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**Opening Extract from...**

# **When the Sky Fell Apart**

Written by Caroline Lea

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# *Part 1*

WHEN he was on fire, the man smelt bitter. Like the stink when Claudine had once tried to burn Maman's old wool blankets because they had itched.

Even after they had tipped buckets of sea water over him, he still smelt. But sweeter. It reminded her of Maman's Sunday lunch: roast pork with blackened skin and the cooked fat seeping out through the cracks.

Claudine's mouth watered. She clutched Francis's sweaty little hand and tried not to cry. She didn't go too close. Minutes earlier, he had been a talking, laughing man. Now he was a monster, without any skin. And full of noise. Bellowing, writhing, screaming.

She closed her eyes and tried to pretend it was something from a story: once upon a time, a girl and her baby brother huddled on the beach, watching the death throes of a dangerous giant—or, better yet, a dragon. She breathed in the smoke, imagined the man's roars to be the dragon's last breaths, flames

sirening from his broken mouth. She saw herself beside him: small, grubby, dark-haired.

But when the man howled again, the story dissolved.

Heart thudding, Claudine stayed back near the sea. Francis's face had crumpled and he had started sniffing. Quietly, but any minute it would turn into a bawl. The grown-ups were fussing and shouting at each other; their raw voices and wild eyes filled Claudine with fear.

She dragged her gaze to the stones that had been smoothed by the mouth of the sea, looking for something familiar to clutch on to. Somewhere, there must be a treasure she could use to distract her brother. Perhaps an unbroken crab shell on the tide line—she could skitter it over his skin, pretending it was alive. *It's coming to nip your nose!* His lip would stop quivering; they would laugh and things would start to make sense again.

But whole crab shells were rare—the sea devoured and crunched them to pieces. Usually, by the time she had finished milking Rowan and Elderflower and given Francis his oatmeal and put the bread in the larder to prove, all the treasures along the beach had been taken by other children.

Today was no different, despite the burning man, the panicking people and the smoking bomb holes. All the shells and pretty stones had been scooped up hours earlier, when the sea was still somewhere to swim and the sand was still somewhere to dig.

Claudine had once found a piece of pink granite in the shape of a love heart. She had cradled it against her chest and then stuffed it into her apron pocket, but Papa had scolded her. He didn't want stones left lying around in the house. Francis might try to swallow them, or throw them at a window.

'You should know such things, clever clogs that you are.'

Even though he had smiled, his voice had been hard. It had made her recall when she'd given Maman and Papa the letter from school: moved ahead two classes. 'Clever girl,' they said. But their narrowed eyes said something different. *Too clever by half.*

A few days later, she had found the love heart stone on the kitchen table, with some writing on it, very tiny and in Papa's hand—the big loops on the letter Y.

'What is this, Maman?'

Her mother hadn't turned from scrubbing the nappies over the sink.

'Your papa gave it to me. You may take it, if you wish.'

Claudine carried it in her pocket for the rest of the day. It banded a bruising tattoo on her hip, pulling purple flowers from beneath her skin, but she didn't give a fig because Maman and Papa both loved her: why else would she have been allowed such a wonderful treasure?

It was only later in her room, with Francis grumbling next to her and sucking on his little fist in his sleep, that she wondered why Maman would have given away the stone when Papa had written the message on it for her: *To Sarah—my only heart.*

The burnt man was now groaning, as cows do when they are calving and the little one is stuck in the birth canal. The grown-ups were puce-faced from bawling at each other. A woman was crying, '*Non! Non! Non!*' It was Madame Hacquoil, her face screwed up and red; when she screamed, blue veins bulged like ropes in her neck. She tried to stroke the burnt man's face, but the others seized her arms and dragged her back.

And Claudine realised, with a sickening wrench of her

insides, that the blackened, moaning beast must be Clement Hacquoil, the butcher. He was kindly and well respected and often gave Claudine crisp slivers of bacon rind to chew on while she waited for Maman to do the shopping.

Now he looked like a charred chunk of meat. Claudine shuddered.

