

THE
CALL
OF THE
WRENS

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MUSE

JENNI L. WALSH



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The Call of the Wrens

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Walsh, Jenni L., author.

Title: *The call of the Wrens* / Jenni L. Walsh.

Description: [Nashville] : Harper Muse, [2022] | Summary: "Based on real history, *The Call of the Wrens* explores the bonds of sisterhood and love even when all hope seems lost"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022015099 (print) | LCCN 2022015100 (ebook) | ISBN 9781400233885 (paperback) | ISBN 9781400233908 (epub) | ISBN 9781400233915

Subjects: LCSH: Great Britain. Royal Navy. Women's Royal Naval Service (1917-1919)--Fiction. | Great Britain. Royal Navy. Women's Royal Naval Service (1939-1993)--Fiction. | World War, 1914-1918--Participation, Female--Fiction. | World War, 1939-1945--Participation, Female--Fiction. | LCGFT: Historical fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3623.A446218 C35 2022 (print) | LCC PS3623.A446218 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6--dc23/eng/20220411

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022015099>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022015100>

Printed in the United States of America

22 23 24 25 26 LSC 5 4 3 2 1

CHAPTER I

MARION

July 1940
West Devon

The knock came at dusk. Marion knew the rhythm of it instantly.
Slow—quick-quick-slow—quick-quick.

The pattern had been conceived over twenty years ago after a long night of revelry at the dance hall. Eddie, Sara, and Marion had fox-trotted for hours. Cheeks flushed, Sara had hung on her current beau's arm and instructed Eddie to rap the melody on the boys' cabin door before retiring for the evening.

The knock had become a bit of an inside joke, used liberally, even on random doors.

Now it had to be Sara calling on Marion.

It wouldn't be Eddie.

Marion didn't rise from her chair, the darkness of the room all around her.

"Marion, I know you're in there." She heard Sara's pixie voice, a voice that was once as familiar to Marion as a sister's.

The bustle of the chickens outside filled the silence that followed.

Sara tried again. "The window's open. You'd close it up tight if you were working at the library."

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There was another beat of fowl-filled din, until the doorknob jiggled. Marion always kept it locked. Not that anyone ever came all the way out to her small cottage. Which was the way she liked it.

“You leave me no choice,” Sara called. “I’ll come in through the window if I must.”

Marion rolled her head from one side to the other, stiff from sitting since her afternoon tea. There was no stopping Sara, that bullheaded woman. She did this every few years, fluttering into Marion’s life and checking in on her, reminding Marion of the bond they had, reminding her of Sara’s betrayal, ultimately stirring up painful memories.

Even now, hearing the knocked melody, hearing Sara’s voice, knowing they shared an unspoken guilt, one Marion couldn’t forgive Sara or herself for, made Marion press a hand to her abdomen, as if she needed to physically hold herself together. Marion’s fingertips touched the softened paper she habitually kept within her dress pocket, a reminder—a self-inflicted comeuppance—for what she once had to do.

A tightness stretched across Marion’s chest. Those moments, those feelings, that angst should’ve been left in Marion’s past. Why wouldn’t Sara allow it? Why did Sara insist on inserting reminders into Marion’s present? More so, why must Sara insert herself, literally, into Marion’s home?

She heard a stack of books topple by the window, the window Sara had undoubtedly just climbed through. Marion kept a stack there. She kept one beside her chair. She kept stacks nearly everywhere within her four walls.

Sara’s uneven footsteps maneuvered through Marion’s cottage, until there she was.

A woman who’d once been a fixture in Marion’s life. A heavy-handed fixture at that.

Sara had aged since she'd last visited Marion, but she still held the same lithe figure and heart-shaped face. The scar next to her eye, given to her by Marion, could easily blend with her laugh lines if Sara had a mind for laughing, though at the moment it appeared she did not.

Marion didn't use any words to greet her. She didn't stand. She remained in her chair in front of the unlit hearth, a perfectly positioned beam of light hitting the novel in her lap. That evening she'd chosen *Lolly Willowes*, a character with whom Marion felt a peculiar kinship, both middle-aged spinsters, both having suffered great losses that upended their lives.

In the novel the character Laura, or Lolly, made a pact with the devil for her freedom. *Though was she ever truly free?* Marion wondered. She released a long sigh as Sara saw to opening the heavy curtains.

"There," Sara said, dusting her hands together. "Adequate light."

Within a large cage atop a pedestal table, a pigeon cooed, as if saying hello to an old friend. Traitor.

"I hadn't expected to see your bird again," Sara said, taking on a softer tone, making her way deeper into the room. "My father's pigeons rarely lived past fifteen. But 486 is a special bird, isn't he?"

Sara stopped beside Marion, her arm raising as if she meant to stroke Marion's hair. Instead, Sara clasped her hands together at her middle.

"I'm fine," Marion said abruptly. Her voice croaked, the first she'd used it in days. Over the years, she'd become learned on her condition. Being in the midst of an uneasy social situation all but froze her tongue. Otherwise, talking or not talking was at her own discretion. She generally spoke as a means to an end. To Sara she said, "I'm eating. I walk daily. I work at the library on my appointed days. Even 486 is doing fine, as you can see. Good on you for checking on the hermit. Go home to your family, Wren Brown."

Marion had purposely spoken in a bitter tone and intentionally used Sara's more formal title. Sara glanced at 486 again and ignored Marion's attempt to put distance between them. "I am in fact coming to you as Wren Brown."

Despite herself, Marion upturned her chin to better see Sara. These days it took a lot to pique Marion's interest, usually only stories and moments written into the pages of a book, where a happy ending was nearly always promised. There was a time when she thought her own was as good as guaranteed.

Marion had once put so much stock in serving as a Wren. Being a part of the Women's Royal Naval Service had driven her, to a fault.

But that'd been a long time ago.

The war had ended.

The Wrens disbanded.

So why was Sara coming to her as Wren Brown now?

