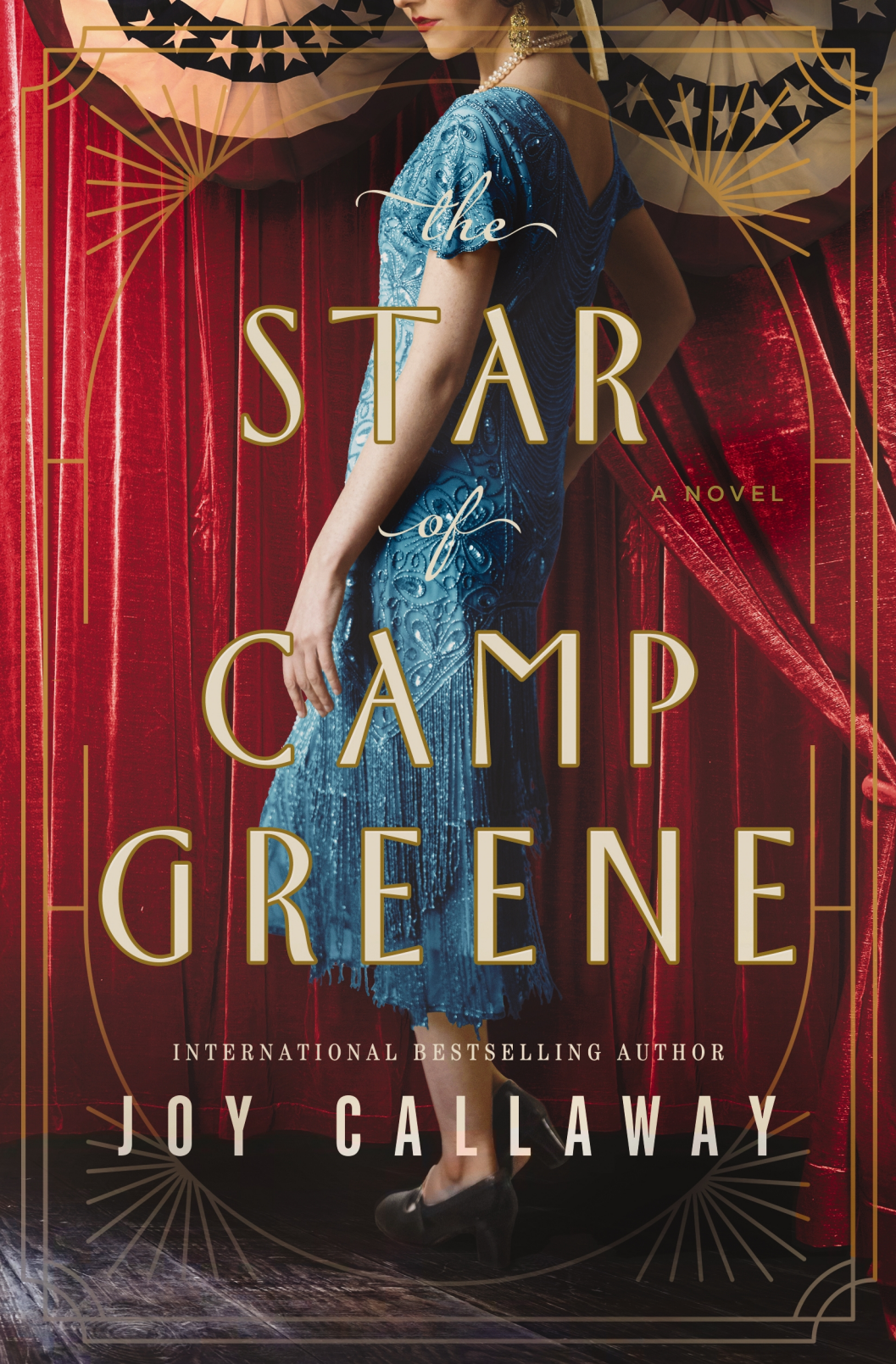
the
STAR
of
CAMP
GREENE
A NOVEL
INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
JOY CALLAWAY

THE STAR OF CAMP GREENE

A NOVEL OF WWI

JOY CALLAWAY

HARPER MUSE

The Star of Camp Greene

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CHAPTER 1

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CAMP GREENE NATIONAL GUARD TRAINING CAMP
CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA

I first realized I was a star when I was twelve. It was a moment just like this one, where the reverberation of my voice hung glittering in the air, nearly as bright as the spotlights, until the applause swallowed it up in a deafening swell that made my heart all but stop. Adoration is an addiction. Everybody warns about the perils of drink, but nobody thinks to tell a young girl that once she's become the darling of her town, she'll want to become the darling of her country, and then her world. And once she's done all that and realized that life off the stage can turn nightmarish in a blink, she'll crave regular roaring applause or risk absolute despondency.

The shouting was riotous tonight. It was my kind of crowd despite a persistent headache and a throat that felt much like the strep infections I got frequently in girlhood. I ignored them both. They were only nuisances. Colds came up now and then, determined to ruin all the fun, but I wouldn't allow it. I couldn't allow it. I'd never canceled a show. Not once in my thirty-two years. At first I persevered through any sort of discomfort for the audience's love, but now, recently, I kept on for myself. Onstage, my thoughts were fixed on the music and the laughter and the moment. There were no questions, no grief, no shadows. Those all met me at the curtain, but for the glorious time in the spotlight, I was the girl I used to be.

