

Out of the Dark

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Chapter 1

My name is Rob Stone and I have no face. I had a face before I went to war but it was shot off. I wear a mask now. The mask is made of thin metal. It's painted to look like a proper face but it's not. It's to cover up where my face used to be.

They try to make the masks look like you, before you were hit, but it's hard to do that. My mask doesn't look like me at all. The only things that remain the same are my mouth and my chin. I was told I was lucky that those had been spared.

I left hospital a few weeks ago. I thought that maybe the captain would stay behind in the ward, but he came with me.

Captain Harry Ashton died in France, but I still see him. He came to sit on my bed when things were bad and the sight of him comforted me. I told no one about him. They would have sent me to a mental ward. They would have said my mind had gone. That's not true. I'm all there, but I see the captain from time to time. He comes back to me. He comes to help me do what I have to do. I haven't done it yet, but I will. I promised myself I would.

When the war started, I joined the army with my friends. We wanted to enlist and have a go at shooting the enemy for king and country. We all

said that. We thought it would be a short war. The girls called us heroes and we liked being praised. We were eager to leave for France.

We didn't get that much training. They gave us rifles and told us how they worked. They let us have a go with bayonets, the sharp knives attached to the barrels of the rifles. We spent hours running at dummies. The dummies were stuffed with straw, and we ran up and stabbed them. We did this over and over again. They reckoned it would teach us to run at a man and stick him in the guts. I am glad I never had to do that. I worried about sticking a knife in a real person.

When we went to France, I thought it was going to be like a holiday. We sailed over the Channel and I watched the white cliffs of Dover getting further and further away. We sang songs. We were with our pals. We thought we would come back when the Huns had been beaten. We were sure it would not take long. Huns was our name for the Germans.

But after a bit I began missing my home. I wanted to be back in London with my mother. I longed for my room in the attic of our house. There, the ceiling sloped down above my bed. I had a little window to look out of. I could see roofs and the tops of lamp posts. I could look down at people walking in the streets. At night there were lights in the windows. When a fog came down, it wrapped itself around the street lamps and made the light fuzzy and soft.

Even up in the attic, I could hear the noises from the street. Horse-drawn carriages made the best noise: clip, clop, clip, clop. When I was a little boy I used to lie in my bed and repeat the nursery rhyme 'Ride a cock horse . . .' to myself before I fell asleep.

In France there was a trench, and a hard bed and mud on the floor and the cries of sad men. They, too, had left everything they loved for the first time and were missing home, just like me. Later, after we'd heard the guns and the screams of men torn apart and bleeding, the sounds in the trench changed. We fell into our bunks wishing we could dream of home. More often than not, we woke up shrieking from a nightmare.

Before I went to war I was happy. I had a job at the draper's shop on Essex Avenue. It was owned by Mr Gordon. My mum had worked for him for years, and she put in a good word for me. I never thought I would like making displays of silks and knitting wools for the window, but I did. I liked meeting the ladies. When they came into the shop, they often asked for me.

'Rob, please come and help me choose a ribbon,' they would say. Or, 'I need your help, Rob. What colour fabric shall I get for this frock?'

Mum said, 'They like your big blue eyes, Rob. That's what it is. They like your smile.'

I was good at helping them choose what they needed. My friends Tom, who worked for a grocer, and James, who worked as a butcher's boy, thought it was girly and sissy to serve ladies every day. I think they were jealous. Many of the young ladies who came into my shop, but not into theirs, were very pretty.

When Millie came in to buy a reel of cotton, I liked her at once. I liked her better than any young lady I'd ever seen. What I felt for her was not

the same as what I'd felt for other girls. She was very pretty and she liked me. I knew she did, because she came into the shop a lot and always asked for me.

My mum said, 'I think you should talk to her.'

'I do talk to her,' I said.

'You know what I mean. Ask her to meet you in the park. If you go on Sunday, you can listen to the band. I know her mother, Mrs Evans. I've seen her in church. They're good people, I'm sure.'

I didn't ask Millie, even though I wanted to. In the end, she asked me. She came up to the counter, ever so bold, and said, 'I'll be at the bandstand in the park on Sunday, Rob. They play very nicely. Why don't you come along and listen?'

So I did. We sat on a bench near the bandstand and listened to the marches and the waltzes. I didn't hear the music. I just thought about how near I was to her, about how I'd like to hold her hand. I thought about how pink her mouth was. I looked at the way the sun shone through the holes in her hat and made patterns on her skin. I wanted to kiss her. I had to stop myself from leaning over and touching her lips with mine.

After the music stopped we walked along the grey paths in the park. I wished that I could stay walking round the park with Millie for ever.

The sun was low in the sky when we said goodbye. I walked her right up to her gate.

‘Will you walk with me again next Sunday?’ I asked.

She nodded and said, ‘Yes. We had a lovely time, didn’t we?’

Then I did it. I leaned over and kissed her quickly on the lips. She leaned closer to me and put her hand in mine. I could feel her warmth through our clothes.

‘Oh, Rob,’ she said and squeezed my hand. ‘I do like you so much!’

I didn’t know how to tell her how much I liked her, so I kissed her again. I felt the taste of her on my lips all the way home and all through the night, too.