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The Unseen

Written by Katherine Webb

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The Unseen

Katherine Webb



I

May 14th, 1911

Dearest Amelia,

It's the most glorious spring morning here, on a day of some excitement. The new maid arrives today – Cat Morley. I have to admit to feeling a touch of nerves, such is the reputation which precedes her, but then I'm sure she can't be all bad. Albert was not at all sure about the appointment, but I managed to persuade him with a two-pronged argument, thus: That it would be an act of commendable Christian charity for us to take her on when surely nobody else will; and also that because of her reputation we would be obliged to pay her very little, and she would therefore represent a sound household investment. We are doubling our household staff at virtually no increase in expense! I received a letter of introduction from the housekeeper at Broughton Street – Mrs Heddingly – giving a list of duties with which the girl is familiar, and also urging me not to let her read 'for all our sakes'. I am not sure what she means by this, but I find it generally wise to heed advice given by those in the know. She – Mrs Heddingly – also passes on a peculiar rumour about the girl. I can't think why she chooses to mention it and can only assume a love of gossip – that the identity of Cat's father is the subject of much speculation, and that it has been whispered, taking account of the dark tones of her skin and hair, that he may have been a Negro. Apparently, the other staff at Broughton Street took to calling her Black Cat after this story got about. Well, I'm certain that the girl's mother, however low her station, would not stoop to such degradation, unless she was the victim of a most heinous crime. And that her poor daughter should go under such an ill-luck name

hardly seems fair. I will not hear her called it again, I am quite resolved.

Amidst the nerves I confess I also look forward to her coming. Not least because there are balls of slut's wool beneath the beds the size of apples! It's been many months since Mrs Bell, God bless her, was able to bend down far enough to see to them. The whole house is in need of a thorough seeing to. But it will also give me great pleasure to gather up one of God's creatures who has been led astray, and who has wandered perilously close to ruin. Here she will find a Godly house, forgiveness and the chance to commend herself to the Lord with hard work and clean living. I intend to offer her every succour in this endeavour, and to take her quite under my wing – she will be my project – imagine it! The chance to truly reform a person, and set them back on quite the right path. I'm sure the girl will see how fortunate she is – to be given such a chance to redeem herself. She comes to us tarnished, and will soon be polished to a shine.

And such work is surely the perfect preparation for motherhood. For what else is a mother's job than to nurture her children into Godly, worthy and virtuous people? I see how well you do with my niece and nephew, dear Ellie and John, and I am full of admiration for your gentle, guiding way with them. Don't fret so over John and his catapult. I am sure he will grow out of this mood of violence very soon: a boy's nature is – by divine design – more warlike than a girl's, and it's to be expected that he feels urges that you and I can't understand. How I look forward to having little souls of my own to grow.

Amelia – please forgive me for asking you again, but I fear your last letter has left me still quite in the dark on the subject in question. Must you be so vague, dearest? I know such things are not easily discussed, and indeed are better not spoken of at all if possible, but my need is great, and if I can't turn to my sister for help and guidance, then who, pray, can I turn to? Albert is an exemplary husband, only ever kind and affectionate towards me – each night before we retire he presses a kiss to my hair and praises me as a good wife and lovely creature, but thereafter he sleeps, and I can only lie and wonder what it is that I am

doing wrong, or not doing, or indeed not even trying to do. If you would only tell me in the most specific terms how I should behave, and how our bodies might be 'conjoined', as you put it? Albert is such a wonderful husband, I can only assume that it is I who am not performing my right function as a wife, and that this is the cause of – well, of my not yet expecting a happy event. Please, dear Amelia, be specific.

All is well, then. I had better end this letter now. The sun is high, and the birds are singing fit to burst, and I shall post this on my way to visit poor Mrs Duff, who has no such problems as I and has been kept abed with a terrible infection since the birth of her sixth child – yet another boy. Then, after lunch, Cat Morley should make her appearance on the three fifteen train. Cat – such an abrupt name. I wonder if she would take to being called Kitty? Write to me soon, dearest and best of sisters.