"'Pack Up Your Troubles'!" someone hollered from the back of the theatre. I grinned and mopped my forehead with my palm, pushing my black curls—neatly set by yours truly and long ruined by my tumbling across the stage—back against the brim of my little pixie cap.

"Now, I think we should give poor Mr. Keeghan here a break for a minute or two, don't you suppose?" I shouted. "He's been playing for an hour straight." I could hear the fatigue in my piano man, Stuart Keeghan, in the way he'd lazily trilled the notes on "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," and he'd barely been able to keep up with the pace of my cartwheels and flips before that. I stole a glance at him, and he nodded wholeheartedly. His face was flushed with exertion. I supposed at times I forgot that he was my parents' age and not mine, that it was only me and him keeping this show afloat instead of the full crew we had in New York.

The crowd booed, and I stepped to the front of the stage and gave them the same disapproving glance I'd made when I'd played a teacher managing unruly pupils in the musical *Roses in the Garden*. They'd used a likeness of me making that expression on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* wearing a sultry sequined gown that was most certainly not my plain teacher costume. The magazine had been so popular, the art had been transformed to posters.

The boys recognized the expression immediately, and the noise changed direction to cheer. I smiled and tipped my head at the audience. I didn't know how many were there—you never could really tell because of the light.

"How about a joke or two?" I said, my voice seeming to barely project as it did in other theatres. My head throbbed, and at once, although I was standing absolutely still, my body felt like it was spinning in circles. The heat, that had only moments before bathed my costume from pantaloons to outer skirts in sweat, was now absent and the fabric felt as though it had been plunged in ice water.

I forced my attention to the light, hoping its constant would steady me, only to realize it was held fast by someone up in the rafters who was not entirely sturdy themselves. I went on anyway.

"Any of you fellas planning to propose marriage to your sweetheart soon?" I yelled. My throat smarted and I swallowed to soothe it. Some whooped and a few called out, "Only to you, Calla!" I laughed and curtsied, pitching my outer skirts away from my pantaloons a bit so the crowd could see the American flag design on the underside of the simple white. Lydia Bambridge always created the most interesting costumes for my acts, so that both my show and my dress caused a spectacle. There was a roar of applause at the sight of the Stars and Stripes and several "will you marry mes" cut through the noise.

"When you do get around to asking that lucky girl for her hand, do remember what I'm about to tell you," I started, leaning close to the crowd like I was telling a secret. "See, back in New York, a very patriotic friend of mine was considering marriage to a fine man. He was handsome, smart, kind—and he called her all the loveliest names: sweetheart, sugar, darling." I paused and nearly stumbled as my body swelled with heat and vertigo. I was suddenly unable to recall the last thing I'd said.

"Well, what's wrong with *darling*?" someone shouted, reminding me that I was in the middle of a joke. I grinned and walked slowly back toward the piano, bracing myself on the case of the opened baby grand when I reached it. Perhaps it was only my blood pressure plunging. I hadn't had much to eat—a grapefruit at breakfast, a slice of buttered toast at lunch.

"Nothing at all is wrong with *darling*," I said. I cleared my throat to stop the sting. "But when he proposed, he made a terrible mistake. Rather than her name, rather than *angel* or *dear*, he called my friend the worst thing you can call proud American stock like us. He called her *hunny*."

I waited for the boisterous smack of laughter, and I suppose there *was* laughter, but it sounded far away. A light smell of lavender incense met my senses, and at once my mind whirled with confusion. Perhaps I'd forgotten where I was. It wouldn't be the first time. The stage was an elusive place. Only one person I knew burned lavender incense during shows and that was Andrew Gerald, the music

conductor on *The Bye and Bye Show* at the Palace Theatre in London. Perhaps the laughter was dull because I was telling patriotic American yarns to the British.

"If the piano man is rested, I'd love to hear 'I Have It All.'" The voice was distant, from somewhere in the back perhaps, but the request mirrored *The Bye and Bye Show* as well. It was always the second to last number.

"Yes, absolutely," I heard myself say, though I couldn't truly make sense of anything at the moment. It was unnerving.

I stepped forward and looked to my right, expecting my fiancé and costar on the show, Caspar Wells, to appear from the curtain, but he didn't. Of course he didn't. My Caspar was dead. He'd been killed on the Somme, forced to jump out of his kite balloon after the cable snapped and the balloon threatened to cross enemy lines. But then again, if I was back at the Palace Theatre, smelling Andrew's incense and singing "I Have It All," perhaps he was still alive. At once, I felt light. Perhaps I had imagined the news of his death, all of it a nightmare—the quivering man who'd delivered the news to my Liverpool flat; Caspar's final letter that came later speaking of the horrors of war, the desperation to hear me sing him a song to enliven his heart, and the promise that if the war continued, he and I would go around putting on little shows for the men about to go to the front. Mr. Keeghan plunked the first few notes, but Caspar didn't materialize to sing his part.

"Caspar?" I shouted, plastering a smile on my face to hide my fear that my hope wasn't hope at all. Mr. Keeghan repeated the introduction, and just as I was about to resign myself to singing Caspar's part, right as tears flooded my eyes, he appeared on the far end of the stage. He was wearing olive drab, an American army uniform, rather than his usual tuxedo. I found the change perplexing, but perhaps he was planning on a surprise finale later, a plea for my people, his comrades, to enter the war on their side.

