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The Promise

Written by Lesley Pearse

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The Promise

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Chapter One
July 1914

Sheltering from the heavy rain in a doorway, he looked across the street to the little bow-windowed milliner's.

Just the name 'Belle' in gold italic writing above the window made his heart race a little faster. He could see two ladies silhouetted inside, and the way they moved suggested they were excited by the pretty hats on display. He had achieved his objective, to discover if Belle had realized her dream, but now he was here, so close to her, he wanted much more.

A plump, rosy-faced matron joined him in the doorway to shelter from the rain. She was struggling with an umbrella which had blown inside out. 'If it don't stop raining soon we'll all get webbed feet!' she remarked jovially as she tried to right her umbrella. 'I don't know what possessed me to come out in it.'

'I was thinking the same myself,' he replied, and took the umbrella from her to straighten out the spokes. 'There you are,' he added as he handed it back to her. 'But I expect it will do the same again in the next gust of wind.'

She looked at him curiously. 'You're French, aren't you? But you speak good English.'

He smiled. He liked the way English women of her age didn't hold back from asking complete strangers questions. French women were much more reticent.

'Yes, I am French, but I learned English when I lived here for a couple of years.'

'Are you back here on holiday?' she asked.

'Yes, visiting old friends,' he said, for that was partially

true. 'I was told Blackheath was a very pretty place, but I didn't pick a good day to visit it.'

She laughed and agreed no one would want to walk on the heath in such heavy rain.

'You must live in the south of France,' she said, looking at his tanned face appraisingly. 'My brother holidayed in Nice and came back as brown as a conker.'

He had no idea what a conker was, but he was glad the woman seemed prepared to chat, hoping he might learn something about Belle from her.

'I live near Marseille. And that shop over there reminds me of French milliners,' he said, pointing to the hat shop.

She looked over to it and smiled. 'Well, they say she learned her trade in Paris, and all the ladies in the village love her hats,' she said with real warmth in her voice. 'I'd have popped in there myself today if the weather wasn't so bad, she's always got time for everyone, such a lovely young woman.'

'So she has good business then?'

'Yes indeed, she gets ladies coming from all over to buy from her, I'm told. But I must make my way home now or there won't be any dinner tonight.'

'It was a pleasure talking to you,' he said, and helped her put her umbrella up again.

'You should go over there and buy your wife a hat,' the woman said as she began to walk away. 'You won't find a better shop, not even up in Regent Street.'

After the woman had gone he continued to look across the street to the shop, hoping for a glimpse of Belle. He had no wife to buy a pretty hat for, and he hardly needed an excuse to drop into an old friend's shop. But was it wise to stir up the past?

He turned to look at his reflection in the shop window beside him. Old friends back in France claimed he'd changed

in the two years since he last saw Belle, but he couldn't see any difference himself. He was still as lean and fit: hard work on his small farm kept him that way and his shoulders were even broader and more muscular. But perhaps his friends meant that the old scar on his cheek had faded and contentment had softened his angular features to make him look less dangerous.

Ten years ago, in his mid-twenties, when he'd needed to be able to strike fear into people, he'd taken some pride in hearing that his blue eyes were icy and there was menace even in his voice. But while he knew he was still capable of violence if it was needed, he had retired from that world.

If the older woman's praise for Belle was representative of how everyone in this genteel village felt about her, the more scandalous parts of her past couldn't have followed her here. That was good. He of all people knew how past mistakes, wrong turns and shameful episodes were often very hard to live down.

Now, as his mission had been accomplished, he knew the wisest thing would be to go back to the station and catch a train into London.

The tinkling of a door bell alerted him that someone was leaving Belle's shop. It was both the ladies, who he guessed were mother and daughter, for one looked to be in her forties, the other no more than eighteen or so. The younger one ran to a waiting automobile with two pink- and black-striped hat boxes in her hands, while the older woman looked back into the shop as if saying goodbye. Then suddenly he could see Belle in the doorway, as slender and as lovely as he remembered, wearing a very demure, high-necked pale green dress, her dark shiny hair piled up on her head with just a few curls escaping around her face.