Your loving, Hester

2011

The first time Leah met the man who would change her life, he was lying face down on a steel table, quite oblivious to her. Odd patches of his clothing remained, the colour of mud, slick with moisture. The bottom half of a trouser leg, the shoulders of his jacket. She felt cold on his behalf, and slightly awkward faced with his nakedness. His head was turned away from her, face half pressed to the table so that all she could see were the carved dark structures of his hair, and one perfect, waxen ear. Leah's skin prickled; she felt voyeuristic. As though he was only asleep, might at any minute stir, turn his head and look at her; woken by her footsteps and the sound of her breathing in that immaculate ear.

'You're not going to throw up, are you?' Ryan's voice broke into her trance. She swallowed, shook her head. Ryan smiled mischievously.

'Who is he? Was he?' she asked, clearing her throat, folding her arms in a show of nonchalance.

'If we knew that, I wouldn't have called you all the way out to Belgium.' Ryan shrugged, airily. He was wearing a white coat, like a doctor, but it was grubby and marked, and hung open to show torn jeans, a scuffed leather belt.

'First time seeing a dead body?' Peter asked, with his calm, Gallic intonation. Peter, the head of the archaeology department.

'Yes.' Leah nodded.

'Always an odd experience. At least with one this old, there's no smell. Well, not the worst kind of smell, anyway,' he said. Leah realised she'd been breathing through her mouth; shallow breaths,

expecting the worst. She inhaled cautiously through her nose. There was a dank smell, almost tangy; like wet January leaves, like estuarine mud.

She fumbled in her bag, drew out her pad and pen.

'Where did you say he was found?' she asked.

'In the back garden of a house near Zonnebeke, north-east of Ypres. A Mrs Bichet was digging a grave for her dog . . .' Ryan paused, pretended to check his notes, 'her dog *Andre*, if I have it correctly.' He smiled, that curving, lopsided grin that made something pull in Leah's bones. She raised an eyebrow at him, nothing more. Under the strip lights his skin looked dull and there were shadows under his eyes. But he was still beautiful, she thought helplessly. Still beautiful. 'Digging one grave and stumbled across another. She nearly took his right arm off with the shovel – see here.' He pointed carefully to the dead man's forearm. Beige skin had parted, brown flesh protruded, fibrous like earth, like muck. Leah swallowed again, felt her head lighten.

'Isn't the War Graves Commission going to identify him? Why call me?'

'So many dead soldiers turn up every year – fifteen, twenty, twenty-five. We do our best, but if there are no regimental badges, no tags, no crucial bits of kit to go on, there just aren't the resources to pursue it further,' Peter explained.

'He'll get a nice burial, with a nice white cross, but they won't know what name to put on it,' said Ryan.

'A *nice burial*?' Leah echoed. 'You're too flippant, Ryan. You always were.'

'I know. I'm impossible, right?' He smiled cheerfully again; ever one to make light of something serious.

'So . . . if there's nothing to go on, how did you think I could help?' Leah addressed the question to Peter.

'Well—' Peter began, but Ryan cut him off.

'Don't you want to meet him face to face? He's remarkably well preserved – that end of the garden is waterlogged all year round,

apparently – there's a stream that runs along the bottom of it. Very pretty, by all accounts. Come on – not scared, are you? Of an archaeological find?'

'Ryan, why must you be so . . .' Leah gave up, didn't finish the sentence. She tucked her hair behind her ears, folded her arms protectively across her chest, and walked around to the other side of the table.

The dead man's face was rumpled slightly, as if he'd only lain down to sleep, pushing it resolutely into a pillow of broken ground. A crease in the lower cheek, running from eye socket to mouth. His top lip still described a long, elegant curve; a trace of stubble above it. His bottom lip and lower jaw dissolved into a scrambled mess that Leah could not look too closely at. His nose was also crushed, flattened, soft and gelatinous. It looked like she could reach out, cup her fingers, scoop it away completely. But his forehead, his eyes, were perfect. A lock of sodden hair fell forward, unruly; his brow was unlined, perhaps because of youth, perhaps because the skin was swollen, waterlogged. Handsome, he would have been. She could almost see it – could unfocus her eyes, blur away the terrible injuries, the wrong colour of his skin, the inhuman smell. And around each closed eye were tiny black lashes – each one separate, discernible, neatly lined up, as they should be. As they had been, the day he'd died almost a hundred years before. The lids had a faint silvery sheen, like meat left too long. Were they completely shut? Leah leaned towards him, frowned a little. Now it looked like they were slightly open. Just a little. Like some people's remained when they slept, when they dreamed. She leaned closer, her own heartbeat loud above the whine of the lights. Could she see his eyes moving, behind the lids? Would the last thing he saw be there still? Tattooed accusingly onto his irises. She held her breath.