"*I have a mansion in Rome*," he sang, his familiar baritone washing over me. "*But I call a palace home. I've got piles of diamonds, a fancy yacht, but it's not a lot if I haven't got you*."

I couldn't take my gaze from his face, the straight nose that rounded at the tip, the eyes that pitched downward at the outer corners. I wanted desperately to arrest his stare from the audience, to see the love, the desire soften the sun that beamed from his face on the stage to stars that shimmered for me alone.

"*I'd like your palace, your mansion in Rome*," I sang. My voice was weak and my headache pulsed with renewed fervor in my temples. "*Your diamonds and your yacht too. I'll have it all . . . except for you*."

The crowd roared in laughter, and I smiled, waved, and stepped toward him. Usually Caspar did something humorous at this point. He'd toss paste diamonds at my feet or take my hand and pretend to beg, but he didn't so much as turn my direction. My skin flushed hot and cold, but I ignored the warning. Surely it was just relief at seeing him and realizing my reality was only a nightmare after all.

"*I can give you a king-sized bed, goose down for your head*," Caspar responded.

I reached for his arm and he allowed it, but didn't clasp my hand like he usually did.

"*I'll take the first two, so long as they're absent you*," I sang. "*You're—*"

"I apologize for the interruption, but I must." A voice boomed over the song, silencing us and the crowd. Caspar jerked away from my clutch, and as the spotlight swung away from our faces, over the canvas tent ceiling and three hundred men in olive drab fatigues, to land on a young officer at the entrance, I realized my error. My brain felt bruised as the headache persisted. Confusion and grief grasped hold of my heart. I wasn't in London. I was at an army training camp in North Carolina, Camp Greene. I recalled it now: the army band playing at the train station upon my arrival that morning, the Red Cross ladies handing me flowers and warm donuts, the crowds lining the streets to greet me, and the shock of the camp being a true camp—nearly all of the forty thousand soldiers were staying in tents. At Camp Sherman in Ohio and Camp Lee in Virginia there were barracks.

"The gents in charge will have no choice but to assign you to the Broadway division after that performance," I said to the man I'd thought was Caspar. I laughed. Laughter always righted things—at least in the moment.

"Aw, thanks, Miss Connolly," he said. He had an accent, from somewhere in New England. "I wish there was such a thing. I'll be a rifleman. Not sure I'm as suited to war as the others seem to be." Face-to-face, he didn't look as close to Caspar as I'd assumed. The nose was similar, but the eyes were different, and he was at least a few inches shorter than Caspar had been.

"Calla, please. All of my friends call me Calla and—"

"I need everyone's attention," the officer shouted again, his height and the velocity of his tone silencing the voices that had doubtless begun to speculate about the reason for his interruption. "I've just received word that we lost a few men on the front in Flanders. If you have any familiar attachments to men already over there, you can go to the administrative building to review the telegram listing the names of the fallen and request leave if necessary."

Several men pushed through the crush of their comrades toward the back of the tent, their faces drawn and pale. I felt the echo of shocking grief as I watched them depart. Some would find themselves subject to the same horrible feeling that came with knowing they'd never see their loved one again. Caspar had been such a vibrant presence—magnetic and steady and magical all in one. He told me he was coming back to me, and I believed him. So much so that I hadn't even cried when we'd kissed goodbye.

I watched more men weave through the crowd and out the door to check the telegram. Being shocked by death in wartime was an interesting phenomenon. No one really believed that anyone they knew would die in this war, even though they knew that thousands would.

"Miss Harkins has made herself available to book rail tickets," the officer said, then his eyes met mine. In the wake of the soldiers' departure, the tent was nearly silent. "Miss Connolly, if you'd be so inclined, hurry along with the rest of the show. The men need rest."

I wanted to say something in reply, some sort of retort to let the officer know that merriment was as vital to well-being as rest—I would know—but the men's faces silenced me. All of the emotions were there, as plainly as Caspar had described them in his letters: fear, anger, regret, terror. My body ached—my head to the point it felt as though it could combust—and I had begun to sweat so much that moisture washed my face. Even so, I would not abandon these men to their melancholy as Caspar had been abandoned.

"I suppose we could all simply retire," the man I'd mistaken for Caspar said.

"And end the evening with sorrow? Absolutely not."

I'd come home to New York, to Broadway and my parents' Bronx townhome after Caspar's death. I couldn't bear to live in Liverpool without him, but his final letter was always with me, and his desperation for a song, for hope, in his final days haunted me day and night. The only respite from thinking of it was the stage, so I'd immediately accepted Lee Shubert's request for me to star in his new show, *Fancy Free*, ignoring the whispers that I wasn't grieving properly. When America entered the war a year later, I understood the reason for my return home and my heart that wouldn't heal: I was meant to enliven the troops, to give them cheer in their darkest hours, to put on the little shows at the front that Caspar had hoped we'd do together.

I'd been so confident in my calling that I'd declined two new starring roles and wrote a letter directly to General Pershing instead, requesting clearance to go to the front and put on a tour modeled after the private shows I occasionally took to the Gilded Age set on Fifth Avenue—just me and Mr. Keeghan. I told General Pershing the show would travel easily and I'd finance it myself, but I'd been denied on the grounds that I could muddle the focus of the men. After much persistence, however, General Pershing suggested I invest my efforts in the stateside army camps instead, insinuating that if I proved myself valuable and able to stay out of the necessary mechanics of war, he may reconsider his stance. I looked at the despondent men in front of me. If I couldn't cheer these men, an

ocean away from the action, how would I prove to Pershing that I deserved a place at the front where brightening spirits actually mattered?

