd witnessed the drawn faces of men in battered homburgs lined up for a cup of watered coffee at Julius Meinel while women sat with white-knuckled hands crossed in their laps at the Hauptbahnhof, waiting for their emaciated prisoners of war to exit the trains screeching into the station. As the city precariously balanced Hitler's oppressive Anschluss and the Allied indecision regarding next moves, it was a prime breeding ground for the Communist influence Simon was so intent on destroying.

Gabriel Langer, like Diana, was an ally. Simon introduced him as a proud Austrian university professor who had watched his city first captured by Hitler's regime and then divided when liberated by the occupying Allied forces. The last thing Langer wanted was to see his city torn apart again. She wasn't sure how Simon knew him, just that he was as influential as Simon believed she was.

Diana adjusted the brim of her red cartwheel hat, straightened her shoulders, and pursed her lips stained the same shade of crimson as her hat as she neared the heavy wooden door of Peterskirche, tucked between narrow buildings in its eponymous *Platz*. She would find Langer and together they would try to suss out Eternity.

Simon had intercepted a message the night before that linked Eternity—or one of his men—with a concert at Peterskirche. The concert gave her an opportunity to meet the man Simon so relied

on in Vienna just before she caught her three-hour flight back to London the following day.

The textbooks, dry lectures, and slides from her studying at King's College couldn't adequately encapsulate the opulent interior, nor could they breathe life into Mozart's Great Mass filling the *hochaltar* amidst gilded marble walls hosting numerous sculptures and inspiring the eye upward to its famed painted dome.

She wouldn't have known as much about music if she hadn't sat across from Fisher Carne for four years in a slatted hut in Bletchley, listening to German signals through the wireless and overhearing daily programs of religious and classical music. None of those experiences could compare to the live musicians who filled the sanctuary now with an explosion of sound. She savored the first bars of the *Grosse Messe* in C Minor as she scanned pews for her contact.

The Kyrie section swelled to the frescoes and tripped over the tile as voices filled every inch of the sanctuary. It was important for her to pay attention to the music. It might be a language beyond each note or phrase.

She spotted white-blond hair and a green collar three pews from the back as per her directive. She slid in beside Langer.

"Are you familiar with Mozart?" he asked.

"I know this piece." Diana cast a surreptitious look at the handbag she had placed beside her at an angle, ensuring the white-handled revolver was tucked away from view.

"A shame we have to hear it scaled back like this. Doubles in each of the vocal sections. Seems everything is rationed these days, even timpani and tenors," Gabriel remarked. She liked his soft Viennese accent and intelligent brown eyes.

"Mercy." He translated the lyrics accompanying the next bar. Diana kept her ears peeled to recognize a code or a message, to seek out a possible key in the architecture of the unbombed sanctuary. Simon had warned her of traitors who looked like friends. Those who balanced two worlds: depressed or destitute by war or unknowing

of what good or evil was. Langer, he assured her, was none of those things.

The soprano soloist's rich voice drew her focus.

"A lot about mercy," Langer continued. "Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy." His gaze swept the church's circumference. Perhaps he was trying to hear in lyrics what she was trying to hear in musical phrases: a clue to the identity of the man they were pursuing.

"In the Middle Ages," Diana explained in his language, "men believed if they built the great cathedrals, they would be given mercy. To build a church was to atone for a sin. They were given plenary indulgences and a fast route to heaven. The generations after them were indentured but promised a living. So the men built church after church, knowing they might never see the end. The fruit of their labor as their steeples grew higher and higher to heaven."

"You speak excellent German." Gabriel's gaze took to the fresco in the cupola depicting the *Coronation of Our Lady*, all while his dexterous fingers retrieved a notebook and pen from the inside of his coat. Casually, she opened her compact and smoothed a stray smudge of lip stain with a handkerchief she kept pristine in her handbag.

"My father taught me."

"And who is the architect of this church?" Between them he covertly scribbled something. Mozart swelled and the soloist was joined by the unison of the choir. He passed the note to her.

