

# *Far Side of the Sea*

KATE BRESLIN



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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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*In loving memory of Kenneth Swinney:*  
gray eyes, strong hands, soft-spoken, and wise—  
my dad.

*For Cher Ami, G.I. Joe, and all trained  
carrier pigeons of the two world wars:*  
may these unsung heroes that saved countless lives  
in the face of injury and death never be forgotten.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.

Psalm 139:9-10

## CHAPTER

# 1

**HASTINGS, BRITAIN, APRIL 9, 1918**

*He was suffocating. Trapped beneath several feet of earth, he tried to claw his way through the dirt and rubble to reach the blue sky above. His starving lungs screamed for air, the torn flesh beneath his broken fingernails bleeding into the soil as he scabbled toward the surface. The agony in his chest grew unbearable, yet darkness continued to swallow him, the heavens overhead always beyond his grasp. Futility settled over him. He would die here, in this place. Buried alive . . .*

Colin awoke with a start. Chest heaving, his sweat-soaked body gave an involuntary shudder. The nightmare was always the same; even using both of his hands, he could never reach the precious blue sky.

A sharp rap echoed at the door. Dawn's gray light filtered through his bedroom window in the cramped seaside flat as he rolled toward his nightstand to turn on the lamp. Blinking against the sudden brightness, he stared at the clock. 0530 . . .

The next knock accompanied a hesitant male voice. "Lieutenant Mabry?"

His protégé, Corporal Albert Goodfellow. “A moment, if you please.” Colin rose to sit on the edge of the bed, planting his bare feet against the rag rug covering the hardwood floor. He used the bedsheet to wipe at his clammy skin, then leaned to snag the pair of suspended britches from his clothes valet near the foot of the bed. After donning the khaki riding pants, he started to call out, then paused, grabbing the woolen sock from his nightstand. He fitted it over the stump of his left wrist. “Enter.”

A tall, painfully thin young soldier in uniform stopped at the threshold to his room. Corporal Goodfellow removed his cap, revealing a short crop of thick red hair. He flashed a sheepish grin. “Good morning, Lieutenant. Did I wake you, sir?”

Colin shot him a sour look. “Corporal, why are you here at this unholy hour?” He walked to the wardrobe across the room and withdrew a clean undershirt. When his visitor said nothing, he turned. “Well?”

Albert Goodfellow’s gaze was transfixed on the clothes valet near the bed—and the prosthetic harness that hung there. He jerked his attention to Colin. “Dovecote’s got a heap of messages needing attention, sir. They’re marked priority, so the colonel sent me down the hill to request your presence in the office as soon as possible. It’s going to be a bear of a day.”

Colin’s jaw set as he imagined the ensuing hours decoding encrypted messages from the Front. Both the British Army and Secret Service deemed everything a “priority,” including daily reports, supply requisitions, and weather conditions in France.

He maneuvered his arms through the sleeveless undershirt, pulling the fabric over his chest. “Tell the colonel I’ll be there presently.”

More silence. Colin reached for a pressed uniform shirt from the wardrobe. Shrugging into the olive khaki top, he turned again to glance at the corporal. Goodfellow hadn’t moved. “Was there something else, man?”

“I was ordered to wait, sir.” The corporal shifted. “May I assist in any way?”

“You mean to hurry me along?” Colin scowled. Had the colonel sent Goodfellow to be his nursemaid as well? “I’ve been dressing myself since I was three years of age, Corporal. I think I can still manage on my own, thank you.”

“Sorry, sir, I just meant . . .” The corporal’s cheeks flushed. “Yes, Lieutenant, I’ll just wait beside the pier with the truck.”

His protégé sketched a quick salute and made a hasty departure. Colin stared at the door, anger and shame coursing through him. His gaze dropped to his open shirt and the task before him. Infernal buttons! Almost a year ago, they had become a curse on his life.

He decided to postpone the chore long enough to scrape a razor across his face and tame his hair with a wetted comb. Afterward, he drew together the edges of his shirt with his right hand and began the painstaking task of tucking each button into its corresponding hole, working his way down the shirtfront. The cloth fit snugly against his chest, and he was reminded again to purchase new shirts. Months of recuperation working on his uncle’s Dublin farm had produced more muscle than what he’d started out with after leaving the hospital.

The button chore complete, he slipped a brown silk tie around his upturned collar and single-handedly knotted and fitted the popular four-in-hand up between the points of his collar.

Shirt tucked in, he slid his cotton suspenders into place and strode toward the prosthetic harness dangling from the clothes valet. The apparatus seemed to mock him as he fitted the terminal sleeve close against his left wrist before he buckled the arm brace. Securing the shoulder harness in place, he swung the long strap across his back and brought it forward to fasten at his chest.