Monsieur Le Gallais was waving a big pointy piece of granite and shouting in Jèrriais, too fast for Claudine to understand. And Clement, the monster-man, moaned even louder and clawed at the air, as if he were trying to grasp the rock. As if he *wanted* to be pounded about his roaring skull with that toothed piece of granite.

His hands were like firewood. And his arms too—black and cooked-looking. Where his skin wasn't black, it was bright red: tongued by the flames. No clothes, no skin. Just the blood and the wetness underneath. The word *oozing* came into Claudine's head. She whispered it under her breath: a word with a taste in it.

There was a series of splashes, which Claudine made-believe was wheeling birds slapping into the sea in search of fish, but which she knew was the sound of pails of sea water being emptied over the man.

A shout made Claudine turn.

'Stop that! Are you trying to kill him!'

An older woman rushed out of the crowd, waving her arms.

With a complicated twist in her stomach, Claudine recognised Edith Bisson, the woman who used to help Maman to care for her and Francis. She hadn't seen Edith in months—Maman had forbidden it—but she was unchanged: grey-haired but straight-backed, and eyes sharp.

As Claudine watched, Edith took the pail from the man's

hands and dumped the water out on to the sand.

‘Oi!’ The man glared. ‘Want Clement to cook, do you?’

Edith glared back. ‘Use *clean* water, for goodness sake.’

‘It’s fresh from the sea.’

‘Fresh indeed! A fine plan to shower poor Clement in fish shit and heaven knows what else.’

She threw the pail to another man. ‘Stop gaping, Hedley, and fetch some water from a hosepipe.’

Hedley shut his mouth with a click and scurried off to fetch the water.

‘And Anton,’ Edith said to the first man, ‘run for Dr Carter, would you?’

Edith continued to direct people while they waited: she sent Madame Hacquoil to fetch some potatoes and some tea.

Claudine heard someone ask Edith what use potatoes would be to poor Clement.

Edith gave a grim smile. ‘No more than his wife’s hysterics. It’ll calm her to be doing something.’

Claudine would have liked to run and embrace Edith: she remembered the comforting reassurance of those strong arms. But Maman’s voice was loud in her memory: *Keep away from that woman!* So Claudine hung back, near the gently plashing waves.

By the time Dr Carter arrived, Clement Hacquoil had stopped bellowing. Every breath was a gasping wheeze, punctuated by a horrid sucking noise: the sound when wet boots are tugged from clags of clinging mud.

Once or twice, Claudine had tried to go closer, but the



grown-ups had shooed her away. Even Edith.

*You can't be of any help here, dear. This isn't a sight for children. Go on and play now; be off with you!*

Dr Carter was a tall man. Long arms and legs, and a face that made Claudine think of the pictures of hawks and eagles in Papa's bird book. He was the new English doctor—Claudine knew none of the grown-ups really liked him.

*Thinks he knows everything,* old Mrs Fauvel had wheezed to Maman. *Told me to cut back on my cigarettes. Well, I ask you, how can they be making my lungs worse, at my age, when I've smoked them all this time with no trouble at all?*

But whether they liked him or not, all the grown-ups let him through now.

'Will he die?' Claudine whispered, but no one was listening. She felt a sudden, fierce longing for Maman—the old Maman, who might have held Claudine close, or picked her up and kissed her, but she hadn't done those things for a long time, not since before Francis was born.

As Claudine crept closer, she saw how Dr Carter said very little but the grown-ups were talking at him, all at once:

'Well, I ran, of course, as soon as I heard the plane.'

'Running's not cowardice; it's good common sense when there are barbarians bombing an undefended island.'

'We should have all evacuated before now and never mind the shame of it...'

Dr Carter didn't say very much, only 'yes' and 'really?' and 'hmmm'. The way Maman did when she was trying to sleep and Claudine wanted to tell her about the sandhoppers she had collected.

Clement howled and writhed as if his skin were still alight.