All at once he didn't want to be wise; he had to speak to her. The rumblings of war which had started a year or two ago had become increasingly louder in the last year, and since the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria back at the end of June, war was now inevitable. Germany would undoubtedly invade France and as he would have to fight for his country, he might not live to see Belle ever again.

As the two women drove off, Belle closed the shop door. Unable to resist the impulse now she was alone, he darted across the street through the rain, pausing for just a second or two to watch her through the glass in the door. She had her back to him as she arranged some hats on little stands. There was a row of tiny pearl buttons down the back of her dress, and he felt a pang of jealousy that he would never be able to undo them for her. She bent forward to pick up a hat box from the floor and he had a glimpse of shapely calves above pretty lacy ankle boots. He had seen her naked at the time he rescued her in Paris, and felt nothing then but concern for her, yet now the sight of just a few inches of leg was arousing.

She turned as the door bell tinkled and on seeing him her hands flew up to her mouth and her eyes opened wide with shocked surprise. 'Etienne Carrera!' she exclaimed. 'What on earth are you doing here?'

Her voice, the deep blue of her eyes and even the way she said his name made him feel weak with longing. 'I'm flattered that you remember me,' he said, removing his hat with a flourish. 'And you are looking even more lovely. Success and married life suit you.'

He took a couple of steps nearer her, intending to kiss her cheek, but she blushed and backed away as if nervous. 'How did you know I was married and here in Blackheath?' she asked.

'I called in at the Ram's Head in Seven Dials. The landlord there told me you'd married Jimmy and moved to Blackheath. I couldn't leave England without seeing you, so I caught the train out here in the hope of finding you.'

'After all you did for me I should have written to you when I got married,' she said, looking both anxious and flustered by his sudden appearance. 'But . . .' she faltered.

'I understand,' he said lightly. 'Old friends who have been through so much together do not need to explain. I always knew from the way Jimmy never gave up in his quest to find you after your abduction that he must love you very deeply. So I am just happy that things worked out for you both. I heard that he and his uncle have a public house here.'

Belle nodded. 'It's the Railway, just down the hill. I'm sure you remember me telling you about Mog, my mother's housekeeper. Well, she married Garth, Jimmy's uncle, two years ago in September, then Jimmy and I got married soon afterwards.'

'And you got your hat shop at last!' Etienne glanced appreciatively at the pale pink and cream decor. 'It's lovely, as feminine and chic as you are. A woman out on the street told me you couldn't get better hats even in Regent Street.'

She smiled then and seemed to relax a little. 'Why don't you take off that wet raincoat and I'll make us both a cup of tea?

'Are you still on your farm?' she called as she went into a little room at the back of the shop.

Etienne hung his coat on a hook by the door, and brushed his damp fair hair back with his hands. 'I am indeed, but I also do a little translating, which is the reason I came to England to meet with a company I have done work for in the past,' he called back.

'So your life is about more than chickens and lemon trees

now?' she said as she came back into the shop. 'Please tell me you *have* kept to the straight and narrow?'

Etienne put his hand on his heart. 'I promise you I am a pillar of polite society,' he said, his voice grave but his blue eyes twinkling. 'I haven't escorted any more young girls to America, and neither have I rescued any from the clutches of madmen.'

He had never forgiven himself for not making a stand when the gangsters he had worked for back then blackmailed him into delivering Belle to a brothel in New Orleans. He might have partially redeemed himself two years later when he rescued her in Paris, but in his eyes that didn't wipe the slate clean.

'I really don't believe you could ever be a pillar of society,' Belle giggled.

'Do you doubt my word?' he said with pretended pique. 'Shame on you, Belle, for having such little faith! Have I ever lied to you?'

'You once told me you'd kill me if I tried to escape,' she retorted. 'And you later admitted that wasn't true.'

'That's the trouble with women,' he smiled. 'They always remember the little, inconsequential things.' He reached out and touched a pink feathered hat on a stand, marvelling that her determination and talent had paid off. 'It's your turn to tell the truth now. Is your marriage all you hoped for?'

'Much more,' she said, just a little too quickly. 'We are very happy. Jimmy is just the very best of husbands.'