If she knew Sara, Marion only had to wait for the woman to continue. And she did, asking Marion, "Have you kept up with the happenings? There's another war on."

There's a war on.

Hadn't Marion heard that many times before? Hadn't that been the beginning of the end?

Sara stared at Marion another few beats, neither of them blinking, before Sara looked away and studied the small room, her gaze zeroing in on a stack of books beside Marion. She'd sit there, Marion knew. Nowhere else for her to do so. As predicted, Sara perched on the stack, leaned closer. "My children are safe with my parents. But I've joined up again as a Jenny. The Wrens are back on. I think you should return with me."

Sara was slow to say more. Did she suspect Marion was reliving her betrayal? Or was Sara hesitant for another reason, as if there

was something she was leaving unsaid that went beyond their secrets? Again, Marion's hand ticked toward the yellowed document in her dress pocket. She had half a mind to ask Sara what she was after. The other half simply wanted to be left alone.

"Please go, Sara." Marion wanted nothing to do with a second war.

But Sara didn't take her leave. "I'll retire here for the night. It's too late to travel."

Sara pulled free the throw blanket strewn over the back of the very chair in which Marion sat and proceeded to an armchair in the corner by the bird.

By the third *thud* from Sara's removal of books from the cushion, Marion was on her feet. She retreated to her bunk, knowing her memories would travel through time until she was back in Birmingham. Back to where it all began. To Marion's desire to be wanted, the beginning of her downfall.



March 1914

Birmingham

"Did you hear me, Marion?" Sister Margaret stood in front of Marion's chair. "I said, if it's any consolation, has anyone told you that your name means 'wished-for child'?"

Wished-for child.

Hearing those words almost brought a young Marion's head up from *Jane Eyre*. But she kept on reading, without acknowledging Sister Margaret's sentiment.

Children can feel, but they cannot analyse their feelings; and if the analysis is partially effected in thought, they know not how to express the result of the process in words.

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That last part. Marion read Jane's thoughts again.

... they know not how to express the result of the process in words.

Marion had never spoken to another human being, not that she could remember, in her fourteen years and her many different homes. The memory of one of her earliest so-called homes was jumbled, almost as if Marion were seeing herself instead of possessing her own body. She'd been a babbling three-year-old, her papers stated. But then Marion had been surrounded by so many new faces, too many faces, whipping in front of her. Shouting, screaming. She'd been unable to form any words, as if her facial muscles had turned to stone of their own accord. At her feet, a wetness puddled on the ground. She turned and ran. Where, Marion didn't remember. But it had been dark where she hid. Her socks had been wet.

Later, when she was found by a pleasant enough nun, Marion had chosen to continue not to speak. She'd chosen not to talk every single day since. Her mutism, as she'd heard the doctors call it, was involuntary in situations where Marion held a lack of control or was thrust into the center of attention. Otherwise, in moments where she didn't experience paralyzing fear, Marion simply had no desire to gift that part of herself to another human being, who'd soon be nothing more than another memory. Another nun, another priest, another housemother, another foundling. A carousel of faces, coming and going, gone too quickly.

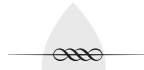
Ironic, what Marion read next: *For one thing, I have no father or mother, brothers or sisters.*

Sister Margaret's words that Marion was a wished-for child might've meant something if she hadn't just told Marion she was being relocated to yet another orphanage in the morning. Sister Margaret, with her expressionless face, didn't look like she'd cry a second over

Marion leaving. It'd be one less mouth to feed, one less child to clothe, to house, to educate.

Wished-for child? Marion thought not.

But Sister Margaret had fed her, clothed her, housed her, educated her, so for those reasons Marion raised her head and smiled at this small act of kindness before she went and packed her few belongings.



"She's a mute," Marion heard whispered as she took her first steps into St. Anne's Home for Boys and Girls. Sister Margaret had just handed Marion off to Sister Florence, who now edged her deeper into the entrance hall.

Usually there was little excitement about the arrival of someone of Marion's age, not like there was with the younger kids. It made it easier. It made Marion feel less like stone when only a few children turned up with a quick hello. But now Marion's cheeks flushed and her brow hardened from the many eyes upon her. As if she were the newest act to come to Small Heath with the Sanger's Circus. She'd never actually been to the circus, but Marion had seen a troupe's arrival to London one time. They'd had a parade to announce themselves, with a menagerie, a military band, an elephant, over fifty horses, and a collection of "living human curiosities."

For the group of kids standing before Marion, peering between and over each other, Marion was one of those curiosities.

The Wordless Waif.

See the girl who has never spoken a word. Not one. Never a grunt or groan. Nor a laugh. Try as you may.

At each home she'd lived in, the other children *had* tried, making

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it a game to cajole something out of Marion, generally a cuss. But soon they'd see Marion was not going to give in to their antics, and they'd tire of her.

Moreover, Marion didn't intend to play with them at all, shaking her head at marbles and Kick the Wick.

Marion would read. She was a reader. Her friends were the always-present Jane Eyre, Anne Elliot, and the Dashwood sisters.

She'd made the mistake of getting close to another girl once before, silently playing dolls and cards. The girl had even enticed Marion to play tag. Marion let herself giggle softly at the girl's jokes, a first for her. One morning on the loo, Marion even whispered her name, Caroline, for only her own ears to hear.

"Caroline . . . Caroline."

But then Caroline had been adopted a few days later. Marion hadn't picked up a book the entire time they played together. But after Caroline left, Jane Eyre was still there, waiting for Marion.

In St. Anne's foyer Marion stood ramrod straight, a small chalkboard hung around her neck. As the other children looked on, she hugged her small satchel to her chest to hide the slate but also in a protective manner. She had *Jane Eyre* inside her bag. Marion had pilfered the book three orphanages ago.

Beyond her book, the bag's contents consisted of only two more articles: the gingham cloth Marion had been found in, which she'd guessed to be a portion of a woman's dress, and a cheap brooch that had been attached to the blue-and-white fabric. Marion was certain that if the jewelry had been of worth, it never would've landed in her hands. As far as the scrap of cloth, lonely days and nights had left Marion to imagine the young mother who'd torn the skirt of her dress to wrap and discard an unwanted newborn.