"What's your name?" I asked the man still standing beside me.

"Guy. Guy Werths," he said.

"Well then, Guy. Suppose you're the guy to help me make these men smile again?"

"Gee, I haven't heard that one." He laughed.

I turned too quickly toward Mr. Keeghan, who had almost nodded off at the piano bench, and nearly fell. Dizziness consumed me.

"'Over There,'" I said, barely able to make out the words, but somehow both Mr. Keeghan and Guy heard me. Mr. Keeghan struck the opening notes with a fervor I was shocked he possessed in his current state.

"Let us remember what we are fighting for. You are courageous, loyal, and brave." I forced my voice over the piano notes and then starting singing with Guy. My throat protested with each breath.

By the first "*Over there, over there*," everyone in the tent was singing again and smiles were restored, but I couldn't utter another note. Every word exhausted me, my throat was swollen, and my breath was shallow. I signaled to Guy to keep the song going while I danced. At the end, feeling a bit more stable, I launched myself into a cartwheel, but my arms collapsed beneath me and I fell on the stage.

I tried to get up but failed. I couldn't move. My breath was coming in short, shallow gasps. Mr. Keeghan stopped playing. Guy stopped singing. I fell back against the rough wood, vaguely registering that in doing so, I hit my head. Men were shouting, but the noise sounded distant, then someone picked me up.

I tried to force open my eyes as I was carried through the tent. I tried to latch on to the smell of the room—stale sweat—or focus on Guy's face as he hefted me through the throng in hopes to regain some of the lucidity I'd lost, but I was tired, so tired.

"This is silly. I'm all right. I just need a cracker," I said in a whis-

pery voice that sounded nothing like my own. My eyes were heavy, but I refused to allow them to close. Guy didn't answer, but paused in what I gathered must have been a sort of makeshift lobby. Posters with my likeness and name papered the walls.

"I'm tired," I thought I said, though I couldn't be sure if the words actually sounded. Guy was talking to someone, and I couldn't keep my eyes open. Then there was a table beneath me and rain on my face, and just as quickly the sound of a door shutting and silence.

"If you can hear me, it's me, Guy. We're on our way to the hospital. I'll stay with you."

Though I knew I should claw my way to consciousness, it was impossible, so I let myself go. Somewhere an angelic voice was singing Mother's favorite song, "Too-Ra-Loo-Ra-Loo-Ral."

CHAPTER 2

My nightclothes were itchy. I yanked at a sleeve, surprised it felt more like cotton than silk, and turned on my side. I'd have to have Mother order new nightgowns from Wannamaker's, I thought as I drifted back to sleep. Perhaps the discomfort was only that this one was old.

Mother was humming "Too-Ra-Loo-Ra-Loo-Ral," though the notes were barely on pitch. The dissonance rattled me to consciousness.

"Mother, please stop. You sound like a rooster with laryngitis. It's the middle of the night," I mused without opening my eyes.

The song—I suppose that's what it was, even in its sad state—stopped, but then a door opened and shut and I heard whispering, a voice I didn't recognize.

"I told you I'm tired," I attempted again, but then there was the rattling of a cart across a wood floor. That was the last straw. I opened my eyes and tried to heave myself upward against the pillows, but was startled to find that I could not. I had no strength, nor did I know where I was. In front of me resided a cold potbelly stove in desperate need of cleaning, a stark white wall, and a shabby little table with a glass pitcher of water and a discarded mercury thermometer.

"Miss Connolly?" A meek, unfamiliar voice came from behind the metal spindles that made up the headboard.

"Where am I?" I asked. Just then, I could smell it. The stench of illness permeated the air. It was on my breath too. I turned over,

a gesture that took much effort, and came face-to-face with a little nurse no more than five feet tall standing beside a metal cart laden with a veritable buffet. Croissants and pancakes and Danishes—everything my former manager and longtime Broadway star, Lenor Felicity, used to forbid me to eat since she'd introduced me to vaudeville and Broadway at twelve.

"Why, you're here at Camp Greene," the nurse said with an extraordinary amount of cheer. "You're in the officers' convalescence quarters at the base hospital. There's nowhere else to put the ladies and you're . . . well, you're Calla Connolly. We couldn't exactly throw you in with the soldiers."

At once, I recalled stepping on the stage of the makeshift Liberty Theatre under the canvas. I recalled the way my head pulsed and my body ached. I remembered the way my throat felt as though it had been skinned. It still felt much the same. But I couldn't recall collapsing or being admitted to the hospital. The last thing I remembered was shouting hello to the crowd and motioning to Mr. Keeghan to start the show.

"We're terribly relieved that you're coming back to us," she said. She stepped toward me, then reconsidered. Her entire body, including half of her face, was covered in starched white linen. "It was a perilous night, Miss Connolly, but we knew you would pull through. You just had to. Kirsten said that she knew you'd make it. She kept watching you to make sure you weren't turning blue, but you didn't and your fever broke."

"Blue, you say? Did you suppose I could transform into a blueberry? Or perhaps you supposed I was one of those people with blue-pigmented skin like the Blue Fugates of Kentucky? That's not how it works, miss. The Kentucky blues are born with the hue." I tried to smile but coughed instead. Congestion rattled my chest. My voice sounded gravelly and foreign, and my neck right below my jaw felt horribly swollen.