"Initially the plans were attributed to Montani." Diana didn't miss a beat. "Hildebrandt too. Then Dientzenhofer for the façade." She sought what his note said—*fourth pew on the right*—then crumpled the paper.

A man sat with his hat brim pulled low not two rows over and she shivered. While Simon assured her she was perfectly safe, she never crossed through the city without premonition. Perhaps it was leftover intensity from Bletchley where the Official Secrets Act and the constant warning about an accidental slip of integral

information hovered around her daily. Or maybe it was the tug of the Blitz at her heels.

Most likely, it was because of the rumors of what befell spies—both those trained and civilians—and the general sense of morbidity that hung over the city like a shadow. Simon assured her that she had allies. Diana, however, felt completely alone.

The music regained her attention and she recalled all Fisher had told her about the piece.

The gilt high pulpit was a gold and silver representation of the martyrdom of St. John of Nepomuk, the spandrels or triangles around the domed roof portraying the four evangelists.

“And you are returning to London now?”

Diana nodded.

“As you can see, Peterskirche was fortunate to remain intact while so many of our churches were not.” His lips slid into a rueful smile. “Perhaps if you tire of the churches in England . . . Who is the fellow, the one named for a bird . . . ?”

“Wren. Christopher Wren.”

Glazed with sadness, his brown eyes held hers. “Perhaps someday you will come back and visit our churches.”

“Perhaps.” Diana reached for her red hat. The Viennese—occupied or not—took great pride in their ability to charm and hold their guests—even amidst bombed churches, even as jagged cracks snaked over the gilt interiors of ivory Baroque buildings.

The conductor held his palm out to the soloist, and the concertmaster bowed. Diana joined the applause. The man with the hat they had been watching rose.

Langer held Diana back a moment with a light hand on her sleeve. “Let me go first.” He departed the church while Diana inched toward his pew, peering over the famed cherub carving on its back to see if anything had been left behind.

Finding nothing, she pushed through the heavy door and pressed her back against the curved ivory stone of the church’s exterior.

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She watched the audience trickle back into wrecked streets that stood in stark contrast to the preserved beauty of the church. The man with the hat was lost to her, though she was already running through a dozen possible reasons to stop and engage him should he appear. Anything to bring back to Simon since the music and the architecture left her without a message.

Several moments later as the throng thinned out and the sun disappeared behind the roof's green dome, Langer appeared.

"Well?"

He held a silver cigarette case out to her and she declined. He lifted one to his lips, struck a match against the side of the church, and lit the end. "Simon Barre loves using civilians. I've known the man several years now."

"As have I."

"You're as much a field agent as I am. Which is to say not at all. Whatever you did to catch Simon's eye during the war must have made a great impression."

"I cannot talk about what I did during the war."

Langer nodded. "And he will want favor after favor and you will know just enough to think you are helping with a greater cause. But mostly you will be . . . what is the English word?"

"Endangered?"

"Baffled. He never works in a cohesive line. He follows his instinct. And sometimes it leads to something like a beautiful concert and sometimes . . ." Langer dropped the cigarette and turned his heel over it. "It leads to nothing at all. So when you go back to your London, remember that whatever you promised him can make you feel heroic. Part of a worthy cause. And other times . . . well . . ."

Langer didn't need to finish the sentence. They shook hands and she walked away. Some things, including Simon Barre's methods, would never need translation.



Diana wove her way back to her temporary flat. Was she being too careful, looking over her shoulder every few steps? Truth was, she had no idea what she should sense as dangerous. And Simon had so little to give her.

An elusive Soviet agent with a penchant for making contacts around churches. Never far from a church. Diana was to tell Simon if she saw anyone at a church. If they set their cases down. If they left anything behind, from a newspaper to a telegram or a note. And to listen. Just as she had when she was at Bletchley in Hut 3, when the airwaves were filled with air raids and intercepted Luftwaffe signals. When anything from a German radio station to the BBC might be worth passing to the code breakers.