Perhaps the effort to keep Marion warm had meant a portion of

her mother once cared for her. Or perhaps the scrap of fabric was a hastily executed afterthought, motivated by guilt from the fact it'd been a cold December day. In either case, she was abandoned.

One of the older girls, probably close to Marion's age, approached her in the entrance hall of St. Anne's and said hello.

Even if Marion wanted to, which she didn't, she felt herself unable to respond to the girl. Not with all those eyes on her. Especially not with how the girl widened her eyes in a mocking manner. The others found this funny. Sister Florence tsked.

Marion locked her gaze on the tiled floor. With relief, she watched the girl's shoes backpedal to the semicircle she'd come from. Sister Florence laid pressure on Marion's back. Marion stepped forward, slightly raising her head again, including the knees of the other children in her line of sight.

A boy with a hole in his trousers stood in front of her next. He extended a hand. "I'm Edward." He waited, his hand still outstretched.

There was a time when the idea of engaging with a peer and returning the gesture would've seemed hopeless, too overwhelming. But Marion had been in this position many times, so she focused on only his face and, ignoring the others, took a deep breath and slowly shook his hand.

The others snickered, their presence flooding her again.

Marion caught the roll of Edward's eyes before he turned to show his disapproval to the others. They fell silent, with the exception of one girl who tittered behind her hand.

To Marion, he continued, as if nothing had happened, "But everyone calls me Eddie."

Marion held no plans to call him anything, let alone Eddie. Beneath a mop of red hair, he was all arms, teeth, and freckles.

At that, Sister Florence clapped her hands once, a folder with

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Marion's name on it tucked beneath her arm. "Now that we've welcomed Marion, off to breakfast. It's on the table."

Marion was quickly forgotten, thank the Lord, and she felt the muscles in her face soften and become her own again.

Sister Florence reached for Marion's bag. "I'll just put this upstairs in the girls' wing. Fifth bed on the right, next to little Millie."

Marion hesitantly let go of her meager belongings.

More slowly than the others, she walked into the dining hall. It wasn't unlike her other homes. Six or so long tables. Twenty or so children at each table. There was a short line of children waiting for a free spot to sit.

Edward was in the line, joking and jostling with the others there. He saw Marion approaching and offered her a toothy smile. His friendliness made her uncomfortable. She didn't smile back, yet he seemed nonplussed by her cold reaction.

It was clear the others were drawn to him. In line waiting to eat, Edward was holding court. *Magnetic* was a word for him. But as Marion dragged her feet toward the queue, she yearned to maintain her distance, as if they were both two souths or two norths. She kept her focus on her shoes. Embarrassment coursed through her. She wished her footwear was more remarkable. Fewer holes. Tighter stitching.

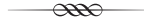
His weren't much better, but still, it seemed he'd been better looked after.

Soon a seat was vacated for Edward, and he sat to eat.

Marion shuffled forward in the queue, her hands balled at her sides, until one of the sisters motioned her toward a newly vacated spot. Of course it was beside Edward.

Now Marion's porridge was the most interesting thing she'd ever laid eyes on. Fortunately Edward was caught up in the happenings

around them—watching one boy use his spoon to launch his breakfast onto another boy's face—and Marion's presence went generally unnoticed. Splendid.



After breakfast Marion found herself in the common room, where bookshelves defined one of the corners. There were more books than most places she'd lived. She was pleased about that. Marion planted herself in the corner, right on the floor, her feet crossed at the ankles, her dress neatly draped over her legs.

Other children milled about. Marion felt their glances and some of their stares, but they otherwise paid the Wordless Waif little mind.

At random, she plucked a book from a shelf. It was a game Marion liked to play.

Emma.

She flipped to the beginning.

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.

Marion cocked her head, thinking, *Hello, Emma. Well, aren't we strangers? I'm not certain I like you yet. It may be some time before we're good friends.*

Shoes paused just within her line of sight.

But then they were gone.

Marion flicked her gaze up to watch Edward walking toward the draughts table, then returned to her book. Marion read again the next day too. Edward paused in front of her again, this time longer. As she

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resumed reading, his laugh, while he kept company with the other boys, filtered into her corner. He glanced her way.

Could his interest be in her? Or was it in one of the many books she was blocking? Marion was lolling in front of the bookcases, occasionally watching the children from behind the safety of her book. In all her orphanages she'd come to recognize something: The girls generally paired off or formed tiny clusters, sometimes merging to create larger groups to engage in this or that. The boys likewise seemed to have a favorite chap, but they usually tumbled around together like a pack of wolves. Marion hadn't yet noticed with whom Edward was most chummy.

It'd be odd if he didn't have a best mate. She thought of him again as magnetic, everyone and everything pulling toward him.

Marion herself always felt more of a repellent, after the novelty of being a "living human curiosity" quickly wore off. Which it already had, it seemed, with the other children. But perhaps not yet with Edward. With so little attention paid to her, it'd been easy to settle into her corner and escape into a book, most of the novels advanced for Marion's age.

She'd been educated in the three Rs of writing, reading, and arithmetic more than most other orphans in these places on account of her mutism. Way back when, when it first became apparent she wouldn't speak, a nun had held a bamboo cane and a writing utensil mere inches from Marion's nose.

"You will communicate," she'd been told. *"Only one of these needs to be used."*

Marion had chosen the writing utensil. She learned to write. She learned to read. And she had learned that if she didn't want the cane, she'd use the small chalkboard she'd been given.

Now Marion saw the special consideration that'd been given to

her education as a grace. Where would she have been without her books?

On the third day, Edward's shoes stopped in front of Marion. This time Edward knelt. He leaned in conspiratorially, whispering even, "Have you been getting on all right?"

She debated not looking up, but Marion placed her finger on her spot in *Emma* and met his eyes. They were green, and her mind instantly conjured the Loch Ness Monster.