"No, no," she said, clearly not at all inclined to display any sort of mirth at my jokes. Perhaps what I'd said hadn't actually been funny. I couldn't tell. My mind felt slow, like I was stuck in that state of

acute drowsiness right before slumber. "Not that. It's . . . well . . . turning blue is a sign of . . . well, it's a sign that you're going to die of this Spanish flu, ma'am," she said, lowering her voice to a whisper. Though I could see only a bit of skin across her forehead, I knew her face had paled. In the absence of color, the dark circles beneath her eyes were startling. "It's going around like wildfire, claiming lives in a matter of a few hours sometimes. We're trying to contain the infected in the hospitals, but it's nearly impossible. It comes on so quickly."

"Oh, I'm sure I didn't have anything like that," I said. My tongue felt thick around my words. "Just a little cold."

"With all respect, Miss Connolly, those stricken with a cold don't hallucinate. Though you were battling a fiery fever, you were quite irate when you were conscious, arguing with Kirsten and me, calling us Lenor and asking over and over why we would try to ruin you when we'd brought you to Broadway in the first place. Then occasionally you would ask us where the rest of your money was."

I let my eyes close. I was cold too.

"The Lenor you were speaking of . . . is it Lenor Felicity? The two of you are practically mother and daughter. That's what the papers say." The nurse's voice sounded distant. "Never mind me," she amended quickly. "It's none of my business."

"I'm not surprised that Lenor was haunting me. She has for years," I said, my tone barely above a whisper. The moment the sentiment crossed my lips, I knew I shouldn't have said it. I'd never spoken openly about my troubles with Lenor save the once, and I learned to regret it after.

I could feel the nurse looking at me and forced my lids open just a hair to meet her startled gaze.

"Please excuse me. I don't know quite what I'm saying. Everything is a bit jumbled, it seems," I forced out. "I owe an awful lot to Lenor. She's like family."

I could say both of those things honestly. Many families—my lovely parents not included—were vile to each other. Family was really why Lenor was as awful as she was, why she clung to fame like

it was the last life preserver on a sinking ship, why she'd thought it her right to introduce me to Broadway only to steal my earnings and my roles and, after I fired her, falsely smear my name. Lenor mistook admiration for love because she'd never known the real thing.

"I know. When you're fighting such an illness, the mind can dream up any number of strange scenarios," she said. "I had a feeling the two of you were close like everyone said. She missed you terribly when you were in England, didn't she?"

I closed my eyes again and kept quiet. If I spoke, I'd say something else I shouldn't. It was difficult to bite my tongue at the moment. After our falling-out, Lenor had convinced the director she was having an affair with to spread a rumor around Broadway that I'd made an untoward advance at him. The following week she'd had her lackey, Mr. Crispel, descend on my front stoop with information about a London West End producer looking for a lead for his new show. I knew Lenor was only trying to send me away before the absurdity of the accusations wore off, but my family needed the money urgently, so I'd telegrammed the producer, who'd hired me on the spot.

"My mother would miss me too if I was all the way across the sea," the nurse went on. "It was obvious that Lenor was quite sad. She only took on those small roles while you were away."

I wanted to say that I had a lovely mother who *had* missed me terribly, and that Lenor's small roles had nothing to do with me—unless you believed the old saying that you reap what you sow. Come to think of it, perhaps that was why Lenor had extended an olive branch when I'd returned to New York and convinced Mr. Shubert to cast me in his show, though he swore to me it hadn't taken much convincing. By the time I returned from England, Lenor's director beau had been caught seducing not one but two actresses, negating his claim that I had been the one to make an advance at him. Despite the quelled rumor and Lenor's peace offering, she hadn't been able to reverse her original reaping with my return. She spent the year I was starring in *Fancy Free* doing the short opening number for B. F. Keith's vaudeville circuit. She would never admit it, but

her star was dimming.

"Then again, it could have been worth it to leave her," she said. "Was London what you dreamed it would be?"

I wasn't entirely sure why she kept talking to me when I wasn't responding, but perhaps this was part of my recovery. Perhaps conversation assisted the brain in coming back to itself.

"Yes. It was marvelous," I said. I swallowed and my throat smarted. "Being there changed my life. Before, I had one focus: success. But then I arrived at the Palace Theatre where I starred alongside my dear—" I couldn't say his name. My eyes welled and I let the tears fall. *And in the light of his love, fame wasn't all that mattered anymore*. I sobbed at the thought.

"Now, now, Miss Connolly. I'm sorry to have pressed you so. You must not allow yourself to get upset in such a fragile state. You're over the worst of it, we think, but we can never be too cautious. There's pneumonia to consider," she said, her voice soothing and low. "Though I know losing Caspar Wells must have crushed you. The departure of such talent was felt the world over."

"I'll never hear his voice again," I whispered, swallowing the urge to keep sobbing. I recalled the way Caspar's fingers stroked my hair in bed each night, the timbre of his voice singing lullabies in my ear, the mischievous glint to his eye when he performed with me in *The Bye and Bye Show*. My mind stopped on the last memory. "Did I . . . did I call for him on the stage last night? Mistake another man for him?"

"Yes, that's what they said, but you were quite unwell," the nurse said. She approached me now, pulling at the fabric across her nose and mouth as she did. She peeled the blankets back from my feet and nodded approvingly at something, then drew the fabric back over me.