Diana had just set down her keys and gloves in the rented flat when the telephone rang. She smiled at Simon's voice on the other end. It called to mind chess and cocoa and late nights when he took her into his confidence. She told him of her current frustration that she hadn't been of much help at all.

"I am going home tomorrow," she said. "I've been here for five weeks and you have called in your favor. And now you're back in London before I am." She clucked her tongue. "So the next time we talk will be on British soil."

"Gabriel Langer is a good man."

"He seems so."

"I appreciate him much as I do you, Diana. Well, maybe not *as* much."

"I'm touched." She wound the telephone cord around her finger. "Not sure if it's helpful, but Fisher always talked about how Mozart's compositions were catalogued. The Köchel Catalogue." She listed the piece they had heard that afternoon. "And there was certainly someone who seemed suspicious to Langer there. But we got nothing out of him. If someone was trying to collect a message, could it be in the catalogue choice?"

"See why I need you?"

“Because we get along? Because I know everything about church architecture and because I am indebted to you and you know I have no choice?”

“There’s that. But you also think outside the lines and—”

“Because you’re following a trail outside of MI6’s jurisdiction?” Diana continued. “It’s not like you to go rogue, Simon.”

“I’m not going rogue. My team officially has men surveilling the known sympathizers and Soviet supporters in London. But if I can just prove that there’s someone else, that this file exists . . .”

“You keep mentioning this file.”

“Langer *saw* it, Diana. As did a former Special Operations Executive I work with now and then. I just need to prove it. And I need to find the man who is behind the collected information in it.”

“Off the record,” Diana translated. “With my help.”

Simon was silent for a moment. “Diana, this file is a link to an ideology that could ruin us. It’s why I am so determined to do my bit to stop it from spreading.”

“We fought *with* the Soviets.”

“I know that. But just because you’re allied in one line of thought doesn’t mean you are aligned in all. Even Hitler hated Communism.”

“If you truly think I can help . . .”

“Yes, I do. So let’s have a proper tea, shall we?”

“When?”

“The Savoy. Threeish. Day after next.”

“A proper tea . . . And then will you let me get back to my life? The war is over, as you well know.” But she could still imagine the look of exasperation he would give her. For Simon, there was always another war.

“Let’s see, shall we?”

“Simon, you’re infuriating.” But she couldn’t help but smile. Simon was trying to be evasive and professional, but she could hear the grin in his words.

“Am I?”

“You know you are,” she said in lieu of good-bye and rang off.

Diana waited before she dialed her husband’s number at the flat in Clerkenwell. She supposed it was her flat, too, though she had spent but a handful of time there before he shipped out to Belgium and she chugged to Buckinghamshire on a crowded train. She had been twenty-three then and he had just courted the right side of thirty. So young. Today she felt several centuries old.

While she dialed, she imagined the chiming tower of St. James’s next door while Brent set his satchel and fedora on the stand near the corner. Perhaps he would be mentally running through his earlier lecture at King’s College after wrapping his wonderful tenor around the courses on New Testament theology. While she had been in Vienna, he had slipped back into their life before the war.

Was he as lonely without her as she was without him? Would he fix himself a cup of tea then take out a sketchbook and work deft lines into dimension, shading churches so they breathed from the page? The prospect of seeing him excited her, which was why she was surprised when her hands wrung in anticipation of their meeting. Of their speaking.

She straightened her shoulders, inhaled, and dialed.

“Hello.”

Diana’s heart skipped a beat at the sound of his voice. “Brent.”

Several heartbeats, then a rigid intake of breath. “Diana.”

His voice reverberated through her, even though miles and years stretched between them. Such was their love story that it had to pick up long after other uniformed men and women found each other in long embraces.

While she had initially imagined announcing her return with a joy that made her trip over her words, she merely swallowed and said, “I’m coming home.”