Hmm, was Nessie even green? Or was that just how Marion had imagined the creature? She turned toward the shelf to her right, wondering if there was any literature on Nessie.

Then Marion realized herself and turned back to Edward. He was eyeing the slate around her neck. Did he expect Marion to answer his question?

His green eyes seemed to smile. "What are you . . . around thirteen? Fourteen?"

She nodded.

"Well, which is it? Thirteen?"

Marion shook her head.

"Fourteen then. Older than me by a year." He snapped his fingers playfully. "Well, I think I'm thirteen. No one is sure. At my first orphanage, they lined me up against some of the other boys to try to see how old I was. Two, they decided back then." He shrugged. "They must've written it all down in my papers because at a later home they told me the story as if it were a funny way to figure me out. I'm not sure it's funny, though."

Marion shook her head. It wasn't comical. It was sad not knowing where you came from or how old you truly were. She knew all too well. Her own age had also been hypothesized. As her story went, she'd been left on a hospital's doorstep in little more than her nappy

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at one minute after midnight on the first of January at the turn of the century. Had it been a fresh start for the woman who'd birthed her? Had she been trying to erase everything prior to 1900, including Marion's existence? Marion would never know. But since she was still jaundiced, Marion was assumed to be days old, and she had been given the birthdate of her abandonment.

She supposed she and Edward were fortunate to know at least some of their stories, though. Many didn't have papers that followed them from home to home.

Edward gave a departing pat on his knees, then stood, brushing wavy hair from his eyes. "Marion," he began. It was startling to hear her name coming from another child. Usually it was only the nuns who spoke to her. "Can I come talk to you again? I've told the others to leave you be. But would it be okay? I like talking to you."

A peculiar thing to say, as she hadn't yet said anything to him in return. But Marion found herself nodding. This exchange had been harmless enough. But then she remembered Caroline and how she'd let herself come to enjoy the girl's company. Marion's head changed directions.

Edward chuckled, then closed his eyes. "Too late. I only saw the yes." He backed away, his lids still tight.

A laugh slipped from Marion.

"Heard that too!" he said.

Marion's hand flew to her mouth. She held it there, covering a smile that surprised even her.

CHAPTER 2

EVELYN

April 1936
Weybridge

Mr. Orwell sat beside Evelyn in her father's Buick. She was wary of his brown suit. Father always said the color brown denoted a keen sense of duty and responsibility, someone who took his obligations very seriously. Evelyn's mother, on the other hand, found the color annoyingly dull and preferred to dress Father in lighter spring-time blues and grays and in handsome vertical stripes.

Evelyn hoped Mr. Orwell was neither annoyingly dull nor excessively judicious.

"You may start," he said flatly.

Evelyn pressed the accelerator and began to travel down the long drive of her family's estate, where she'd practiced endlessly, testing the limits of her father's automobile in preparation for this very day.

Did Mr. Orwell know her mother had originally suggested that Evelyn take the test for drivers with a disability? Evelyn had fought her on it, and Evelyn had won. She was undergoing the same test her peers were taking.

Earning a driver's license was more than obtaining a piece of paper that claimed, "Evelyn P. Fairchild is hereby licensed to drive a Motor

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Car or Motor Cycle.” It meant freedom. It meant having the ability to zoom across this earth, after so many years of being immobile. It meant she was *fit* to drive.

Evelyn sucked in a breath. She and Mr. Orwell were not a mile down the road and she had already grazed a curb. Mr. Orwell’s hand shot to the car’s ceiling for support. She quickly apologized, citing nerves, and bit back reminding him how well she’d handled the choke and ignition lever when they’d begun. Evelyn had even announced when she thought they’d reached a good operating temperature and how she’d be switching the choke to a slightly leaner mixture of air and fuel.

“*I do believe that’s the proper level for ideal fuel consumption,*” she had said. But had her *thwack* of the curb dismissed all his goodwill?

She glanced at Mr. Orwell again, not daring to take her eyes off the paved road or an approaching lorry for more than a heartbeat. Mr. Orwell wasn’t holding on anymore. An improvement.

Evelyn added an even sunnier smile to her expression, taking care not to let herself look too enthusiastic. She debated small talk. Decided against it. The lorry passed. She maneuvered gracefully around a pothole before turning down a country street. It was nothing but the two of them and the open road now, stretching on and on. Trees created a canopy overtop. Evelyn found it thrilling to be traversing something other than her own gravel drive. She slid the gear lever into Neutral, released the clutch, pressed the clutch, disconnecting the power from the engine, and transitioned the lever into the next gear. The shift of gears was silky smooth.

Mr. Orwell had to be impressed.

Evelyn squeezed her fingers into the steering wheel, feeling the leather grow warmer beneath her gloves. Exhilaration coursed through her. She was driving like any other young woman her age,

despite the fact she'd spent her childhood as anything but. The casting of her leg and foot had begun when Evelyn was only hours old. It ended when she was sixteen, following a final operation. But that morning as the sun rose, she also rose as an of-age seventeen-year-old who ached to move.

Swiftly.

Quickly.

Smoothly.

"Miss Fairchild," Mr. Orwell said, a note of concern in his nasally voice. "Miss Fairchild, do slow down. This is not a race car, and you are not a racer at the Brooklands."

Evelyn was caught between alarm at the reprimand and intrigue at the mention of a race car. Now, wouldn't that be thrilling? But the idea of going even faster across the earth and whipping around a track couldn't be Evelyn's focus at the moment; she needed to focus on slowing them down. More specifically, synchronizing the shaft speeds. With the gearbox in a neutral position, Evelyn blipped the throttle, increasing the rotation of the gears connected to the engine so that they'd match the speed of the gears connected to the wheels. Perfection.

Mr. Orwell seemingly agreed, Evelyn catching how his head bounced in an appraising manner.