Dr Carter blinked nervously—but surely grown-ups didn't feel nervous?—and put a hand gently on Clement's unburnt shoulder, leaning in close to the charred and bloody stump that must have been an ear.

'Can you hear me?'

Dr Carter's voice was kindly, his manner gentle. Claudine wondered why none of the islanders liked him.

'Monsieur Hacquoil,' Dr Carter said, 'I'm here to help you. You are in enormous pain, which will only worsen once we attempt to move you. So I am going to give you an injection. To make the pain go away. Do you understand?'

Clement screamed. Blood and spittle sprayed across Dr Carter's glasses.

Claudine held Francis close, but he seemed less distressed than she was, and watched with wide-eyed bafflement.

Dr Carter filled the syringe with a clear liquid that looked like water and stabbed the needle into Clement's arm. His face immediately changed: like ice melting, all the hardness went out of it. His breathing sounded less jagged.

Dr Carter took a deep breath too. 'You should be feeling more comfortable,' he said. 'That's a good man.'

Clement made no noise at all. No movement.

'Oi, Doctor!' Monsieur Fauvel shouted. 'He's not breathing. You've gone and killed him. By *Crie*, he's only bloody gone and killed him, hasn't he?!'

Claudine's stomach lurched. But it was true: Monsieur Hacquoil had slumped forward so his cheek was resting in the sand. His eyes were half open and cloudy.

Everyone rushed forward.

'Throw sea water on him.'

‘Don’t be a fool, Marian, do you want to drown him?’

‘Tickle his neck.’

‘What good is that going to do? Blow smoke up his backside, that’ll have him going again. Who has some bellows?’

‘Don’t be disgusting, Fauvel.’

‘He hasn’t killed him at all!’

It was Edith, shouldering through the crowd.

‘Look, he’s still breathing. Dead indeed! For goodness sake! Out of my way, if you please. You too, Doctor. Come on, chop chop!’

Claudine remembered that tone: it was the exact same voice she’d used to usher Claudine into bed when she was being *overexcitable and giddy*. Claudine almost smiled to see the grown-ups jumping out of Edith’s way exactly as she used to herself.

Edith drew a glass jar of liquid from her apron pocket, and a handkerchief, which she soaked in the liquor from the jar. Even in the open air with a strong breeze, Claudine could smell the sharp tang of soil and onions and herbs. It was a smell Edith always had about her, in varying degrees, and it reminded Claudine of comfort and warmth, even as it made her eyes water. The grown-ups took another step back: Edith’s potions were legendary.

She held the soaked handkerchief under Clement Hacquoil’s nose. After a breathless, silent few seconds, his eyelids began to flutter and he gulped a deep lungful of air.

Everybody began to clap, but Edith waved her hand in the air impatiently. Cradling his head in her lap, she pressed the glass jar to Clement’s lips and said, ‘Come along, then. Down the hatch!’

Clement drained the jar, and within a few minutes he was

breathing evenly, as if he was sleeping, wrapped up in his own bed, with his skin in one piece.

Claudine was used to seeing Edith work her magic, but even she found herself staring, open-mouthed.



EDITH could hardly credit the dilly-dallying and fussing.

Once poor Clement was breathing again, everyone stood gawping. Did they expect him to jump to his feet and dance a jig? Even that English doctor, who'd seemed an unflappable sort—even he was gaping at her.

She clapped her hands together, as though she was shooing her chickens into their coop. And in less time than it took to skin a rabbit, Clement had been laid out on a bedsheet and then carried up the beach to the tractor and trailer, which would take him to the hospital. Everyone followed, chattering and gossiping, like children at a saint's day feast.

Dr Carter waved at Edith to follow him up to the trailer. Those big eyebrows of his were drawn down and his lips were pressed into a thin line. It crossed her mind that perhaps she had trodden on his toes a little, swooping in like that and taking over. Still, Clement hadn't been breathing, and she was jiggered if she was going to stand and watch a man die purely because she wanted to show good manners and kiss the English doctor's proverbial backside. So she frowned right back at him, ready to give him an earful if he so much as blinked at her in that know-all way that doctors have.