## CHAPTER 2

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### *London*

One would think after surviving the resounding boom of artillery fire, the screams of dying men across the trenches, blaring air-raid sirens, and constant shouted commands, silence would be a reprieve. But to Brent Somerville, it was as deafening as the cacophony of war.

Through the vantage of his window seat on the double-decker bus, on his way to meet his wife at Charing Cross, he made out what was left of the once-majestic churches she loved in streets as familiar to both of them as breathing.

When Brent first fell for Diana Foyle, it was in a city of bell tolls and steeple chimes. Christopher Wren's poetry of plastered columns and distinctive lines defined every street around the old gates of London and beyond. Wren's influence served as a backdrop to their romance. The art entailing the highest point of the city skyline with the dome of St. Paul's on Ludgate Hill, the bells of St. Mary-le-Bow and St. Bride's tolling in friendly rivalry. It spoke to his nerves that he wondered at her reaction when she finally saw them again. Saw him again.

During the war she had been in Buckinghamshire doing translation work from numerous languages, including German, for the Foreign Office while he was hoisting stretchers and wading around murky trenches in Belgium and then Italy. She had spent her leave in the early days with him at arranged locations, saying little about her daily life, which suited him just fine. He didn't want to expose her to what met him daily through the dirt, blood, and artillery fire.

Once the war had ended and everyone else was returning home, she was still needed to continue her work and disappeared for a month. Five weeks, to be exact. No letters from her. No word from her superiors about her situation . . .

Photos didn't capture her smell or the way the wind tickled her hair; telephone calls were just rippled static and took the chime-like wonder from the voice of a girl who, in the earliest years of their acquaintance, never stopped talking.

During those long nights of waiting for the next battle, he would drift into nightmares, imagining the worst, or take out his sketch pad and capture a wounded church or a slice of the horror he experienced as he trudged after his unit. Then, there were the weeks of convalescence when his pain and flashbacks were secondary to his worry for her.

Two fingers on his left hand now melded into one, while a deep gash on his forehead faded into a scar he could just hide with his hair if he combed it right. Once the morphine wore off, he was merely miffed that she was so far away when hadn't they wasted too many years already?

The double-decker swerved around the remains of these churches and the jigsaw puzzle of wrecked Cripplegate. Wounded, scarred, and gutted, with moats of brick and uneven mortar. Signs spoke to the rebuilding efforts, and local politicians bandied about flyers fashioned with a hope as hard to come by as sugar, butter, bread, and tea leaves, which would be strained three times in a morning.

The newspaper headlines dominated by Churchill's certainty of stoic victory when Brent left now announced the triumphs and travails of the Labour Party elected by a landslide while Brent was still in a foreign hospital. He didn't know why the state of their wrecked city shook him as if he were solely responsible for the chaotic peace that stretched before him. Solely responsible for the London Diana would meet after so many years away.

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He smiled, remembering how he had dusted and cleaned his flat the night before they were married. But he couldn't scrub away the men with scuffed shoes and wilted homburgs limping from the neighborhood daily in search of jobs that would never be found. He couldn't polish or finesse the women waiting expectantly outside the bakery and butcher shops for hours only to leave defeated, their meager findings slung over their sunken shoulders.

Brent shifted in the bus seat and turned from his reflection in the window. He knew he shouldn't be self-conscious. That she would take London's scars as she took his own—a branding of war. He knew she would love him no matter what. After all, she had vowed as much until death parted them. But the longer he stayed alone in their flat, the more he formulated doubts.

Part of him wanted time to peel back and everything to be the same. Before a miscalculated step and an unexpected blast ignited his hand and marred his forehead. It did more than that, of course. It cost a life. But Brent wouldn't think of that now.

He trained his thoughts on Diana. She had been as certain to him as breathing. If she returned as changed as he was, would he love her in the same way? He felt like a traitor for even allowing those bleak thoughts to fill the space of his overcrowded mind.