Well done, us, Evelyn thought. That *us* was her and her father. He'd taught her well, the insides of a car endlessly fascinating to them both. Father had grown up around cars, but the Great War had happened and he'd fallen away from it all. But Evelyn realized now that her father had been holding out on her. He'd never taken her to the Brooklands. She wondered if seeing an automobile zip around a track would be as enticing as the racehorses at Lingfield.

"I've seen enough, Miss Fairchild," Mr. Orwell said. "You may drive home."

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“Of course,” she said agreeably.

But had Evelyn done enough? Shown enough? Proven enough?

Mr. Orwell had to be none the wiser that her left foot was two sizes smaller than her right since both of her shoes were the same size. Where most girls her age padded their bras, wishing to be a C instead of an A, Evelyn stuffed her left stocking and shoe.

Mr. Orwell was irritatingly silent as she returned them to her home. Even with him having *seen enough*, she took care with everything she did. Eventually, there was silence around them, the car’s engine off. Evelyn spotted her father’s expectant face in a front window. She clenched her teeth, willing Mr. Orwell to declare his decision.

Inside her head, Evelyn screamed for him to get on with it already. But he sat there, reviewing the notes he’d made for himself.

She folded her hands in her lap, squeezing until her knuckles were surely white beneath her gloves. She thought perhaps she should’ve vocalized to him what having a license meant to her. The freedom, yes. But obtaining this little piece of paper would be validation.

Evelyn’s mother doubted that she could pass, as her mother had doubted her many times before.

“Evelyn, no, you can’t climb that tree. You’re not like other children.”

“No, sweetie, that ground is far too uneven to walk over. You’ll stumble and fall.”

“Let’s school at home, Evie. Other children can be so cruel.”

“Sweetheart, you aren’t strong enough yet.”

Being born with a clubfoot had meant a childhood of lying about; of plasters, special boots, and bracings; of a left leg so stunted and fragile looking one would’ve thought it could’ve snapped; of parents who were never farther than arm’s reach. Theirs, not hers.

“Miss Fairchild—” Mr. Orwell began. His face was aggravatingly unreadable.

“Yes?” Evelyn said, unable to help herself.

The man looked annoyed that she’d cut in. Evelyn pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. He stared at her three long seconds before finally—*finally*—saying, “On behalf of the Surrey County Council, I will provide my signature that deems you an able driver.”

Able driver.

Able driver.

But what Evelyn also heard was *able-bodied*.

She could’ve hugged him. She certainly would not. But the fact of the matter was Evelyn could’ve with how wonderful she felt.

She was fit to drive. She had passed the driver’s test—the ordinary one.

Elation and pride filled her, and she knew exactly how—or rather *where*—she wanted to celebrate.

August 1939

Weybridge

The Brooklands.

It’d been three years since Evelyn had begun coming to the tracks, Mr. Orwell inciting the destination upon her. Upon her first time setting eyes on the grandstands and the drivers, hearing the sounds of the engines, smelling the petrol, Evelyn immediately loved everything about it—even more so than being at the horse tracks, and that was saying something, as the majestic creatures enamored her greatly.

In fact, Evelyn had once asked her mother for a horse of her own; they had the land for it. But her mother stroked Evelyn’s hair and

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said she feared Evelyn would fall off. Evelyn had let it go, learning at a young age to pick her battles.

But the Brooklands . . . it was different. Three years ago, Evelyn came. She saw. She immediately wanted to conquer it herself. She had pleaded with her mother to let her try racing. *“There’s a roof and doors to keep me inside,”* Evelyn had argued. *“I’d have to be rather reckless to fall out of that.”*

Perhaps she should’ve left off the last part. But after a year of insistent asking, and with some cajoling from Father, Mother had finally agreed to let Evelyn circle the track. *“To get it out of your system,”* her mother had said, “temporarily,” because it was “beneath” her.

Apparently her reluctance had grown to be less about Evelyn’s safety and more about appearances, and lately her mother had been demanding that Evelyn “mature” from the endeavor of racing and her so-called toys so she could be taken “seriously” by society.

Her mother could barely say the word *spinster*, the term so disparaging to her, but her mother’s spiel was largely the same: *“I know your childhood felt shortened, which is why your father and I have taken the questions about your interests on the chin and have allowed this escapade for these past few years instead of requiring you to pursue a husband. But, Evelyn, you’re twenty years old now. I am done smiling politely at luncheons. It’s time to attend a finishing school; long overdue, in fact. You must adequately learn how to run your own household, to bring up a family, to hold events for other ladies, and to get married.”*

But that wasn’t for Evelyn.

Right now Evelyn belonged on the tracks.

Currently she *was* on the track, in the midst of a race, in control of how fast she went, when she maneuvered, which overtaking move to complete. In part it was why she loved racing so fiercely.

She clutched tighter at the steering wheel of her V12 Delage, as if the extra force with her hands would aid in her acceleration.

First.

Evelyn was in first.

How novel. How marvelous.

Since her first go-around two years prior, this was the moment she'd been waiting for, craving. She maneuvered slightly to block Doreen, who was in second place. The Baroness was a close third. Too close. The others were right on their tails.

The smell of exhaust was everywhere. Evelyn gritted her teeth and tightened her grip even further, her eyes spending more time on the mirrors than on the finish line.

The grandstand spanned the final stretch of track. Every spectator was on their feet, their individual faces indiscernible. The trees formed a blurred green backdrop.

Evelyn was in awe. She could've pinched herself. Truly, it had been a dream to rumble down the same circuit as the likes of Gwenda Hawkes, Elsie Gleed, Kay Petre, and Doreen Evans.

Doreen.

Oh, blast it. Doreen performed an overtaking move that Evelyn hadn't seen coming. The Baroness tried now. But—aha!—Evelyn was ready for her and the finish line was too close. Evelyn claimed second. A grin remained on her face despite losing first—a position she'd yet to hold through the finish. How could she not smile, though, after moving at such a great speed, going nowhere yet everywhere?