'Boo!' Ryan said in her ear. Leah jumped, gasped audibly.

'You prick,' she snapped at him, and marched out through the heavy swinging doors, angry at how easily she rattled.

She strode briskly up two flights of stairs and followed the smell

of chips and coffee to the college's cafeteria. Pouring herself a paper cupful, she noticed that her hands were shaking. She sank into a plastic chair by the window and stared out at the landscape. Flat and grey and brown, just as England had looked when she left. A neat row of gaudy crocuses lining a pathway only highlighted the drab of everything else. Her own reflection in the glass was pale – pale skin, pale lips, pale blond hair. The dead man in the cellar had more colour, she thought ruefully. Belgium. Suddenly she yearned to be somewhere, anywhere, rather than here. Somewhere with bright sunshine to etch outlines onto the landscape, and warmth to soak into her bones. Why on earth had she agreed to come? But she knew why. Because Ryan had asked her to. He walked right out of her thoughts and sat down opposite her, frowning.

'Look, I'm sorry, OK?' he said, contritely. 'Having you here isn't easy for me either, you know. You make me nervous.'

'Why am I here, Ryan?' Leah asked.

'I think there could be a great story in it for you – really. The lost soldier, anonymous and unmourned all these years . . .'

'You don't know he was unmourned.'

'True enough. Undiscovered, then. And I know you think I'm flippant about it, but I'm not. It must have been a bloody miserable way to die, and I think the guy deserves some recognition, don't you?'

Leah eyed him suspiciously, but he seemed sincere. His hair had grown since she'd last seen him. It was hanging in loose tawny curls at either side of his face, matching three or four days' growth on his chin. His eyes were the colour of dark honey. Leah tried not to look too deeply into them.

'Why me?' she asked.

'Why not you?' he countered. 'I don't know that many freelance journalists.' He looked down at his hands for a minute, picked at one ragged thumbnail where the skin was already raw. Leah's own fingers twitched, from the long habit of trying to stop him doing it.

'That's all?' she pressed.

Ryan frowned, took a short, irritable breath. 'No, that's not *all*. What do you want me to say, Leah? That I wanted to see you? Fine – there you go,' he said, abruptly.

Leah smiled a small, wintry smile. 'You never were very good at saying what you're feeling. It always was like getting blood out of a stone.'

'I didn't get much chance to improve before you walked out.'

'I had a bloody good reason, and you know it,' she said.

'So why did you come, then, if I'm such a nightmare and you don't want to see me?'

'I never said . . .' Leah sighed. 'I'm not sure why I came,' she concluded. 'I haven't had a good idea for a story in ten months. I haven't written anything worth reading in I don't know how long. I thought you might actually have something for me to work on, but an unidentifiable soldier? What am I supposed to investigate – the work you're doing for the War Graves Commission? What happens to these men once you've dug them up? It's worthy, of course, but it'd be a pretty dry piece . . .'

'Well, there's not *nothing* to go on, actually,' Ryan said, leaning towards her and smiling his pleased, boyish smile again.

'What do you mean? Peter said—'

'I was going to tell you downstairs, but you stomped off.'

'Well, what is it?'

'Have dinner with me tonight and I'll show you,' he said.

'Why not just tell me now?' she suggested cautiously.

'Dinner would be far more fun.'

'No. Look, Ryan, I don't think you and I should be . . . spending too much time together. Not like that.'

'Oh, come on, Leah. Where's the harm in it? We've known each other long enough . . .'

'Apparently, we didn't know each other quite as well as we thought,' she said, glancing up. Anger sharpened her gaze, and she saw him flinch.

'Just . . . have dinner with me tonight,' he said, more softly.

Leah swigged the last of her coffee, grimacing at the wan, bitter taste.

'Bye, Ryan. I wish I could say it was good to see you again.' She got up to go.

'Wait, Leah! Don't you even want to know what it is that we found on him? I'll tell you – then you can decide whether or not to stay. Leah! He had letters on him – they've survived ninety-five years in the ground! Can you imagine? And these are no ordinary letters either,' Ryan called after her. Leah stopped. There it was, that tiny sparkle; the shimmer of curiosity she felt before she began to chase down a story. Slowly, she turned back towards him.