Truth was, he wasn't used to being so close to another human, physically or otherwise. Four years of the ravages of war had built up barriers. He could retreat into himself far more deeply than he had before, even when crouched with men in a trench, or while freezing in a tent, or after a long stretch of convalescence. London had seemed a stranger to him the moment he stepped off the train weeks ago before tiredly adjusted the canvas bag on his good shoulder. If he had to readjust to his beloved city, how did that bode for Diana?

He reminded himself, as he had the night before, of how smitten Diana was when he taught her about all seven of the Greek forms of love. He might have to find a way to define each word again, having

spent so long alone, but he had seven forms at his disposal. Yes, he returned without having her here to welcome him. But she was here now. He would make sure that was enough.

The long, winding Strand pierced the heart of Westminster's artery. Exiting the bus, Brent took the road to Charing Cross at a quick diagonal. He tried to meet the gaps in the well-known neighborhood's unfamiliar new façade as she might. At least until he saw her.

Diana stood facing away from him, framed by the large statue of an Eleanor Cross. Diana's long fingers tugged the brim of her broad-rimmed red hat. He placed his uninjured hand on her shoulder.

She spun on her heel and his heart twisted at her eyes glistening in a beautiful face. "Brent."

Turned out he loved her more than his pride, because for all he had practiced being calm and collected and imagined holding her at arm's length in punishment for her radio silence the last five weeks, the joy on her face obliterated every last instinct for reservation. "Hello." He smiled and adjusted the tie tucked into his vest, thinking of how to kiss her senseless without startling her.

He hadn't kissed her in so long. Memories had taunted him across the Front, particularly on morphine-addled nights in the hospital wing. He could feel her breath on his collarbone and the tips of her fingers at the back of his neck.

Brent leaned in quickly and she leaned back, studying him. He took a step forward and landed on her shoe. She gave a forced laugh, then rose a little on her toes to kiss him just as he turned his head so her nose collided with his cheekbone. When she tried again and met his lips, he barely kept himself in check before melting. But this was not the time. He wouldn't start a physical conversation when he hadn't heard but a word from her lips.

"There's no word, Greek or otherwise, for this awkwardness," he muttered, pulling away.

"Pardon?"

Brent straightened and took her hand. "Diana, how have you

been?" Her blonde hair was half hidden by her red hat and though she was pale, her blue eyes sparkled.

She let out a nervous laugh. "How have I *been*?"

"I'm sorry . . . I just . . ."

"I left my cases in a locker inside the station. I was dying for a cup of tea. And I'm famished. I was determined we could find something to eat before setting off for home. I hope you don't mind."

Brent hated small talk. "Not in the least. The larder is in a rather dismal state."

He wanted to say a thousand things. Ask a thousand questions. Instead, he said, "Tea?"



It was always tea. On their wedding night. Tea. At learning he would ship out as the church towers crumbled beneath German bombs unhindered by the searchlights and barrage balloons. Tea. For any insecurity she had about their reconciliation, three letters in a small word and she felt safe. And more tea.

She was almost surprised at how easily he gave in to the suggestion that they return to a common meeting place. To Brent's credit, he didn't wonder why she hadn't taken a taxi from the airport directly home. Then she remembered she hadn't told him *how* she was getting to London, just that she *would* be there. The longer she could put off the flat familiar to her only from a few dinners during their courtship and the first excited hours of their wedding night before the sirens drove them out the door and into a cold Tube station shelter, the better.

She shouldn't be nervous to see her husband. She should be elated. But the years apart had taken away all the well-meaning shoulds and left nothing but mere survival in their stead. She shouldn't have noticed the garish scar he carefully tried to hide, but she did. She shouldn't have let her eyes dart immediately to his

damaged left hand either. So much for shoulds and shouldn'ts. There was always tea.

Here now on neutral ground, she couldn't see the flashes of whatever horrors were branded on his mind any more than she could decode a fuzzy radio signal on a stormy Bletchley night.

Diana cleared her throat. "I cannot tell you how wonderful it is to be home. I know that . . . Was it arduous to get back?"