'Then I am happy for you,' he said and gave a little bow.

Belle giggled again. 'And you? Do you have a lady in your life?' she asked.

'No one special enough to settle down with,' he said.

She raised her eyebrows questioningly.

He smiled. 'Don't look like that, not everyone wants marriage and stability. Especially now with war coming.'

'Surely it will be averted?' she said hopefully.

'No, Belle. There is no chance of that. It is only weeks away.'

'That's all men talk about these days,' she sighed. 'I get so weary of it. But look, why don't you come home with me now and meet Jimmy, Garth and Mog? They'll be so excited to meet you after all this time.'

'I don't think that would be appropriate,' Etienne said.

Belle pouted. 'Why ever not? You saved my life in Paris, and they'll be very disappointed and puzzled that you called here but wouldn't come and meet them.'

He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment. 'When you moved here you also left the past behind.'

Belle opened her mouth to protest but shut it again, realizing he was quite right. From the day she married Jimmy she had firmly closed the door on her time in America and Paris. Etienne may have opened it again by coming to see her, and she was glad he had, but Jimmy might not see it that way.

'What about Noah?' she asked. 'Will you see him? You became such good friends when you were searching for me, and I'm sure you'll remember Lisette who took care of me in the convent before you took me to America. Noah fell in love with her, and they are married now with a baby on the way. They have a lovely home in St John's Wood.'

'I have kept in touch with Noah,' Etienne said. 'Not perhaps as well as I should have, but then he's a journalist and writing comes much easier to him than it does to me. But he is such a well-known columnist now that I can even read his work in France. In fact I'm having lunch with him tomorrow, near his office. We will always be friends, but I won't call at

his home. We both feel Lisette needs no reminders of the past, especially now with a baby coming.'

Belle gave a rueful smile, understanding exactly what he meant. Lisette had also been forced into prostitution when she was a young girl, which was why she had been so kind to Belle. 'Respectability comes at a high price. I like Noah and Lisette very much, but although we keep in touch, and visit each other now and then, we are always careful to avoid talking about how and why we met. I know that is the right thing to do now both Lisette and I are married, but it does prevent us from being really close friends.'

'Does the past affect your relationship with Jimmy?' Etienne asked, his eyes boring into her, daring her to lie to him.

'Sometimes it does,' she admitted. 'It's like having a splinter in your finger which you can't get out, yet you can't help but prod it.'

Etienne nodded. He thought her description very apt. 'For me too. But in time a splinter works its way out and the hole it left will become filled with new memories.'

Belle laughed suddenly. 'Why are we being so gloomy? For all of us – you, me, Jimmy, Mog, and Lisette too – despite all the troubles we had, good came out of it. So why are humans so perverse that they choose to dwell on the bad times?'

'Is it the bad times we dwell on, or the beautiful moments that lifted us up during the bad times?' he asked, raising one eyebrow quizzically.

Belle blushed, and he knew she remembered only too well the moments they'd shared.

Despite being taken against her will to America, Belle cared for him when he was seasick on the voyage. Long before they reached New Orleans they had become very close, and on the night of her sixteenth birthday she had

offered herself to him. He didn't know how he restrained himself that night; he wanted her despite his wife and two young sons at home. The memory of her firm young body in his arms, the sweetness of her kisses, had inflamed him so often over the years. Yet he was very glad he hadn't succumbed to her charms that night – he carried enough guilt about her without that too.

'Whenever I read anything about New York I think of you showing me all the sights,' she said. 'I have to take care I never mention that I've been there, or I might have to explain when and who I was with. I never asked you if you enjoyed those two days too. Did you?'

'It was the most fun I'd had in a long time,' he admitted. 'You were so wide-eyed, so eager to see everything. I felt so bad when we had to continue the journey to New Orleans, knowing I'd got to leave you there.'

'It wasn't so bad at Martha's,' she said, putting one hand on his arm as if to reassure him. 'I never blamed you, I always understood that you had to do it. And anyway, when two years later in Paris you came bursting through the door to save me from Pascal, you more than made up for everything.'