Instead, he coughed. 'A fine job there,' he said. 'Quite

miraculous, really, reviving the fellow like that. I'd have expected to perform some sort of forced respiration—what you might call mouth-to-mouth, if you understand me?'

His words were all rounded vowels, like listening to a BBC News broadcast. He was still frowning, but perhaps that was just his way: some folk have faces that'd look glum even if they found a ten shilling note in their breeches.

Edith tried not to grin too widely.

Dr Carter continued. 'It was most impressive, I must say. What exactly was that concoction you administered? I'd like to procure some for my own practice.'

She blinked. There must have been a question somewhere in that jumble of gibberish.

'Forgive me,' he said. 'I'm being terribly rude. Timothy Carter. I shouldn't expect you to offer up your miracle cures to virtual strangers.'

He smiled—like the sun coming up—and held out his right hand. With his other hand, he checked Clement's pulse. Gentle hands, she could see that.

She smiled back. This was something. The last doctor had called her a witch—told all his patients that they shouldn't go to see a charlatan. But this one seemed...amiable.

'So, what was it? Or is it a secret?'

'Beg your pardon, Doctor?'

'What miracle concoction did you give the chap to bring him round?'

'Oh, *that*?'

The cart jolted forward. She sat down next to him.

'Simple enough, really. Only some mint, rosemary and pepper with a touch of vinegar. Oh, and a drop of honey to take the edge

off it: burns something awful otherwise. It's a job convincing folks to drink it without the honey—they sick it straight back up. And that doesn't do anyone a bit of good, particularly not if it's on my house shoes, which has been known.'

'Just a few herbs and some vinegar! Is that all?'

'And a little onion juice, of course. Gets the blood going; works a treat.'

He shook his head. 'Well, I never.'

'It's the shock of it, you see, Doctor. I don't know if you caught a whiff, but the stuff stinks to high heaven. Stick it under your nose and it'll make you gasp. Gives you a real kick up the backside. Let my cat sniff it one time. The poor thing ran around in circles, yowling like he was being chased by the devil himself.'

When Clement groaned, Carter squeezed his hand again. 'Steady now, nearly there,' he murmured. 'Good fellow, well done.'

Edith watched. He was kindlier than folk had described him. And there was a calm intelligence and wisdom behind those blue eyes, despite his manner of frowning when he spoke.

'So,' she said, pointing to the sky. 'Do you think we can expect more of this, then?'

'I don't know, Mrs... Please forgive me, I don't know your name.'

'Edith Bisson.'

'Mrs Bisson, I really couldn't say. I can't see any particular advantage to the Germans in wiping out the lot of us. But, then, why bomb a defenceless island in the first place? It's crossed my mind that I should have evacuated while the opportunity was there.'

'You should have, Doctor. English by birth, aren't you? So

you've no loyalties here. And the rest of your lot went last week. You didn't think to go with them?'

'No, not really. I haven't much to return to back in England. Only Father and...'. He busied himself checking Clement. 'I felt, well—it didn't...sit right with me, the thought of leaving.' He kept his eyes down.

*What are you hiding?* Edith wondered.

But she nodded along as Carter continued. 'We've no idea what medical care will be necessary if they do invade. Leaving would have seemed, well—I almost said *traitorous*, but perhaps that's a foolish term to use.'

'I heed you, Doctor. You wouldn't catch me leaving, either. But then I'm rooted to this soil—years of my blood in it. I just couldn't understand it, folk upping and leaving like that, thousands of them. Rats from a sinking ship.'

'Well, there will be no more of that—the chap who fetched me said that there's more smoke over St Helier. Rumour has it they've bombed the harbour.'

Edith felt a fluttering of fear. '*Bombed* the harbour? By *Crie!* They mean business then?'

He gave a thin, humourless smile; he really did have a kind face, and a sort of sadness in those eyes.

'It would seem so,' he said. 'We're entirely isolated now.'