One after another, all the remaining cars crossed the finish line. The noise of the crowd rose as the sound of the engines slowed. Evelyn made out her nickname—Dare D-Evelyn—and she knew that somewhere in the crowd her father was cheering and her mother was risking frown lines. Nothing a good cream couldn't fix.

Evelyn's mother certainly couldn't change Evelyn's mind about wanting to be at the Brooklands, despite her mother's doggedness that a young woman's interests should be elsewhere. The need to race consumed Evelyn, especially after she had learned that this very place was where her father had come when he was younger. He had never raced, but he'd been chummy with a chap who'd worked on the cars, and her father had often helped out, having to hide the grease from his own mother when he'd returned home.

Evelyn laughed freely as she killed her engine. Her goggles went on top of her head, and she unclipped the helmet straps. From around her neck she loosened a scarf.

Within moments Evelyn's mechanic approached. "Jolly good show, Miss Fairchild."

"Thank you, Wilkes. It felt marvelous. Truly so."

"I see a real future for you in racing. You could make a real name for yourself."

"Go on," she teased. It was music to her ears. If only her parents saw racing as a viable future too. But they didn't, not even Father. When the Great War had happened, he turned his focus to more practical things. Work and Mother. Eventually, he'd enlisted. Then Evelyn had come along, completing their family.

The word *family* was her mother's focus. With Evelyn of age—well past it, in her mother's eyes—marriage and a family were all she wanted for Evelyn. But the so-called marriage bar be damned; Evelyn didn't see why racing—or a woman's occupation in general—had to cease in order for a woman to have a husband and children. She often reminded her mother of the married Elsie Glead. Although Elsie had recently divorced. Evelyn would need a new role model of a woman who kept a job and a family to persuade her mother that it was possible to do both.

Wilkes began pushing Evelyn's V12 Delage—with Evelyn at the wheel steering—toward the paddock, where she first had to pass through the crowd of press. With her free hand, she returned the spectators' waves, smiling the entire time, though wishing she were still barreling around the tracks. But there would be another day, another race. "A *real future*," Wilkes had said, one she hoped she could eventually convince her parents to take seriously.

As they left the track, the press closed in. Evelyn heard the shouting of the nicknames of her and the other women.

"Evelyn," a reporter began, "you came close out there."

"Next time," she said joyfully. "Doreen is a worthy competitor. And it appears I must keep my eye on the Baroness as well."

"But will there be a next time?" the reporter asked, his pen poised over his notepad.

"Pardon?"

"A next time, Evelyn. Will there be one? Rumor has it that the Brooklands will cease races in the near future."

Evelyn turned toward Wilkes, who was standing by idly waiting for her to give him the sign to continue pushing her and her car toward the motoring village. He only pressed his lips together.

The reporter went on, "With talk of a second Great War, the Brooklands will be turning their efforts to aircraft production, just as they did twenty years ago. Or that's what we're hearing."

"Time will tell," was all Evelyn said. She was at a loss for anything more. She'd heard talk of another conflict with Germany. England's prime minister had traveled to Germany a year prior in an attempt to avert war. His meeting had been successful, Evelyn had thought. But then there had been the recent leaflets, one after another . . .

The first:

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SOME THINGS YOU SHOULD
KNOW IF WAR SHOULD COME

The second:

YOUR GAS MASK: HOW TO KEEP
IT AND HOW TO USE IT

The third:

EVACUATION: WHY AND HOW

The fourth:

YOUR FOOD IN WARTIME

The fifth:

FIRE PRECAUTIONS IN WARTIME

Please, no more. Evelyn's mother had become fainter with each one. She also gasped at how single boys between twenty and twenty-two were required to undergo six months of military training. "*Thank goodness Percy is twenty-three,*" she had said, watching for Evelyn's reaction to the name of her childhood friend. She'd given her mother nothing. If Evelyn's mother had her way, Percy would also be un-single in the very near future.

Evelyn offered the reporter a winning smile, politely informing him their interview was complete, and signaled to Wilkes. They began moving toward the motoring village again.

Evelyn's brow furrowed as she let the reporter's words sink in. *The Brooklands. Closing to races. Aircraft production.*

She should've expected it with all the anticipated war preparations; however, she didn't know the Brooklands aided in the war all

those years ago. Her father had only spoken of not coming to the tracks any longer. Plus, truth be told, Evelyn hadn't thought of the Brooklands's existence beyond her own existence there.

But the Brooklands was everything to her. Evelyn lived for each day she flew across the earth, after being caged for so long.

Within the paddock, Wilkes stopped outside the maintenance shed.

Evelyn swung both legs from the low automobile and stood as quickly as possible, allowing her skirt to drop and cover her thinner left leg. Her mother didn't like when society glimpsed Evelyn's past.

And there Evelyn's mother was now, coming her way, with Father at her side. Evelyn grabbed a rag and knelt beside Wilkes, intent on ignoring them for as long as possible, even if it was only for a few glorious seconds longer.

The Baroness and her mechanic, Rose, pulled in beside them.

Wilkes gave a greeting nod toward Rose.

"Evelyn, sweetheart," Mother called, approaching.

Evelyn sighed, stood.

"Brava, my dear," Father cheered.

"Yes, brava," her mother said but with far less enthusiasm. "We've come to fetch you."

Evelyn fought an eye roll. "You know you're not supposed to be back here."

"Which is why we've only come to fetch you," her mother insisted, "not stay."

"But I'd like to help Wilkes look over my car and see to any—"

"Evelyn, darling, we pay Wilkes to do such things. Things that aren't becoming of a young lady, yes?"

Rose ticked her eyes toward their conversation, and Evelyn avoided meeting her gaze. Instead, Evelyn looked to her father. But

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Father's attention was purposefully elsewhere. He may've pressed Mother from time to time, but he was the one who'd taught Evelyn how to pick her battles.

On the days her parents didn't follow her to the motoring village, Evelyn was regularly involved in her car's maintenance, not one bit worried about getting grease under her perfectly filed fingernails. She had no intention of giving that up and every intention of continuing to climb the leaderboard. But for now she'd give her mother this small victory. Evelyn dropped the rag and gave Wilkes a goodbye before being ushered away.