"I was still in hospital, as you know, and then the demobilization efforts took a blasted long time. And you know from my letter that I started back at King's a fortnight ago."

He could command entire lecture halls with that voice, disseminating his perspectives on Scripture. Could command her whole heart.

From across the table in the tea shop, the sun played with Brent's features as a particularly stubborn cloud stole away beyond the pane. A few gray strands at his temples offset his tawny hair, and it rippled reddish gold when the sun struck it a certain way. His green eyes were flecked a little with gold, and amber rimmed their irises. The creases at the corners of his eyes seemed caused by exhaustion rather than laughter.

"I bet the routine is a nice change," Diana said stupidly when no other words formed, turning the end of the sentence up as if in question. But he didn't answer.

She flicked her gaze down at his left hand. He hadn't told her the extent of his injuries. The sight of his index and middle fingers sewn together into one big digit in the middle of his long hand hurt her as if she had felt their pain. He noticed her stare and tucked his hand under the table.

She wanted to close the years between them. To tell him that she had met a man who would outdo even Brent at crossword puzzles. That she had . . . It would be too easy for the secrets to spill out.

The tea arrived with a plate of sandwiches and tarts. Despite

her growling stomach she was nervous to pinch a sandwich before he helped himself.

“King’s. Yes,” he said finally. “I think they’re enjoying the classes.”

She didn’t recognize this strange shell of herself, so why should she expect him to take the reins? Sure, he had served at the Front, bearing stretchers across unthinkable atrocities while she was tucked safely in a hut away from the bombs. Was it the truth about her time away from him that kept her so formal? Diana folded her hands in her lap, unsure of what to say.

For all he knew she merely sat in the Foreign Office and translated. No intercepted Luftwaffe codes. No Vienna. It was the secrets she was forced to keep from him that held her back. In the same way she assumed his scars and experiences kept him from meeting her halfway.

Brent gingerly tilted the plate toward her. She took a sandwich and a tart, then arranged them on her plate. Their eyes met over the tiered tray. For a moment she found the Brent she knew and her heart raced at the familiarity. But he pulled away, reaching for a sandwich.

He seemed more interested in chasing a crumb around his plate than he was in eating. “The students are finding it hard to readjust.”

Diana’s stomach growled again as a reminder she had been too nervous to eat that morning, or even the night before.

“Do you . . . do you have what you need?” Brent’s brow furrowed. “Did you get enough to eat?”

“You know I can’t eat when I’m nervous.” Diana shoved a triangle of sandwich in her mouth. Who was she to sit here fingering delicacies and taking dainty bites? They were married, for heaven’s sake. She spun the tier and selected an egg-and-cess sandwich.

Brent straightened his shoulders and made long work of eating a cheese sandwich. “Strange we should be nervous around each other.”

Diana swallowed as a memory formed: his finger brushing her

cheek and over her collarbone, catching the lace collar of her nightgown. She lingered in the past a moment before blinking back to a cold table of strangers enjoying a simple repast. She wanted to curve into his side and sob into his neck and learn every horrible thing he had experienced. They had always fallen so easily into each other. “Talking as if we didn’t know each other?”

“I don’t know where you were the past five weeks.” Brent tried to be stern but sounded merely hurt instead. “And now you’re back. I thought you would be here when I returned.”

“I was doing a favor for a friend.”

“A friend I don’t know.”

“We lived very different lives the past four years, Brent, and we met new people.” Diana sighed. It was one thing for her to present her Simon-assigned role to strangers in Austria, quite another when sitting across from her husband. “There are a few committees—even one formed by the Royal Institute of Architects—now dedicated to ensuring our architectural treasures and history are preserved. They began when the bombs started to fall. There will be a new grading system to classify the importance and heritage of each building, even as some modern adjustments are made. And I thought that, well, with the Wren churches I can provide notes that account for the obvious changes that need to take place but also ensure they are true to Wren’s original vision.”