She involuntarily shuddered as she always did when she remembered the horror Pascal put her through. That madman had imprisoned her at the top of his house, and if Etienne hadn't managed to find her she had no doubt Pascal would've killed her.

And Etienne hadn't only rescued her, he'd healed her by sitting beside her bed at the hospital, letting her cry, talking to her and giving her hope for the future. She remembered too the day Noah told her that Etienne's wife and two sons had died in a fire at their home. To her shame her first reaction had been that Etienne was now free, not horror that his loved ones should die in such a barbarous way.

Etienne noticed her shudder, and aware that his unexpected visit and their shared past were troubling her, he felt he must bring them both back to the present.

'I'm going to enlist in the army when I get back to France,' he said.

'Oh no, surely not,' she gasped.

Etienne chuckled. 'That's always the female reaction, but it's my duty, Belle. And once again my past will catch up with me because I evaded the compulsory national service as a lad by coming to England.'

'Will they punish you for that?' she asked.

He grinned. 'I'm hoping they'll just be glad to put a gun in my hands,' he said. 'I won't be welcoming all the drill and having to take orders, and I'm not naive enough to think it's the path to glory, but I love France, and I'll be damned if I'll stand by and see it fall into the hands of Germans.'

She looked at him speculatively. 'You are resourceful and brave, Etienne, you'll make a good soldier. But I'd much rather you were safe on your farm growing lemons and feeding chickens.'

He shrugged. 'In this life we can't always choose the safe and pleasant road. I have a violent past, I know the worst man can do to man. I thought I'd never have to put that to use ever again, but it seems that is exactly what my country needs me for now.'

'You are a good and honourable man,' she sighed. 'Please keep safe. But if you're sure you really don't wish to come and meet Jimmy, I ought to close the shop and go home. We always like to have a meal together before he opens the bar for the evening.'

'Yes, of course, I mustn't delay you,' he said, but made no move to pick up his hat and coat. He wanted to tell her that he had always loved her, he wanted to take her in his arms

and kiss her. But he knew it was too late. He had had his chance back in Paris and he hadn't taken it. Now she belonged to another man.

'You'd better leave first. I don't want anyone remarking that I was seen walking down the street with a stranger,' she said bluntly.

At that Etienne put on his coat. 'I found what I was looking for,' he said quietly. 'That you are happy and secure. Stay happy, love Jimmy with all your heart, and I hope one day I will hear through Noah that you have a whole brood of children.'

He took her hand and kissed it, then turned quickly and walked out.

'Au revoir,' Belle murmured as the door closed behind him, tears prickling her eyes for there was so much more she would have liked to say to him. So much more she wanted to know about his life.

At sixteen she had thought she loved him. It still made her blush to remember how she'd stripped off her clothes and got into his bunk and invited him to share it with her. He had been such a gentleman; he'd held her and kissed her, but took it no further.

As an adult looking back on the horrors she'd experienced before meeting Etienne, being snatched from the street by her home, then taken to Paris to be sold to a brothel and raped by five men, she supposed that she might have felt she loved anyone who was kind to her after such an ordeal.

Yet it couldn't have been just because Etienne was kind to her, or that he was strong, sensitive and affectionate, because those girlish dreams about him had stayed with her throughout her time in New Orleans and the voyage back to France.

When he reappeared to save her life, her innocence was

long gone and she knew more about men than any woman should. But he must have felt something for her too: why else would he come rushing to Paris two years later when it was reported to him that she'd disappeared?

Throughout her convalescence after the rescue, she waited and hoped for an admission of love. She sensed he did love her from the way he looked at her, and the tenderness he showed her. Yet he didn't take her in his arms and admit he wanted her, not even when they parted at the Gare du Nord and she was crying and making her own feelings very clear.

She'd done her very best to erase their parting from her mind, and the yearning she felt for him for so long after, even when she was safely home with Mog, and Jimmy was talking of marriage. So why did he have to come here today to drive that particular splinter back into her heart?

She had told him the truth. She and Jimmy were very happy. He was her best friend, lover, brother and husband all rolled into one. They had the same goals, they laughed at the same things, he was everything any girl could want or need. He had healed the horrors of the past; in his arms she had encountered exquisite tenderness, and deep satisfaction too, for he was a caring and sensitive lover.