"You'll never guess who is here," her mother said. She managed to avoid touching anyone within the crowd. She also managed to avoid raising her voice while still being heard.

"Who?" Evelyn asked.

"Percy."

"Who?" she repeated impishly. Their family had known the Harrington family for eons. Generations, in fact.

Evelyn's mother ignored her. She said conspiratorially, "I told him not to move a muscle."

Evelyn felt her mother's hand on the small of her back, thrusting her forward until she had no choice but to lay a hand on Percy's arm to steady herself, drawing his attention from where he stood at a railing.

"Hello, Percy," she began. "So nice to see you again."

His smile was warm. Most girls would swoon over it. They swooned over Percy Harrington in general. He very much had the Superman look. Or the presence of a hero from the silver screen, one who'd single-handedly solve the murder while saving the beautiful but helpless damsel.

Percy's shoulders were broad. He had a thin waist and an athletic build to his legs, or at least Evelyn assumed he did beneath the widely

tapered legs of his trousers. His attire was designed for work and play. When not saving women, Percy could've been a boxer or a star swimmer. In fact, she'd heard he recently won a swimming competition. Not at anything as fancy as the Olympics, but he'd swum in races in London.

Evelyn admitted to liking Percy's competitive spirit. They were alike in that way. Even during their childhoods—when Evelyn was supposed to be on the sidelines healing from a surgery—he had egged her on, carrying her to a tire swing or hoisting her onto his back. One time he even climbed aboard Evelyn's roller chair and, trying to impress her with his grand idea, sent them flying downhill. At the bottom they had toppled over, both of them whooping from the fun of it even while Evelyn skinned her knee. Percy had begged Evelyn not to tell. She never did. She didn't think her mother ever found out either.

But the camaraderie between Evelyn and Percy felt like it ended years ago, with her playmate morphing from Percy the Boy to Percy the Man, a potential suitor. Evelyn couldn't help feeling distant from him while also feeling quite pleased with that distance.

Evelyn's mother wished to eliminate the divide. Percy didn't even have a chance to greet Evelyn before Mother was saying, "Oh, Percy, the cut of your suit is simply perfect."

"Mother's doing," he said simply.

"They do know best," Evelyn's mother replied with a smile.

They talked on. Evelyn's father had excused himself to shake hands and talk business elsewhere, and Evelyn half turned her attention to a motorcycle race that was lining up. She even spotted Rose with her own motorbike. Evelyn hadn't known she raced too.

While she kept her gaze fixed on the track, Evelyn heard her mother inquire after Percy's parents, asking when they'd be coming

to London next, when they'd all dine together. Evelyn's mother went on about how she'd almost narrowed down the perfect finishing school for Evelyn. That caught Evelyn's attention and she growled internally.

Evelyn would have words with her mother about *that*.

Then her mother coyly suggested that Percy and Evelyn should bowl a frame—or ten—laughing at her own quip. “Or perhaps you’d rather go to the cinema. Is there a film you’ve had a hankering to see?”

“I’m afraid I’m due back at the clinic shortly. But another time?” Percy shifted his focus from Evelyn’s mother to Evelyn.

Evelyn smiled just as politely, not thinking the date would ever come to fruition. “That’d be lovely, Percy.”

Mother beamed at the promise of a date for her daughter. “Yes, that would be lovely, Percy.”

What was more likely was that Percy would romance another young woman, or two, which was no water off Evelyn’s back. It wasn’t that she didn’t consider Percy a dish with his dark hair and eyes. But Percy the Man had recently opened his own medical practice, and it was as if a boxing bell had rung for his mother and Evelyn’s mother to find him a wife, thrusting him into the land of courtship. Had there ever been a more antiquated word?

Evelyn’s mother was actively trying to hurl Evelyn into his universe, where she’d be nothing more than a physician’s wife, caring for his future children, hosting his dinners. Those types of wives didn’t dirty their hands in the underbelly of anything but a turkey, and only if they couldn’t pay someone else to do it.

Could Evelyn lead that life? Not yet. Maybe not ever. How was she to know? She’d only just begun living—and racing. The idea of stopping now caused her stomach to knot and breath to flee her lungs. But then Evelyn thought of what the reporter had said about

the Brooklands closing, and she feared her mother would get her way after all, and soon Evelyn would be back in a cage, her future at a finishing school all but set.

And Evelyn knew one thing: it would be a battle she wouldn't be able to win.



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CHAPTER 3

MARION

March 1914
Birmingham

As usual, Marion found harbor in a corner at St. Anne's. She'd only been at her new orphanage a small accumulation of days, falling into her schedule of meals, class time, free time, and lights-out. But already the spot felt like it was her own. At the moment, the common room was silent, empty. The day had grown warm, and there was a break in the springtime rain so the other children had poured out into the courtyard. Marion remained inside. She was on the final pages of *Emma*. Marion liked her more than she thought she would. Emma could be charming.

With no one else around, Marion allowed herself to read aloud softly, to give herself the gift of hearing her own voice. Being shorter in height than most, Marion guessed the other children assumed her voice was pitchy and high. But there was a low tone to it, perhaps emphasized by her whispering. She only spoke when she was alone, which in a crowded orphanage happened once in a blue moon.

Today Marion was feeling anything but blue, however. She was content for the first time in a long time. She hoped to stay at St. Anne's, where the nuns weren't quick to yell, the other children were satisfied

to leave her be—save for Edward, though did she mind?—and Sister Florence had even asked if she would be interested in secretarial work that involved typing.

Marion didn't yet know how to type, but she wiggled her fingers where they touched the book, playacting like she'd be doing on the typewriter, pleased that at St. Anne's she'd be more than simply a child to clothe, to house, to educate. She'd have a job to do.