"I'll have to apologize to that poor soldier," I said. I coughed again.

"Don't you dare," she said, smiling. "That soldier is my fiancé, Guy, and last night was the night of his life. One of my fellow nurses

was at the show and she told me that when you launched into 'I Have It All,' you seemed to be looking around for Caspar. She said she heard Guy's friend Crowley encourage him to step onto the stage and offer his voice." She paused. "He'll have to be monitored quite acutely for flu, but he'll be speaking of the time he sang Caspar Wells's part with Calla Connolly for the next fifty years."

"I'm sorry I endangered him," I said, emotion welling in my swollen throat. It seemed lucidity came and went with this illness. My mind felt cloudy again and a ripple of chill washed over my body. "I knew I wasn't well, I suppose, but I thought it was only a sniffle."

"The flu is everywhere," she said. Her face, which a moment ago had been bright with happiness, was now drawn and serious. "It tends to come in waves, and we've reached the crest of one now, it seems. One of the men in Guy's tent fell ill last week and, unfortunately, perished." She reached for the thermometer beside my bed and motioned for me to open my mouth. I complied and she fell silent, focusing on the way the mercury rose up the glass tube. After a few minutes, she took the thermometer back to her cart and withdrew a notebook and pencil from a shelf below the pastries.

"One hundred and two degrees. Still a high fever, but much lower than yesterday's 106," she mumbled, scribbling as she spoke. "Today is Saturday, May 4."

"May 4?" I startled, jerking upright despite the heaviness of my body. "I've forgotten myself. I've got to be at Camp Sevier by seven o'clock. Have someone fetch Mr. Keeghan, wherever he is, and tell him to ready for our departure."

"Miss Connolly, you can't . . . ," the nurse attempted, but I ignored her. I looked around for a clock but found none.

"What's the time, miss? I'll need to dress and get to the train station." My brain lurched with vertigo, but I forced my legs to move closer to the edge of the bed anyway. The nurse hastened to my bedside and blocked my way up.

"You're battling a severe flu. You'll not be going anywhere, I'm afraid," the nurse said almost apologetically, and her face reddened.

"And your piano man, Mr. Keeghan, was sent home to New York with the instruction that he's to be monitored for flu. I'm sorry. I don't mean to mother you, but performing tonight is not possible. You could risk falling ill again and perishing this time, not to mention infecting others."

"You don't understand," I said, falling back against the mattress. "I must perform." I could feel the grief, the familiar memories that flipped through my mind pressing in on every side despite my illness. The stage was the only thing that prevented sorrow from swallowing me whole. When I was performing, I was full of purpose, uplifting the soldiers, leaning toward Caspar's dream. "I must impress upon General Pershing that I can be counted on. Otherwise he'll not reconsider my request to go to the front. If I don't, all of the men will fight—and some will die—in despair, without a song in their hearts, without a recent memory of cheer to enliven them. Caspar told me so."

"The front?" she whispered as if in disbelief. "I'll go right now and wire Camp Sevier to let them know of your condition," she said to me. "Even General Pershing would have to rest if he were to contract the flu."

"I suppose you're right," I said. My teeth chattered. I couldn't perform in this state, even if I wanted to. My best course would be to get well quickly.

The nurse nodded resolutely and reached for a small glass of milk hiding behind the croissant, then dug around in her apron pocket and pulled out a tiny jar of what appeared to be cinnamon. She sprinkled the cinnamon in the milk and swirled it around a few times before snatching the plate of pastries.

Behind her, the wall seemed to billow and move. I stared at it, thinking that perhaps my flu was worsening before I realized that the wall wasn't a wall at all but rather a sheet fitted neatly to the ceiling and the floor. I wondered if there was someone behind that sheet and how they fared.

"I'll go send the telegram right away on my break as long as you promise to take this cinnamon to soothe your fever and eat at least

two of the pastries," the nurse said, interrupting my inspection of the makeshift wall. She deposited the plate in my lap and then handed me the milk. The cold made me shiver and I hunched down into the covers. "And here, take this aspirin for your aches." I held out my free hand for the small pill and swallowed it down with the milk. The drink tasted like Mother's French toast. I hadn't had it since before we moved to New York City, since Father worked in the buggy factory in Columbus.

"Thank you. I'll return in half an hour," the nurse said. Then she took two envelopes from her pocket and set them next to me on the bed. "A few letters your piano man left for you before he departed for New York. He was given them at your last stop and forgot they were in his briefcase."

"Thank you," I said.

"I'm Goldie, by the way. Goldie McGann."

"I appreciate your help, Goldie," I said. A light moan sounded from beyond the sheet partition.

"Is someone next door? Beyond that sheet just there?" I whispered.

"Yes," Goldie said, her eyes grave. "He's very ill and he's dearly loved." She grasped the handle of the cart and pushed it out of my room, leaving me with my pastries.

Absent Goldie fluttering about, I noticed there was a small window past the foot of the simple iron bed. It boasted a view of a pine wood and a rain so drenching and mighty that it poured in sheets over the lip of the roof.

I lifted the croissant to my lips and took a small bite. I had no appetite, and my throat smarted so badly that I couldn't eat more. I set the croissant down on the plate and opened the first envelope, noticing the British two-pence stamp immediately.