“Some will see a crack. A bombed building.” The right side of his mouth twitched into a small smile. “You will see a map and imagine the potential in the rubble.”

“I have carte blanche access and compensation even to those places blockaded by city work crews because . . . a friend gave me a special letter. So I can provide aesthetic and historical notes to use in the meetings for their new designation.” She sipped her tea. “I will take notes and pair them with my knowledge of the churches as they were as well as how they might function in the future. Right now, they’re a huge puzzle and it’s a monumental undertaking.”

She scratched the tablecloth with her thumbnail. “It’s what I want to focus on, Brent. Now that I’m back.”

“You should be finishing your degree . . .,” Brent started but didn’t get far as she warmed to her subject.

“Just like Christopher Wren and his stonemasons after the Great Fire. Walls and windows and pews! All of those tombstones worked into the walls and floors. I’ve missed my churches, Brent. And if you come with me, you can give me a spiritual perspective! Even the churches that were bombed are still holding services and concerts and weddings.”

“You’re starting to sound like yourself.” His hands clasped the edges of the table.

“Like myself?” She arched her right eyebrow.

“Give the girl a chance to talk about Wren churches and . . .”

She smiled at her plate before she snatched up another sandwich. “You told me that architecture is as sure a form of worship as a hymn, psalm, or prayer.”

A smile toyed with his lips. “I clearly have to stop telling you things.”

Diana sank into his teasing tone as she might an old cardigan, and her shoulders relaxed. “You know their stories. You know their symbols. You know why the quires are in the shapes of crosses and why the baptismal fonts are near the back doors, and the significance of the high altar catching the eastern sun.”

“So do you, Diana. You hammered me with those facts endlessly before your exams. I didn’t even know what a quire was before I met you.”

“And you the vicar’s nephew,” Diana said before clearing her throat. “The quire is the area of a church providing seating for the clergy and church choir located between the nave and the chancel,” she recited, mimicking her most studious sessions.

“Remember those cards?” Brent said. “I would write a definition on one side . . .”

“And I would write the name of the church on the other.” The memory warmed her. “I tried to draw steeples.”

“I stopped you, thank heavens. Especially when you insisted that every illustration for our immediate purpose required a parish cat.”

Diana laughed. “I never had your artistic talent. It was one of the reasons I fell in love with you.”

She watched for his response and exhaled at his softening features. The singe of his lips before at Charing Cross, the slight tremor when their mouths first met, the hitch in his breath when he pulled away, the rest of the kiss lying dormant in his eyes. All the promise she needed was right there.

“Come, let’s leave my cases in the locker for a while. We’ll go to All Hallows. You pledged your life and soul to me there. It’s a perfect place to start rebuilding.” She crossed her palm over her heart. “I don’t want to go in and take notes just about stone.”

“And now with all these dramatic pleas . . .”

“But what’s more”—she laid down her trump card—“do you really want me roaming around a bombed church alone at night?” She gazed out the window, the sky gray and heavy with rain clouds. Evening was tugging fast at its heels.

She compelled him with slightly pouting lips and raised eyebrows.

Brent’s eyes softened when she covered his forearm with her newly manicured fingernails, leaned over the table, and widened her eyes after seeing the desired effect reflected in his own. “You never could resist that look.”

“Turns out I can’t resist you after all.” He shrugged, his lips creased in a partial smile.

Diana smoothed her skirt. “What does that mean? You *want* to resist me?”

“What other choice did my pride have, Diana? I wondered if you had changed your mind since it took you so long to come back.

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See, when you spend enough nights pacing, your mind makes up all sorts of things. Especially after so long apart. About a marriage that took place just before our worlds drove us apart. About a girl you thought you knew and certainly loved until she went missing for five weeks just as you were sorting out how you could possibly return to life again. After where you had been. After all you had seen.”

His injured hand was on the table and no longer hidden in his lap. She grabbed his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, the wedding ring on his fourth, still-whole finger pressing into her palm. “I will never change my mind.”



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