She focused again on *Emma* and whispered, "He stopped.—Emma dared not attempt any immediate reply. To speak, she was sure would be to betray a most unreasonable degree of happiness. She must wait a moment, or he would think her mad. Her silence disturbed him; and—"

"So you *can* speak."

Marion gasped, looking up to find Edward standing a few steps into the room.

Now she was unsure how to respond, beyond going statue-still. Her mind whirled with the notion of feeling exposed yet experiencing a hint of exhilaration that Edward had been the one who'd caught her.

Edward stepped closer. "Sister Florence only told us that you can't. You can." He said this *can* almost as if he were asking Marion to verify. "But if you don't *want* to talk, that's fine. I bet you have your reasons. I can't step on cracks. I mean, I physically can, but I don't want to. There are so many bad things that can happen with stepping on a crack. I don't want to risk any of it."

He shrugged, yet Marion was no closer to finding an expression to respond to this boy. She parted her lips, letting air escape in a slow, controlled exhale.

Closer Edward came, until he sat opposite her on the hardwoods. "But if you wanted to, maybe you could read to me sometime?"

Read to him?

Marion felt her brows creasing.

"I know," Edward said. "I should know how to read. But no one's ever taught me. I was shuffled around a lot, so my learnings were so stop and start. But I've been here for a while, and it looks like kids get to stay at St. Anne's. I thought they'd begin teaching me, but they never did. I think the nuns think I already know how." He sighed. "I'd really like to learn."

By the time he was done explaining, his cheeks were rosy.

Was it embarrassment?

Marion's chalkboard sat beside her. She usually reserved the board and her one-word answers for her superiors, with whom she knew she had no choice but to respond, but a question rose to the forefront of her mind. Marion took the chalk from her dress pocket. Not wishing to embarrass him further, she used only numbers instead of words and wrote, 1? 2? 3?

The idea of someone being at a single orphanage longer than that many years was implausible, but she also added, 4? 5?

His mouth twisted as if he was unsure of what Marion was asking. She sucked on her tooth, thinking of how to explain without using words he couldn't read and causing him more embarrassment. She waved an arm, indicating the space around them.

"The common room?"

Marion shook her head, then circled her hand more grandly.

"St. Anne's?" he asked.

She nodded enthusiastically and pointed again to the numbers. Edward opened his mouth but then reached for her chalk. He circled 3.

Wow. Marion had only spent a year at most homes. Three years at St. Anne's . . . that was a long time. Long enough to let herself hope that she could remain the same length of time. That Edward would continue to be at St. Anne's too.

"I'll leave you be now," he said. "Think about it? We don't need to tell the others you can talk. Reading together can be our secret."

Our secret.

After he left, Marion's mind whirled with the revelation that Edward didn't know how to read. She would quite literally be nonexistent without her books and literary friends. Then she thought again about him being at St. Anne's so long.

That night after all was dark and quiet, Marion lay awake in the girls' dorm. Her mind was still on Edward. She'd never done anything spontaneous, yet she found herself kicking free from the thin sheet. She surprised herself when she slid a book from beneath her pillow and further shocked herself when she began to sneak from her dorm on the south side to Edward's on the north side.

In the boys' dormitory Marion followed the row of beds until she found his and then knelt beside him. She listened to the soft breathing of the other boys, none stirring. And in the glow of the moonlight she began to whisper ever so softly, reading from a story where a sand fairy granted children a single wish each day.

Edward had awoken at some point, for when she was done reading for the night, he said, "Thank you."

Instantly, her stomach felt heavy. Had it been a mistake to come? Edward had said he'd been there three years, yet what if letting him hear her voice would somehow trigger his being asked to leave St. Anne's? He'd be nothing more than another memory. Just like Caroline.

But the next day he was still there. And the way he smiled at her, making her feel so special, was enough for Marion to risk reading to him again. That night she returned to read the book's second half.

When she finished, Edward whispered back, "My wish for today is to hear your real voice. Non-whispered."

She twisted her lips. In the story, the more outlandish the desire, the more likely that it could cause a poor outcome. No, she wouldn't oblige him with her full voice.

However, the next night she came back to whisper-read the book again, starting at the beginning once more. Repetition was good for learning, Marion remembered. He thanked her again. Before she could stop herself, "You're welcome, Edward," slipped out, booming in the room's quiet.

She immediately regretted her words. How fitting to the story it would be if her voice had caused her to be caught in the boys' wing. She could be sent elsewhere. Edward could be sent elsewhere. Just as she had feared. The heaviness in her stomach grew and grew.

Marion heard a rustling of sheets and the squeaking of bed-springs. She scanned the dark room, but no one called out, *Hey! You shouldn't be in here!* One of the nuns didn't rush into the room.

She returned her eyes to Edward, certain she'd see his own fear on his face, but he was looking at her with a toothy grin instead.

"Call me Eddie," he insisted quietly, loud enough for only the two of them to hear.

She paused. Then ignoring her better judgment, she tried, "Eddie."

His cheeks pushed out with a wide smile.

"I like your voice."

She dropped her gaze then, feeling more exposed than scared. The sound of her full voice was largely unfamiliar even to Marion. She didn't have any particular accent, having lived all over England with other children who had lived all over England. But she liked her voice too. Marion liked that the tone of it was low and steady, even when spoken louder than a whisper. She liked that the smile Eddie gave her was as bright and special as the first star of the night.

Every day Eddie remained at St. Anne's. Every night Marion came to read to him, their little secret. More and more, he coaxed words from her, even during daylight hours.

One afternoon they sat in her corner. The room was empty except for them. Eddie asked Marion what she would wish for from the sand fairy.

"To be wanted," she told him honestly, thinking of her name's cruel meaning of "wished-for child."

"You don't think you are?"

Marion shook her head.

"I do," he said, his cheeks reddening between his freckles.

Marion answered by reading more. They'd progressed to her reading him *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*.

But as she was reading, Marion's mind had the ability to slip elsewhere. And it did, to what it would mean to be wanted by someone like thirteen-year-old Eddie from St. Anne's.

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