'We've been cut off for two weeks already, Doctor, what with England leaving us to our own devices. Demilitarisation? A fine name to pretty up leaving your dependants to be blown up and invaded, don't you think? We're supposed to be under Crown protection. The English took every single one of their soldiers. The Germans could come and butcher the lot of us, for all they care.'

Carter blinked. His eyes were red-rimmed from the smoke or exhaustion. It hit her, for the first time: the weight of responsibility on this man's shoulders—English doctor in a land far from home, during a foreign invasion. Why would any soul make that choice? What must his family think?

He sighed. 'Yes, well. On some days, I'm ashamed to call myself English.'

'Now, Doctor. The shame isn't with you. It's those politicians sitting in London, smoking their cigars and drinking while other people—good, honest people—die for them. Seems they could drop bombs on us until we're nothing but a crater in the sea and the English wouldn't shift a muscle to help us.'

'If it's any consolation, Mrs Bisson, I can't see that happening. There's little doubt the Germans will invade now. But there oughtn't to be any more killing. What would be the gain for them, murdering innocent people?'

Edith felt a jolt of irritation: why didn't he understand the danger they were in? Where was his fear? His rage?

'What about what they've done in France then, eh?' she demanded. 'Burned farms to the ground, killed whole families, raped women... What makes you think it'll be any different here?'

'It *has* to be.'

'And why is that?'

He was quiet a while. Just the creaking of the cart, the soft wheeze of poor Clement's ruined lungs. The seagulls screeching in the open sky above them and the sea breathing behind them, inhaling and exhaling, mumble-mouthed over the stones. Some things remain the same, even when the sky over your head is ablaze.



He sighed. 'Because...because I have to *hope* it will be different.'

No answer at all. Once again, Edith was struck by the thought that Dr Carter was hiding something, or perhaps hiding *from* something.

The cart creaked over their silence. She turned to look at the sea. Flat stretch of water, blank and blue as the sky above. Pretty as a picture, except with black and grey craters where the bombs had fallen: as though some thuggish child had scrawled all over the picture out of spite alone.

And Dr Carter thought this time would be different? He was naïve, too young to remember the Great War, the way it ripped apart people and land and time. Still, no gain in making him fret over what couldn't be changed. Another few minutes and she would get off and leave him to travel the mile to the hospital. She hoped Clement would last the journey.

Near her fence, Edith called for the cart to stop. She turned to Carter.

'I must be off now,' she said. 'I live on that hill.'

'Of course. Well, very pleased to have met you.'

'Likewise.' She paused, put her head to one side. How far could she trust him? 'You were saying before—about the harbour being out. Not being able to leave. Were you looking to go yourself, after all? There's none would blame you. You've no ties here.'

A momentary flash of a haunted shadow in his eyes, and then he smiled and his professional briskness was back.

'I'm staying,' he said. 'It's only that I've some patients who would do well from receiving more specialist care on the mainland. But, of course, that's out of the question now...'

‘I might know a way, Doctor, if you can be at La Rocque pier tomorrow morning. I’ve heard tell there’s one last boat leaving. Mostly women and children, a few fellows set on fighting. Only a small collier, you understand. But it might do for those strong enough to stand a slow trip across the channel.’

He stared at her, hard, eyes narrowed. For a moment, her stomach dropped. Perhaps she had him all wrong?

But then he said, ‘Very helpful, thank you, Mrs Bisson. I shall see you there tomorrow.’

He smiled, his longish nose pinking under the sun, like a tourist’s.

Edith climbed off the trailer. When she looked back, Dr Carter was straight back to checking on Clement and counting out his pulse.

She had decided to walk the last part home along the sand. She’d spotted some devil’s claw there that would come in handy for Clement—ever so good for burns, it was.

The tide was up. That deep blue and the surface like glass. The Germans could have pelted a hundred bombs into it, a thousand, and it wouldn’t change a jot.

The mirror would shatter and then reform. Implacable. Eternal.

Behind her, the beach was smoking, the air thick and grey with the settling ash. Edith turned away. Some wounds are so shocking that looking on them too long stings the eyes and brings bile to the throat.