Dear Miss Connolly,
I do hope you'll receive this correspondence. I'm Basil Omar. I served alongside Caspar Wells from the time of our training until he perished.

I swallowed hard and put down the letter, unsure if I could go on. If whatever Basil planned to say was something devastating about the nature of Caspar's demise, I couldn't bear it. I knew of Basil. Caspar had often written of the young boy he'd taken under his wing, saying that Basil's friendship and interest in the theatre had been a welcome distraction, a balm to his nerves—until they were ordered to the trenches and the boy fell apart, and Caspar with him. I recalled the despairing letters he'd written from the trenches saying that Basil had begged for singing lessons to keep his emotion at bay as the shells shattered and the enemy drew closer. Caspar had obliged, though he mentioned, between recounting his own heartbreaking fears, that the boy wasn't naturally inclined to song.

I picked the letter back up and forced myself to keep reading. Caspar would want me to.

> *I was recently injured in battle. As if by a miracle, I suffered a broken leg and concussion and have been temporarily discharged from service. It came at just the right time. Fear without ceasing is a torture.*

I ran my hand over his handwriting and tears filled my eyes.

> *In any case, I was saved and here I am. During my time in hospital, I've been reading the papers and saw a mention of your valiant tour in America and thought to take a chance and write.*
>
> *Caspar and I were in the trenches together for weeks at a time, and we'd sing together, pretending we were on the stage at the Palace Theatre instead of about to meet the grim reaper. Just before we encountered the Huns and Caspar died, he promised to include me in the act the two of you were planning on performing at the front if he could convince the army to allow it, so that I might have a bit of luck on the London stage when the fighting ends. I admit I thought the possibility of the act all but abandoned with his death, but when I saw*

the piece about your American tour, I was heartened to realize that General Pershing must have given you his blessing and that you would arrive here at some point soon, to carry out the dream you and Caspar created together. I pray I'm right about your intentions. It would honor Caspar much, and there are countless men like me, men who are losing hope and desperate for cheer.

I shut my eyes and envisioned myself in front of these men, their faces brightening—if only for a moment—with my music. My voice couldn't end a war or spare their lives, but it might give them the strength to continue on to tomorrow. General Pershing would come to see things as I did. I was sure of it. It was only a matter of time until I was somewhere in France.

I also wonder if you would consider honoring Caspar's promise to me if you come? To include me in your act? It would provide so much joy in the midst of this terrible war to perform alongside you, and I have no doubt it would give me a considerable leg up professionally. I am descended from a long line of army men, and my uncle, a childhood comrade of Sir Douglas Haig's, who is commanding a troop on the German front, continues to insist I was born to fight. I was not. I was born for the stage. I know I will be forced to reenlist when I am well, but if you come here, at least I will be able to do what I love before I face the fight again.

When you come, I could also return to you something I have of yours that I took from Caspar's jacket that he left in the trench that day, along with his tag. I thought of mailing it with this letter, but you are indecent in the likeness, and I know it would be devastating to you if it fell into the wrong hands.

I knew exactly which photograph he was speaking of. I was nearly nude, wearing only a flimsy chemise and undergarments of

cotton lawn and Brussels lace, a combination I still wore often. I hadn't thought of the photograph since I gave it to Caspar upon our engagement. I suppose I hadn't realized he'd taken it with him or that it wasn't among our things when I moved. The likeness had been captured for a producer and fledgling fashion-designer friend of Lenor's who'd convinced me to pose for his new lingerie line. I'd only been twenty and had accepted because I was between shows and Father was between mills and we needed the money. I'd almost instantly regretted the arrangement. He'd proposed to me at the end of the shoot, never mind that he was twenty years my senior. I'd declined immediately. When news broke that he'd gambled his funds away before the line could launch, I was greatly relieved and the photograph was never used. Years later, after his marriage to another young model, he mailed the likeness to me in London and I'd given it to Caspar. Now this boy had it in his grasp. I hoped he hadn't shown it to his peers, but if he had, I couldn't do a thing about it.

At least Basil was a Brit and not an American. It didn't really matter if it wound up in Sir Douglas Haig's hands. It wouldn't pass across General Pershing's desk, and that's all that mattered. Though General Pershing was no prude, he couldn't well endorse a floozy for the army's entertainment. I was no such thing, but I wasn't an idiot either. I'd never thought the photograph particularly scandalous, but in the wrong hands, an innocent modeling job would be made out to be suggestive, a major smudge on my character. Lenor's lie about me had eventually fizzled, but something as tangible as a photograph would not.

I kept reading.

> *I pray you'll consider my plea, Miss Connolly, and come to us quickly. I shouldn't ask you to cut your tour of the States short, but I suppose I am. I cannot face the front again without hope of a future after this war. I am a shell of the man I once was. Please come without delay. I beg you. Send me a wire to Duchess of Westminster's Hospital and tell me of your plans.*

Caspar's friend,
Basil Omar

I stared at the name and a darkness fell over my spirit. I wasn't in charge of my goings about as Basil assumed, and the resolve I'd clung to moments earlier, the confidence that I would gain General Pershing's approval, was suddenly shrouded in uncertainty. I folded the letter, put it back in the envelope, and set it on my bedside table.

Every moment I was here I was away from the front. I couldn't convince General Pershing I deserved clearance or help Basil launch his way to the stage or cheer the men as they marched into battle if I was in this hospital, battling this terrible flu. As if my body was set to remind me that I wasn't over it yet, the pain in my throat began to throb and the swirling in my head returned. I took another bite of the croissant anyway.