Jimmy was her world; she loved the life she had with him. Yet all the same she wished she could have told Etienne how wonderful it was to see him again; that he'd been in her thoughts so often over the last two years and that she owed him so much.

But a married woman could not say such things, and neither could she encourage him to stay in her shop any longer. Blackheath was a village, people were small-minded and nosy, and there would be plenty of them glad to gossip about seeing a handsome man talking to her in her shop.

She began to tidy up, dusting off the counter and picking up some stray tissue paper from the floor.

Yet she couldn't help but ask herself why, if everything was so good for her, she felt there was something missing in her life. Why did she read about suffragettes in the newspaper and feel envy that they had the guts to stand up for rights for women in the face of hostility? Why did she feel a little stifled by respectability? But above all, why was it that Etienne's voice, his looks and the touch of his lips on her hand, still had the power to make her shiver?

She shook herself, opened the drawer where she kept the day's takings and emptied them into a cloth bag which she pushed into her reticule. She secured her straw hat to her hair with a long hat pin, flung her cloak over her shoulders and took her umbrella from the stand by the door.

She paused at the door before turning off the lights, and reminded herself of the day she opened her shop. It had been a cold November day, just two months after Mog and Garth's wedding, and she and Jimmy were due to be married just before Christmas. Everything had been new and shiny that day. Jimmy had indulged her by buying the small but expensive French chandeliers and the glass-topped counter. Mog had found the two button-backed Regency chairs and had them re-upholstered in pink velvet, and Garth's present to her was paying the two decorators who had done such a fine job of turning the dingy little shop into a pink and cream feminine heaven.

She sold twenty-two hats that first day, and dozens of other women who came in to look had been back since to buy. In the eighteen months since then there had been fewer than seven days in total when she hadn't sold one hat, and those were all in bad weather. The average week's sales

worked out at fifteen hats, and though it meant she had to work very hard to keep up with the demand, and use an outworker to help her, she was making a very good profit. During the summer she'd bought in plain straw boaters and trimmed them herself, and that had proved very profitable. Her shop was a resounding success.

'As is everything in your life,' she reminded herself as she turned out the lights.

Etienne went straight to the station, but having found he'd just missed a train and had twenty-five minutes to wait for the next one, he stood by the window by the ticket office and looked at the Railway public house across the street.

He had never quite understood English bars, the rigid opening hours, men standing at the bar drinking huge quantities of beer, then staggering home at closing time as if they could only face their wives and children when drunk. French bars were far more civilized. They were never seen as a kind of temple to get drunk in, for they were open all day and a man wasn't considered odd if he drank coffee or a soft drink as he read the newspaper.

The Railway at least looked inviting, with its fresh paint and sparkling windows. He could imagine that on a cold winter's night it was a warm, friendly haven for men to gather in.

As he looked at it, a big man with red hair and a beard came out of the front door. He was wearing a leather apron over his clothes, and Etienne guessed that this was Garth Franklin, Jimmy's uncle. Stopping to look up at water spurting out of a broken gutter and running down the front of the building, he called to someone inside.

A younger man joined him, and Etienne knew immediately that this was Jimmy. He was bigger than he'd imagined, as tall as his uncle and with the same broad shoulders, but he

was clean-shaven and his red hair was neat and slightly darker than Garth's, perhaps because he'd oiled it down. The pair, who looked like father and son, stood there looking up, discussing the broken gutter, seemingly oblivious to the rain.

Jimmy suddenly turned, his face breaking into a joyful smile, and Etienne saw it was because he'd seen Belle coming towards them.

She was struggling to hold the umbrella over her and holding her cloak around her shoulders, but she ran the last few yards towards the men. As she reached them, her umbrella was tilted back and Etienne noted that her smile was as bright as her husband's.

Jimmy took the umbrella from her with one hand, while with the other he caressed her wet cheek, and kissed her forehead. Just those small, tender gestures told Etienne how much the man loved her.

He had to turn away. He knew he should feel at peace to be sure Belle was truly loved and protected, but instead he felt only bitter pangs of jealousy.