

## CHARACTER INTRO

### War Hero

Elodie follows a Blue Tiger butterfly's zigzag flight with her eyes as she rests back against the fig tree. Now that her schooling is finished, and she's at a loose end as to her future—other than marrying well—she wonders how best to put her interests in use.

Violet leaps from the tree swing and hands her a pair of brass and leather binoculars. 'Here, try these. They should help.'

Elodie lifts the binoculars to her eyes and searches above, finding difficulty now in locating the graceful insect.

'What are you doing?' Violet cries. 'He's not up in the tree, silly.'

'Who's not up in the tree?'

'The new labourer I just mentioned. The one my brother Stan says is a war hero. He's with the mob down there in the vineyard.'

Elodie redirects the binoculars to view the field below the hill, the glass lenses identifying an unfamiliar young man squatting amongst the workers as they prune stems on healthy vines. Stripped down to trousers and undershirt, his tanned, muscular arms shine with perspiration.

'A war hero, you say?'

'Yes. The way Stan tells it, this bloke was under heavy fire somewhere in France, dashed out in front of his company, shot two German gunners, and captured the machine gun, bringing it back for their own use.'

Elodie again studies the man through the binoculars. 'Do you think my dad is aware of this?'

'Hardly anything gets past your father. I hear the young man learnt a few things about wine growing during his time abroad.'

'You make it sound like he was on a holiday, Vi, not trying to dodge the Huns' bullets.' Elodie shoves the binoculars back into her friend's hand. 'It's hot out here. I suggest we scrounge a refreshing fruit cordial from your mother.' Getting to her feet, she brushes leaves and twigs from her skirt and muslin blouse before taking off down the grassy slope, only to skid on a patch of shale near the bottom and take a tumble.

'You silly duffer,' Violet says, catching up and kneeling beside her.

'You're lucky you didn't break your flamin' neck,' comes a deep voice above them.

Startled, both girls look up to find the young man they were spying on flashing them a smile. He seems younger up close, possibly only a few years older than themselves. Elodie wonders if he could he have lied about his age when answering the call to go to war.

'Do you need help to stand?' he asks, holding out a hand.

Elodie goes to take it and pulls away with a gasp, regretting it instantly. Violet hadn't mentioned he'd suffered war wounds. The burn scars snake from his fingers to his elbow in

shiny pink and purple ridges. Shadowy figures suddenly appear. A crowd of similarly young men gathered around him, all in uniforms spattered with mud and blood. Some have horrific injuries—missing limbs, disfigurements—yet all bear the hollow stare of the dead.

Elodie purposely ignores them and rises, wincing from a searing pain in her ankle. As she hobbles forward, the man crouches and examines her foot.

‘Just a sprain, I reckon. But you’d best keep your weight off it.’ He effortlessly scoops her up in his arms and carries her in the direction of the mansion.

Too shocked to speak, Elodie averts her eyes and gazes up at the pale blue sky, entranced by two shimmering cotton-ball clouds colliding mid-air and merging as one. A portent of things to come, she wonders.