By the time Colin had donned his tunic and leather riding boots, his brow was damp with sweat. Wiping his face with his sleeve before donning his cap, he then strapped on his leather holstered

Colt .455 revolver and turned his attention to the canvas satchel still hanging on the valet.

Shaking out the bag's contents onto the bed, he stared at the choice of accoutrements: two steel hooks, a steel pick, a glove-encased wooden hand, and one eating fork, each with a metal stub that fastened to the terminal sleeve at his wrist.

Out of habit, Colin chose the gloved hand, fitting the prosthetic into place. Once he'd repacked the satchel and slung the strap across his shoulder, he went to give himself a quick once-over in the cheval glass.

A smartly attired British officer stared back at him, although the hazel eyes beneath his uniform cap looked haunted and world-weary, not those of a young man twenty-one years of age. He thought about the nightmares he'd struggled with during the nine months since his return from the Front. The war had aged him tenfold.

*Lord, please renew my spirit.* He let his critical gaze linger another moment before dismissing his reflection. Heading toward his tiny kitchen, he grabbed a few biscuits from the tin in the cupboard and exited his flat.

April's coastal breezes nipped at his freshly shaved skin as Colin walked briskly along the shoreline road toward Hastings Pier, where Goodfellow was waiting. He took a moment to breathe in the tang of salt air, reveling in the sense of relief at again being outdoors.

The sun's reflection was already beginning to crest the watery horizon. Dawn was breaking, and while the seaside town slept, he savored the relative quiet, broken by the cries of hungry gulls and waves lapping against the sandy shore.

A peace that would disintegrate once the sun rose into the sky.

Colin soon spotted his corporal with the truck, and a few minutes later, they were driving up the hillside toward the nondescript building that served as the offices of MI8 secret communications

in Hastings. The two-story wooden structure sat just fifty yards away from the Home Defense Pigeon Service, a stationary dovecote that housed a few hundred carrier pigeons.

“I’ll put the kettle on, shall I?” Goodfellow said, parking the truck.

“Capital idea.” Colin’s spirits lifted. The nightmares always managed to rob him of sleep, and tea would be just the thing.

Goodfellow quickly disappeared inside the building while Colin followed at a slower pace. At the entrance steps, he raised his head and caught sight of a grayish-white pigeon heading for the traps built into the dovecote’s angled roofline.

Colin knew little about the birds, though he’d seen them at the Front, taking off from the trenches to deliver messages to headquarters. His job with MI8 was to decipher those messages—most arriving from MI6 and British Army General Headquarters at Montreuil, in northern France’s Pas-de-Calais—and to send them on by courier to his supervisor at the Admiralty in London.

As he watched the bird, the sun chose that moment to rise fully above the horizon, illuminating the pigeon’s fluttering descent and bathing its feathers in golden-white light.

For some reason, the story of Noah rose in his mind, and he envisioned the biblical white bird returning to the ark with an olive branch in its beak. The signal to the end of the flood. A symbol of peace . . .

The mental imagery faded. These birds brought only words of war and unrest, the threat of German invasion, or perhaps a casualty roster from the Front. He glanced at his lifeless gloved hand. Despite his prayers, a year of fighting had taught him that peace was someone’s naïve ideal, a vague optimism offered to comfort the suffering.

A distant dream beyond reach.

Colin continued inside the building to the second floor and entered his cramped office. On the wall beside his equally compact

desk hung a glass-framed picture taken two years before, when he was shiny and new in his full cavalry regalia and mounted on his sorrel steed, Wyatt. Along the opposite wall, a high, barred window allowed morning light to brighten the room's drab green walls.

"The colonel brought over these messages from General HQ in France." The corporal stood just inside his office and removed from a leather pouch at least a dozen tiny rolls of thin paper, each an inch long and the diameter of a cigarette. A roll might contain up to fifty messages needing decryption.

Colin's mouth hardened as he stared at the mound. The corporal seemed to read his mood. "I'll get that tea, sir."

When he was gone, Colin sat down and withdrew from his desk drawer the decorative pincushion his twin sister, Grace, had made for him when he first took the post in Hastings. A smile touched his lips as he read the crooked stitching and the amateurish needlepoint lettering: *Those Who Sew with Tears Will Reap with Songs of Joy.*

He knew the words, taken from Psalm 126. They were a means to give hope to those in despair, a promise of better days ahead.

Colin's smile wavered. Would he ever reclaim that sense of elation and hope that had always come so easily before the war? Battle had changed him, and not just on the outside; he prayed daily for the return of himself, to be able to continue the course upon which he'd once set his life. . . .

He glanced to the gloved hand lying inert against the desktop. And if not the old path, at least to know the new one God intended for him—His reasons for keeping Colin Mabry alive.