"I need you to hear me." The low murmur came from the room next to mine—or rather, from beyond the sheet. I stopped chewing and listened. The voice was familiar, though I couldn't quite place where I'd heard it, nor could I make out any words very clearly. "I know you need rest, but this is a matter of certain death for a great number of men if it cannot be resolved with Pershing." The sentiment struck me. The urgency of the words and the tone converged, and I recalled a memory I'd forgotten from the night before: a young officer who'd interrupted the show to break the news of the losses at Flanders. The voice was the same.

I had always been a tremendous eavesdropper. It was the only way to figure the true character of those in the spotlight—to listen in when they were not washed in the glitter of the stage. It was why I didn't trust any of them anymore. It was also a marvelous way to pass the time. When I was a child I'd be sent to the back of the stage after my act was over while the adults finished the show. To entertain myself, I'd press my ear against the wall or under the door and listen to stars and producers argue about the production or egos or lovers.

I remained absolutely still in my bed. There was a long silence, and I wondered if perhaps the officer had departed the ill man's bedside.

"I beg you, General. I know I should have come yesterday the moment I got the letter, but I didn't know how ill you were and I was occupied with duties. Muster your strength and hear me. I can't figure it out on my own." His voice broke on the last word and I hung on the end of it, willing him to continue speaking. "General Dickman wrote in his letter that General Pershing has heard rumors that the Germans will attempt to take Paris again in the next month or two to take advantage of the progress they made at Flanders. The French and British are tiring, and they'll need mighty reinforcements from our troops if Ludendorff orders the operation." The officer paused. I could hear him take a deep breath. "Dickman said Pershing has asked us to put together a regiment under the Sixth Brigade that will be assigned to stronghold the Allies' footing at the Surmelin Valley—the pathway to Paris. It's where the Allied troops are the most fatigued. The regiment would be ordered to stay at the defense of the line no matter what—even if the French and British assigned alongside retreat. If it comes to it, the stand would be vital and could turn the tide of the war, but would undoubtedly mean great sacrifice for the men assigned to the regiment. We are to identify soldiers suited to such a perilous task—men of great skill and competence, but also prone to trouble or whose moral judgment we find lacking." He stopped.

The words made my skin prickle with horror and my breathing shallow. I thought of the faces that had greeted me in front of the Liberty Theatre upon my arrival. I wondered how many of them would be assigned to this terrible but worthy mission. How could they possibly decide who to call?

"How?" His voice returned, echoing mine. "Surely we can't choose these men, to play God this way. Of course there are men who charge in front first in all battles, but they're fortified by numbers, matched by the other Allied troops, and they know their role ahead of time. In this case, the particulars can't be shared with the

soldiers, and they'll go into battle assuming support. If the others are forced to draw back, leaving them alone to fight for the valley, they'll serve as the buffer the Allies need, but many from the regiment will die. General, I need to know what to do, how to tell Pershing that we can't help with this assignment."

Silence followed and I wondered about the state of the general. Was he able to nod, to shake his head, to utter whispers I couldn't hear?

There was a loud clatter.

"General! Nurse! Nurse!"

A rush of footsteps pounded down the hall beyond my door, and in the next moment, there was screeching of furniture, the general's name being called, the pleading with God, the sobbing. It was clear the man was gone.

"Damn that Calla Connolly." The officer's voice ricocheted beyond the sheet and off my walls, startling me. "You ordered me to manage her visit here, General, but you didn't know what you'd asked. I was so busy I couldn't come speak with you. You were supposed to help me figure out how to deal with Pershing's request. I can't believe you're gone. You were our . . . my leader, my example. What will we do without you?" His tone softened and he sniffed. "If she hadn't been here, we would have had time. We would have settled on a way to move forward. And I could have said a proper goodbye."

I could hear his anger spark again, the roar return to his words.

"But because of her visit, because I was occupied with the particulars of her ridiculous show while you slipped away, I'll have to find a way to go on without you. I might be forced to choose these men. Many will die. It's . . . it's her fault." The last word was equal parts sob and shout.

I froze, my soul shriveling in my chest despite the persistent aches. I was here to save lives, to cheer men. If I'd somehow doomed a regiment of men to death, I'd never get over it. I'd offer my own life instead.

I pushed myself out of bed, ignoring the vertigo and confusion

that riddled my brain. My legs protested when they hit the cold wood and they ached, but my heart pounded out of my chest, urging me on. I couldn't remain tucked in bed, not when I'd inadvertently caused such catastrophe.

"Three thousand men could be in peril," he said.

"Forgive me!" The words burst from my mouth in a sob. My legs faltered and I snatched at the sheet to steady myself, but it fell to the floor as I did. The general lay still and blue in a bed that matched mine while the officer towered over us, his body rigid with anger and despair. His eyes fixed on mine, brown and gold, ferocious, above a cotton mask like Goldie's, his hands balled in fists at his sides. A nurse I'd never seen hastened toward me and attempted to lift me up, but I refused. I curled into my knees and cried instead—for the perished man in the bed beside me, for the men I didn't know who would perish because of me, for Caspar, who had perished without me. I heard the officer swear.

"Dry your tears and face what you've done." His voice sneered over my sniffing. "Your presence has put thousands of lives in jeopardy."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Photo by Bethany Callaway Photography

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