He set the pincushion gently on the desk. His twin would never make a good seamstress, but Colin loved her for her efforts. And with Grace's upcoming marriage to a peer of the realm less than a month away, he was genuinely happy for her. Somehow, knowing love and hope still existed in the world, at least for his sister, gave him a measure of comfort.

His hand reached for the first tiny roll of paper, and using his thumb and forefinger, Colin spread the curled message flat against the cardboard sheet he'd installed on the desktop. Holding the paper in place with his prosthetic, he took pins from the cushion and secured the note to the board.

Once he'd retrieved his codebook and paper, he was about to settle into his task when Goodfellow returned with the tea. "Ah, thank you, Albert." Colin breathed in the welcoming scent of Darjeeling. "Any dispatches from London?"

"Yes, sir, from the Admiralty. I've coded a dozen messages so far, and after you've checked my work, I'll take them next door to be sent to France."

Colin pushed out a sigh, reaching for his tea. It *was* going to be a long day. "I've no doubt your work is impeccable—"

A sudden boom echoed from across the channel, startling them both. With a clatter, Colin's cup dropped against the saucer.

"Sounds like they're bombing Paris again, sir."

"So it would seem." He tried to mask his discomfort and again lifted the cup. The next blast erupted before he'd raised the rim to his lips. He clutched the teacup's handle to keep from sloshing the hot liquid. "You may get back to your work, Corporal."

Colin barely acknowledged the soldier's departure as he set down the cup again and regarded his shaking hand, making a fist. "God, please help me."

He closed his eyes and tried to quash his fear. Another boom followed, and he ground his teeth. How much of Paris had the Germans destroyed? Only weeks ago, they had launched their Spring Offensive and begun firing a new type of long-range siege guns at the French capital. The daily explosions, while distant, reminded him that only fifty miles of water separated him from the war.

Titan's teeth! Why had he agreed to accept this post in Hastings?

As if taunting him, the guns stopped. The air grew quiet again,

and Colin managed to drink his tea. After several minutes, he was steady enough to get back to his work.

He'd memorized much of the codebook, so it didn't take long to recognize the monotony of supply requisitions and troop reports he would forward to London's War Office. There were also orders for more carrier pigeons, as the supply at Montreuil was getting low. Colin had learned the birds flew only one way—back to their lofts—so it was necessary to send Hastings pigeons to France to bring messages into Britain.

Head bent to the task, Colin worked through his lunch. By the time his shift was about to end, he was hungry and his shoulders ached.

He was decrypting his last message of the day marked *FORWARD TO LONDON* when the telephone rang in his office. Relieved at the diversion, he reached for the receiver. "Lieutenant Mabry here."

"Colin, how are things in Hastings?"

He straightened at the sound of the tinny male voice. "Lord Walenford."

"Enough of that. Either Jack or Benningham will do. We're going to be brothers, after all." Jack Benningham's voice warmed. "Speaking of which . . . I thought you might join me for dinner this evening. My man can meet you at Victoria Station and bring you around to the house."

*The town house?* Colin still hadn't gotten used to the idea his sister was about to marry a viscount and the future Earl of Stonebrooke. A man who also happened to be Colin's boss.

Which meant, despite his reluctance to travel into London tonight, he could hardly refuse his employer and brother-to-be. "I can take the train from Hastings if that is acceptable."

"Splendid. I'll expect you at eight. Mrs. Riley is making her ration stew."

Colin stared blindly at the unfinished work on his desk, still

surprised at the invitation. “Very well, Lord . . . uh, Jack. I look forward to it.”

“Excellent. I’ll see you tonight. We’ll have dinner in my study, and you can bring any dispatches for the Admiralty directly here.”

“Of course . . .” Colin’s hand groped to replace the receiver as his gaze fell to the last message he’d been working on, noting for the first time the letters he’d already deciphered. *LT. C . . . O . . . L . . . I . . .*

He continued breaking down the other cryptic numbers, his pulse hammering as more words began to form:

*Lt. Colin Mabry, British Army, c/o Swan’s Tea Room, London:  
Urgent you remember your promise of love. Meet me Café de  
la Paix, Paris. 10 April, 1500 hours. You’re my last hope.—J. R.*

*J. R. . . .* Colin’s shock overrode his rapid pulse. Jewel Reyer . . . *alive.*

He’d thought of her often over the past year: her beautiful face, her laughter. Like her namesake, Jewel had glowing skin, lustrous golden hair, and soft blue eyes that sparkled when she sang. She’d also kissed him. . . .

Another explosion rumbled across the channel, and Colin flinched, staring at the note. Jewel was alive. In Paris.

Sweat broke out along his forehead while his heart stirred with emotions from the past, including another memory.

He had given her his promise to return.